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**ELICITING ETYMO-SINOGRAPHY: ERNEST FENOLLOSA'S TREATISE  
THE CHINESE WRITTEN CHARACTER AS A MEDIUM FOR POETRY**

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The article puts forward a thesis that has never been discussed before, articulating Ernest Fenollosa as a pioneer in the field of etymological analysis of sinographs. Sinograph is a recently coined synonym for Chinese characters.

After many years of neglect, the time has come to rehabilitate his authority in the field of discovering the “aesthetic synthesis” in sinogram as a medium for poetry. Fenollosa’s lingvo-aesthetic treatise is often studied not as an independent and important work in the field of comparative poetics, but as reference material for understanding the origins of Imagism and Vorticism in Western poetry. Hence, there is the danger of Americanization and – even more – of “Poundization” of his work. We have to regret that the legacy of this orientalist, who stood at the origin of the comparative historical study of languages, literatures, and cultures, remains not only underestimated but also continues to provoke unwarranted criticism of sinologists-linguists. It is important to emphasize that linguistic sinology at that time was only in its swaddling bands, and Fenollosa’s fascination with Far Eastern culture could find only a broad lingvo-aesthetic rather than strictly scientific embodiment.

Debunking the “Fenollosian myth” about the pictorial nature of Chinese calligraphy, researchers ignore the quintessential idea of his treatise – the understanding of the linguistic and aesthetic nature of the Chinese written language as the substance of poetry itself. Poetry, in Fenollosa’s view, is inseparable from language. Not surprisingly, he chooses the word “medium” to denote this “substance” and the embodiment of poetic ideas in sinographs.

Moreover, his approach to the study of Far Eastern culture, art, and literature embraced not only the verbal meaning proper, but was focused on the etymological analysis of the fluid and ill-defined semantic boundaries of sinographs. Recently, such a study of sinography was designated by cover-term as “etymosinology”. This term points to the embodiment of cultural roots in sinograms (Chinese characters) and it corresponds to Merleau-Ponty’s resonant theory – the phenomenology of embodiment.

**Keywords:** Ernest Fenollosa, Chinese language, sinogram, etymosinology, embodiment, poetry

Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), a passionate philologist-orientalist, a prominent collector of Oriental art, was an enthusiastic discoverer both in the field of linguistic sinology and in the comparative study of Eastern and Western languages and literatures. The son of a successful Spanish musician, he grew up in an atmosphere of high spiritual culture, surrounded by exquisite oriental decorative art, and already in childhood fell in love with the East. After graduation from Harvard University, he was recruited to teach in Japan.

His reputation rests not so much on his posthumous books *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, as on his major seminal treatise “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry”, written in 1904 and published by Ezra Pound in 1919. He was deeply

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stirred by Japanese culture and declared that this essay “represents for the first time a Japanese school of study in Chinese culture” [Fenollosa 2008, 43]. Here he was the first to highlight an important range of complex philological problems, both linguistic and literary in the sphere of sinography (sinograph is a coined synonym for Chinese character [Rogers 1979; Handel 2019]).

Fenollosa's research on sinography remains highly controversial. What some modern sinologists-linguists accuse him of – the creation of a myth about the pictographic character of the Chinese classical language, as well as for the rashness of his etymological explanations of hieroglyphics – a prominent specialist in this field Zong-qi Cai redirects to the classical sinologists themselves who studied the nature of Chinese hieroglyphics (wenzixue) and on whose works Fenollosa could, unfortunately, rely at that time [Zong-qi Cai 2002]. Andrew Welsh also rejects this accusation, regarding Fenollosa's essay as “one of the high points of modern poetics” [Welsh 1978, 101].

However, James J. Y. Liu in his book *The Art of Chinese Poetry* [Liu 1962, 3–7] insists that the idea of the essay is a deplorable mistake, that Chinese characters are not pictograms or ideograms.

