



## THE TREEING-OF-TREE THROUGH AFFECTIVE ATTUNEMENT: BIOSEMIOTICS AND CHINESE IDEOGRAMS AS AN ECOSYSTEM

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**Resumo:** Este trabalho se insere na esteira dos desenvolvimentos recentes de uma “virada ecológica” nas teorias da naturacultura ocidental, tendo em vista o paradigma crítico chamado “biossemiótica”. Ele se propõe aventurar-se pela crítica literária interseccionalmente transversal, a ontologia quiasmática, a teoria afetiva, a bioneurologia, a pesquisa científica e filosófica sobre os estudos faunísticos e florísticos, de modo a descobrir um caminho para uma ecocrítica/ecolinguística chinesa sob a égide das humanidades ambientais.

O ensaio parte de um grupo entrelaçado de ideogramas chineses que se apresentam com radicais associados com plantas (*mu* 木 como elemento “planta/madeira”), e que exhibe um amplo espectro de interações planta-ambiente visando a uma empatia afetiva com o agenciamento da vida vegetal. Ele cria, assim, um clima para repensarmos o tema estudo crítico de plantas, estabelecendo uma forma biocêntrica ou fitocêntrica de crítica. Com uma ênfase em *mu* como um dos elementos da cosmologia *wu-xing* 五行 da cultura clássica chinesa, esperamos que o esforço amplie o âmbito e a dimensão da biossemiótica como sugerida por Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, Spinoza, Deleuze, Uexküll, Hoffmeyer e Wheeler, mediante uma abordagem entrecruzada não apenas em áreas críticas, mas também entre as culturas do ocidente e do orientee em geral.

**Palavras-chave:** Ecolinguística; Biossemiótica; Afeto; Ideogramas Chineses; Estudo Crítico de Plantas.

**Abstract:** This paper works in tandem with the recent developments of an “ecological turn” in Western natureculture theories towards the critical paradigm called “biossemiotics.” It proposes to venture into the intersectionality traversing literary criticism, chiasmic ontology, affective theory, bioneurology, scientific and philosophical research on animal and plant studies, so as to ferret out a track onto a new Chinese ecolinguistics/ ecocriticism under the banner of environmental humanities.

The paper first brings forward an intertwined group of Chinese ideograms which are designed with radicals associated with plants (*mu* 木 as “wood” element), and which exhibits a full spectrum of

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plant-environment interactions towards affective attuning to the agency of vegetal life. It then carves out a space to our rethinking the terrain of critical plants studies by establishing a biocentric, or phytocentric form of criticism. With an emphasis on *mu* as one of the five elements within *wu-xing* 五行 cosmology in classical Chinese culture, such an effort will hopefully widen the scope and dimension of biosemiotics as adumbrated by Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, Spinoza, Deleuze, Uexküll, Hoffmeyer and Wheeler through a criss-crossing approach not only among critical fields but also between East and West cultures at large.

**Keywords:** Ecolinguistics; Biosemiotics; Affect; Chinese Ideograms; Critical Plant Studies

Along with the recent development of the Western natureculture theories towards the critical “biosemiotics,” scholars in Chinese linguistics, culture, literature and poetics should be attracted to, or even intrigued by, this paradigm shift which starts a project of “rethinking” the human-nonhuman relationship under the rubric of mutual communication, expression and interaction. The overarching significance of such a project is not limited to our critically exploring whether, say, animals and plants have “language” or whether they can communicate among themselves and with other species. It also outlines the contour of debates which challenge the privileged exceptionalism of the human by rethinking what thinking is about. For the purpose of redefining concepts such as linguistic representation, mind or brain of different species, sense, perception and emotion, subject-object relations which lead to the question of agency, it is my intention here to reach out to the radical otherness by venturing into critical plant studies towards something called “vegetal life.” By tracing back to the very etymology of the Chinese ideograms as a starting point, I wish to validate the idea that we are humans precisely because there are nonhuman species; and by way of moving beyond the human, to be beside and across, in and particularly “with” the nonhuman, we are ushered into the framework of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of transversal communication. Our rethinking an intertwined group of Chinese characters (ideograms) which, one way or another, are associated with the plantation world, will enable us to, as Hannah Stark puts it, “cultivate a *new attitude*,” (STARK, 2015, p.183) a drastically different comportment towards how the self-reflexivity of Chinese language could well be considered a culturally configured ecosystem within the new paradigm of biosemiotics.