Besides, Fenollosa's contribution to the study of the Chinese language is exclusively associated with Ezra Pound's interest in the East. His work inspired Ezra Pound, like many other poets, to search for new horizons in art. Ezra Pound praised Fenollosa's treatise, calling it a study of the fundamentals of all aesthetics [Fenollosa 2008, 41]. However, we are interested not in the response of Ezra Pound, who published Fenollosa's work primarily as his Imagist / Vorticist manifesto, not in the degree of Fenollosa's linguistic delusions, but in the comparative lingvo-aesthetic dominant of his approach to the study of poetic possibilities of Eastern and Western languages. For him, words – calligraphic sinographs – are “concrete pictures” of nature, “things in motion” [Fenollosa 2008, 82].

In the introduction to his work, which was the outcome of several years of intensive study of classical Chinese poetry, he noted that, as an “enthusiastic student of beauty in Oriental culture” [Fenollosa 2008, 76], he was interested not in linguistics, but in poetics, primarily in Chinese and Japanese poetry: “My subject is poetry, not language”, and he immediately remarks that language is a substance, a medium for the existence of poetry. “In the study of a language so alien in the form to ours as is Chinese in its written character, it is necessary to inquire how those universal elements of form which constitute poetics can derive appropriate nutriment” [Fenollosa 2008, 79]. For calligraphy precedes painting, being a form of visual art, and hieroglyphics is “poetical raw material which the Chinese language affords” [Fenollosa 2008, 93]. Professor Kahori Tateishi, in his work *Ideograms in a Modern Perspective*, studying the nature of Japanese literary style, notes that the ideographic character is inherent in the oriental (Chinese and Japanese) languages, thus, not denying but emphasizing the importance of the physical/visual aspect of these languages [Tateishi 2011, 134] and supporting the idea which was suggested by Fenollosa. It is well known that Chinese characters have always been regarded as an embodiment of the forces of nature. My discussion of this quality is very much framed by Merleau-Ponty's epistemology of embodiment [Merleau-Ponty 2012, 203], although mine is not a theoretical study. Chinese written characters possess this pictorial or semi-pictorial embodiment as access to the reality of the cultural world. Fenollosa assumes that in Chinese, etymology is constantly visible and retains its creative impulse [Fenollosa 2008, 97].

Fenollosa highlights the contrastive aspects of eastern and western poetic languages, unveiling the difference between Chinese hieroglyphics and ancient pictographic languages. He understood the pioneering nature of his research, noting that his essay “represents for the first time a Japanese scholarly study in Chinese culture” [Fenollosa 2008, 139]. Besides, he did not study modern spoken Chinese, but only written classical Chinese, which for him makes it possible to understand the beginning of any other language. In his treatise, he demonstrates that the Chinese written language absorbs the

poetic substance of nature and, through its very pictorial visibility, “retains its original creative poetry with far more vigor and vividness than any phonetic tongue” [Fenollosa 2008, 55].

He argues against the skepticism of professional sinologists who regard the expediency of studying ancient poetry save for the purposes of professional linguistic scholarship. He insists on aesthetic values and the “newly discovered joy” of such research. He began his study of Chinese poetry under the guidance of the main authority of that time in this field – the Japanese professor-sinologist Kaikan Mori. Gradually, Fenollosa discovered in the oriental languages the most natural linguistic form, calling it living poetry.

The influence of the ideas of his beloved predecessor, the transcendental philosopher Emerson, is manifested in his understanding of the Chinese language as the language of nature itself [Emerson 1965, 186]. Fenollosa understands the reading of such poetry as “watching”. He suggests that the hieroglyphic binomial “speak” represents a “mouth with two words and a flame coming out of it” [Fenollosa 2008, 46].

Comparing the nature of Far Eastern and Western languages, he sees the main difference in the fact that Western thought is directly related to the world through the “logic of classification”, “sifting process” [Fenollosa 2008, 47]. In the Chinese language, on the contrary, the most “natural energy” is concentrated in overtones that vibrate against the eye. This is where he sees the main proof of China’s cultural superiority: it lies precisely in the Chinese language itself.

In the context of the historical and cultural situation of the era, aimed at understanding the process of “visual thinking” (ideas of Jaspers and Hume), Fenollosa’s enthusiastic discovery becomes more understandable: for him, sinographs “speak at once with the vividness of painting, and with the mobility of sound” [Fenollosa 2008, 81].

In this treatise, Fenollosa develops two main ideas. The first is related to the “vitality of Chinese”, which was mistakenly reduced to ideographicity by his critics, who criticized him for being amateurish and ignorant in this matter [Liu 1962]. Unfortunately, the crux of Fenollosa’s arguments has been neglected. He insisted that his focus is not on the pictographic roots of Chinese calligraphy, but on their ideographic radicals that “carry in them a verbal idea of action” [Fenollosa 2008, 81].

Thus, not a pictogram, but the idea of movement captured by a hieroglyph and understood aesthetically, constitutes the essence of his concept of the Chinese poetic language as a picture of the operation of nature.

In his approach, the emphasis is laid on an aesthetic understanding of Chinese written characters. It is obvious in the way he compares the English verb “to be” with the Chinese analogues: “the chief verb ‘is’ not only means activity but shows by its derivation ...something even more concrete, namely ‘to snatch from the moon with the hand’... The baldest symbol of prosaic analysis is transformed by imagination into a splendid flash of concrete poetry” [Fenollosa 2008, 89]. In this treatise, he explores the poetical essence of the Chinese and its close proximity to nature, demonstrating how sinograms convert these “material images” into “immaterial relations” [Fenollosa 2008, 94].

Fenollosa’s etymo-sinographical analysis is often insightful. His aim is to catch the inner dynamics of Chinese written characters – things in motion and motion in things. It is impressively demonstrated in his analysis of the sinograph “horse” where realistic representation leaves no doubt about its etymology.

He insists that etymology is constantly visible in sinograms. It retains the creative impulse and process, visible and at work. “After thousands of years, the lines of metaphoric advance are still shown, and in many cases, actually retained in the meaning” [Fenollosa 2008, 25]. One can not help but get the impression that Fenollosa is carefully constructing his solid arguments in anticipation of future accusations of creating a pictorial myth.

The second idea in this treatise is to demonstrate the exclusiveness of the Chinese poetic language, to exemplify that Chinese writing retains the creative impulse and process.

He enlarges this idea by comparing it with Western European languages, the state of which he defines as “anemia of modern speech” [Fenollosa 2008, 55]. For him, the Chinese words, in contrast to English, are alive and plastic, like nature, because things and actions are not formally separated.

Fenollosa perceived Chinese calligraphy photographically, highlighting not hieroglyphic binomials, but ideograms, which he defined as things in motion. For him, as well as for his teacher Emerson, the Chinese character is directly related to the signified, and this quality demonstrates “immediate dependence of language upon nature” [Emerson 1965, 199]. He wanted to instill this quality in the Western poetic language – the idea highly appreciated and appropriated by Ezra Pound.

Ezra Pound, not knowing the Chinese language, created a kind of English-as-Chinese, for which Thomas Eliot called him “the inventor of Chinese Poetry for our time” [Eliot 1928, 14]. Pound aspired not to “translate”, but to “find equivalents in Western languages for the natural energy of classical Chinese writing”. Thus, inspired by the discoveries of Fenollosa, he became an innovator updating the poetics of Western languages.