Our question, or rather, difficulty, is how transversal communication becomes possible, given the fact that we are using human language (be it English or Chinese) in our attempt at going beyond it. It is of course a question of *attitude* just mentioned, an attitude which is willing to make concession from the self-centered humanity towards a space shared by the human and the

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nonhuman. This can be described by, say, Ian Bogost's concept of the "inhuman" which is "one of the many names for the meeting point between things, of the passage ways between entities' withdrawn, real being and their sensual encounter with others... the friction point... where gears grind, where sparks fly" (BOGOST, 2014, p.139). More specifically in relation to the encounter with plants, Michael Marder's seminal text *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013) emerges as a major attempt at a philosophical reorientation with the activity of brushing "upon the edges of their (plants') being" (MARDER, 2013, p.13). Much earlier on, from E.O. Wilson's "Biophilia Hypothesis" to Naess's Deep Ecology, and Leopold's Land Ethics, ecocentrism has advocated for a kind of life-ethics which emphasizes a biocentric egalitarianism. While Leopold urges us "to think like a mountain," Paul Taylor points to a moral behavior to recognize that "animals and plants have a degree ... of inherent world equal to that of humans," (TAYLOR, 1986, p.152). We then propose a more specific motion as to "how" we actually achieve a "transversal communication" with the nonhuman, namely, through the practice of "becoming animal" and "becoming plant" by following an act of "affective attunement" by Deleuze and Guattari. For them, "Affects are becomings" and "the reality of a becoming-animal ... is affect in itself" (DELEUZE & GUATTARI, *ATP*, p.256, 259). Such an affect would, according to the two philosophers, depend on an emphasis of a process of "structural coupling" between species in terms of vibratory rhythms, as they famously grant such an onto-ethology to explain their concept of transversal communication:

*Rhythm is the milieus' answer to chaos. What chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between two milieus, rhythm-chaos or the chaosmos: "Between, night and day, between that which is structured and that which grows naturally, between mutations from the inorganic to the organic, from plant to animal, from animal to humankind" (ATP, p. 313).*

Despite the fact that Deleuze and Guattari do not elaborate on the becoming-plant to the same extent that they do on becoming-animal, their antihumanist framework does turn to vegetal life under their famous embracement of the rhizomes. For them, "the question is whether plant life in its specificity is not entirely rhizomatic" (*ATP*, p.7). With its "infinitely reproducible principles of *tracing*," (p.13) the rhizome is characterized by its fluidity, receptive connectedness, dispersion towards absolute multiplicity, it being "non-oppositional, non-representational, immanent and material-practical" (MARDER, 2013, p.152). This new image of thought which is rhizomatic

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oscillates among frameworks of transversal connections as manifested from the wisdom of plants” and Deleuze and Guattari suggest that we should “follow the plants” to establish “new circles of convergence” among things (*ATP*, p.12). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they trace the progressive track of becoming, from becoming-woman and end up with becoming imperceptible; in between these becomings we see becoming-vegetable to be followed by becoming-elementary (*ATP*, p.274). Here disparate things on different scales and frameworks generate various form-event assemblages which are subsumed under the rhizomatic assemblage of interconnectedness, heterogeneity and multiplicity. It is from here that I hope to develop an argument that the Deleuzian “becoming-plant,” and particularly the rhizomatics, can serve as an exemplary model for me to venture into a biosemiotic ecosystem first through a group of Chinese ideograms. It is my claim that within the Chinese linguistic structure, these Chinese characters not only serve as signifiers representing various aspects of the plant world, but also as the signified. They are self-reflexively “rhizomes” themselves, taking up the job of establishing a domain of “symbiosis” that brings “into play being of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation” (*ATP*, p.263).