Precisely for this reason, V. Malyavin defines Pound's translations from Chinese as “improvisations”. And this, of course, is a delusion. The scholar does not take into account the influence of Fenollosa's main principle that Pound internalized: not to translate, not to improvise, but to master the very principle of ancient Chinese poetry: to see through sinographs things themselves what constituted for Fenollosa the fundamentals of the Chinese poetic language. He summed up his understanding of comprehending and mastering the Chinese poetic language as follows: “a stupid scholar may spend a week trying to decide what ‘part of speech’ he should use in translating a very simple and direct thought from Chinese to English” [Fenollosa 2008, 51]. On top of that, Fenollosa assumes that every written Chinese word is an underlying word, and yet it is not abstract. He argues that almost every written Chinese word (sinograph) is not abstract. It is not a part of speech, but something which is neither a noun, a verb, or adjective, but is all of them at once and at all times. “It is not exclusive of parts of speech, but comprehensive; not something which is neither a noun, verb, or adjective, but something which is all of them at once and at all times”. For him, Chinese, unlike English, has “a common word underlying at once the verb ‘shine’, the adjective ‘bright’ and the noun ‘sun’ ” [Fenollosa 2008, 91]. Hence, a poet is free to deal with it as does nature.

In considering the poetic potential of ancient Chinese, Fenollosa turns to the analysis of the “substance” of ancient Chinese poetry. Thus, he formulates a broad aesthetic attitude toward the hieroglyphic language. Fenollosa explores how the movements of nature are reflected in the hieroglyph, which for him is the moving picture. It is this idea of the life-giving nature of the sinograph that Pound appropriated, calling Fenollosa's work an essay on verbs – the driving force of poetic thought.

Juxtaposing Chinese with Western poetic languages, Fenollosa stresses the absence of formalistic elements in Chinese. He bitterly observes that the English poetic language lacks this natural connection to life. “This is especially sad in poetry, because the one necessity, even in our own poetry, is to keep words as flexible as possible, as full of the sap of nature” [Fenollosa 2008, 90].

Fenollosa creates not only a treatise on the Chinese poetic language but also a picture of how and what the poet (he wrote poetry as well) sees at the level of artistic and aesthetic perception of the hieroglyphic language. Fenollosa creates a memorable image of what he has discovered in the Chinese language: “One of the most interesting facts about the Chinese language is that in it we can see, not only the forms of sentences, but literally the parts of speech growing up, budding forth one from another... The Chinese language naturally knows no grammar. It is only lately that foreigners, European and Japanese, have begun to torture this vital speech by forcing it to fit the bed of their definitions” [Fenollosa 2008, 90]. Here he argues against western academic logic, focusing not on

formalistic categorization, but on imagination. The metaphor “budding” conveys his main concept – the Chinese language embodies the dynamic force of nature and, unlike Western languages and European logic, is “a kind of brickyard. It is baked into little hard units or concepts” [Fenollosa 2008, 56].

Fenollosa reveals his understanding of the nature of the Chinese poetic language by relating it to his mother tongue and emphasizing a “poetic” advantage of Chinese, inseparable from the precision of its ideographic form. He assumes that nouns are meeting points of actions and that Chinese adjectives possess the traces of verbal actions too, they are not at all “the bloodless adjectival abstractions” [Fenollosa 2008, 92]. Fenollosa outlines the main contrast with the Western languages: “thought deals with no bloodless concepts but watches things move under its microscope” [Fenollosa 2008, 85]. Even Chinese pronouns, as Fenollosa observes, are pregnant with verbal qualities.

To emphasize this specificity, he provides an example with the pronoun “I” and the Chinese “wo” and “wu”. He traces the power of the Chinese poetic language to the hieroglyphic binomials and reveals that putting two characters together does not produce some third meaning, but highlights the significance and relatedness of the fundamental ties between them.

In the fluid dynamics of meanings embedded in the Chinese hieroglyphics, Fenollosa observes this characteristic feature of the Chinese language as the substance of poetry itself. That is exactly why it is so important to reveal the conceptual nuances of the title of his comparativist manifesto. The superiority of Chinese (“verbal”) poetry, which is imbued with the energy of verbal meanings and with the mobility of sounds, rests in its ability to convey the reality of time. At the heart of Fenollosa’s poetics of sinograph is the concept of dynamic force.

Fenollosa has perceptively captured the dynamics of meaning increment in the Chinese language. By his observations, the volume of meaning in English is constantly shrinking. In contrast to English, in Chinese words strengthen and expand in their meaning “instead of growing poorer and poorer... become richer and still richer from age to age, almost consciously luminous” [Fenollosa 2008, 55].

Fenollosa suggested that the condition for this semantic variety is embedded in the graphic nature of the Chinese characters that are easily retained in memory, their etymology is always transparent and visible: “After thousands of years, the lines of metaphoric advance are still shown, and in many cases actually retained in the meaning”. For him, character openly displays its etymology, the metaphoric overtones [Fenollosa 2008, 129].

Meanwhile, Fenollosa never claimed to have scientific knowledge in the field of Chinese writing, his main aim was to show the mechanism that explains the peculiarity of the Chinese poetic language in comparison to the English linguistic system. Noteworthy, that neglecting Fenollosa’s emphasis on the poetic value of sinogram prevents scholars from seeing his insights into the etymological, calligraphic, and aesthetic aspects of Chinese written characters as a medium for poetry that could have an impact on the scientific study of the Orient.

While we agree with scholars about the mistakes made by Fenollosa in interpreting the etymology of some Chinese characters, or in misinterpreting the poems of some Chinese poets, it is important to avoid making an even bigger mistake – to underestimate the contribution that this pioneering Orientalist made to the development of literary and linguistic studies.

Besides, the later movements in art in the heyday of modernism have corroborated his theories. His disciple Ezra Pound appropriated his idea of dynamic force as the soul of living poetry in his modernization of the English poetic language.

It can be assumed that a further unbiased linguistic and aesthetic study of Fenollosa’s discoveries in exploring the nature of poetic and aesthetic specificity of written Chinese characters as well as his fortunate misconceptions will have an impact on the scientific study of the Orient.

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### **Опривалення етимосинографії: трактат Ернеста Феноллози "Китайський ієрогліф як субстанція поезії"**

У статті порушується проблема в галузі етимосинографічного вивчення мови, яка ніколи раніше не обговорювалася. Синограф – нещодавно запропонований синонім до визначення китайських ієрогліфів.

Після багатьох років нехтування настав час реабілітувати авторитет Ернеста Феноллози в галузі виявлення "естетичного синтезу" в синограмі як субстанції поезії.

Трактат Феноллози часто вивчається не як самостійний і важливий твір у галузі порівняльної поетики, а як довідковий матеріал для розуміння витоків імажизму та вортисизму в західній поезії. Звідси небезпека американізації, а тим більше "паундизації" його творчості. Доводиться шкодувати, що спадщина цього сходознавця, який стояв біля витоків порівняльно-історичного вивчення мов, літератур та культур, не лише залишається недооціненою, а й продовжує викликати необгрунтовану критику синологів-лінгвістів. Важливо підкреслити, що лінгвістична синологія на той час тільки народжувалася і захоплення Феноллози далекосхідною культурою могло знайти лише широке естетичне, а не лінгвістичне наукове втілення.

Розвінчуючи "феноллозіанський міф" про зображувальну природу китайської каліграфії, дослідники ігнорують квінтесенційну ідею в його трактаті – розуміння мовної та естетичної природи китайської мови як субстанції самої поезії. Поезія, на думку Феноллози, невіддільна від мови. Не випадково він вибрав слово "засіб" для позначення цієї "субстанції" та втілення поетичної ідеї в синографах.

Ба більше, його підхід до вивчення далекосхідної культури, мистецтва та літератури охоплював не лише власне словесне значення, а й був зосереджений на етимологічному аналізі семантичних меж синограм. Нещодавно таке вивчення синографії було названо "етимосинологією". Цей термін вказує на втілення культури в синограмах (китайські ієрогліфи) і відповідає резонансній теорії Мерло-Понті – феноменології втілення.

**Ключові слова:** Ернест Феноллоза, китайська мова, синограма, етимосинологія, втілення, поезія

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