But before I actually embark on the ideograms in question for analysis, there is still a need for us to digress into the “paradigm of cultural ecology” as expounded by Hubert Zapf in his *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (2016). For Zapf, a paradigm is “an example, pattern or model” (OED); a “narrative, story with exemplary, model-like character” (Zapf: 2016, p.1). Within the larger system of linguistic structure, literature “is described as a transformative force of language and discourse ... for the creation of long-term, self-reflexive models of ecosemiotic complexity” (ZAPF, 2016, p.4). Literary language now becomes “a force of connectivity and intense, even magical interconnectedness. ... [T]he apparently self-referential play of cultural signifiers is embedded into living energy fields of ecosemiotic meanings, which connect heterogeneous domains of nature, culture and the human mind” (ZAPF, 2016, p.232). As it is well-known, Chinese language consists of monosyllabic, mostly ideogrammatic units which emphasize their visual make-ups. Its uniquely poetic characteristic was first known to the West through the modernist poetics which privileged imagistic discourse over discursive narrative. In this regard we are reminded of how literary critics such as Fellenosa and Ezra Pound were amazed by the montage-like juxtaposition of layers of images within one single character, such as the ideogram *dong* 東 (East) from which we can detect a scaffolding of a horizontal line of ocean, with a sun rising above it, and we have a tree in between the two images. The “tree” here takes the

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form of the character *mu* 木 (wood) according to the shape of a piece of twig forking out on both sides; and it plays a fundamental role of not only as a major radical associating with all aspects of the plantation world, but also as one of the symbols for the whole Chinese cosmology within the Five Elements *wu-xing* 五行.

As it turns out, *mu* is only one radical among others, all of which posit different species of plants etymologically designating *hwa* 花 (flower), *cao* 草 (grass), *jü* 竹 (bamboo), comprising a kind of ecosystem of its own. On a more complex level, we have, say, the ideogram *shu* 樹 (tree) which consists of the pre-individualized wood on the left, and, amazingly, a hand planting a young shaft of tree on the right. The character is amazing because it sounds congruent beautifully with the paradigm of cultural ecology which in turn echoes the natureculture theory in general. *Shu* here proffers the natural on the one hand and human culture with an act of planting on the other. Within human linguistics, *shu* as a noun points to a kind of plant in the first place, but it can well be used as a verb enacting a process of cultivating, nourishing and erecting, or establishing with an educational overtone such as the saying that “one plants the trees in ten years’ time and cultivates benevolence in a hundred years’ time.” Such a saying bases itself, of course, on Confucian human ethics. Put in our context of critical plant studies, I would argue here that the phrase *shu-mu* 樹木 (the treeing of wood) can be read as a Deleuzian form/event assemblage, directly positing a capacity of agency on the part of the tree itself without human interference. By substituting the phrase *shu-mu* into *shu-shu* 樹樹, awkward as it sounds, we will have “treeing of tree” which puts to the fore a biosemiotics advocating for the capacity of “striving” by the alterity endowed with affective attunement.

Striving is a concept Jesper Hoffmeyer adopts from Darwin concerning natural selection; and it serves as one of the beginning layers of “scaffolding” in his biosemiotics. Instead of taking the “agency” of living beings for granted as Darwin did, Hoffmeyer goes all the way to molecules and genes to explain the existence of “teleodynamics” in living species, their “interest” in matters of their surroundings. By means of what he calls “semiome,” the entirety of an organism’s semiotic tool set, living beings “may extract significantly meaningful content from their surroundings and engage in intra- or interspecific communicative behavior” (HOFFMEYER, 2014, p.11). Hoffmeyer reminds us that biosemiotics, or “sign processes” appeared way before human linguistics, as there have been millions of sign systems in nature, regulating “not only intraspecific behavior but also

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interspecific behavior through symbiotic interactions” among living beings (p.14). Here Hoffmeyer does include “phytosemiotics” as one of the sign processes in nature, but of course he does not devote his attention to the question of arboreality per se. It is my intention, therefore, to launch a project, as Alfred Kentigern Siewers suggests, to “let trees be trees, as it were.” (SIEWERS, 2014, p.101). Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of trees being hierarchical in Western culture nonetheless, we can still side with Siewers’s argument that “Trees remain an age-old symbol of the mysterious side of life, from their rollicking non-geometric form, which always has a literal ‘other side,’ the nonhuman life that they hide in different dimensions and elements from microbes to bears their frequent age beyond humans and most living things, to the empathy they engender in human cultures that still live within trees and off their fruit and oxygen ....” (SIEWERS, 2014, p.103). In other words, trees occupy a space of intersection of life’s trajectory of the rhizomatic and the arboreal between the immanent and the transcendental, between rootedness and cultural and biological magnetism in life’s aspiration of up rearing towards the sky.

I would make a claim right at this juncture, that Chinese culture still, up to now, live within trees. The empathy trees engender in Chinese culture is manifested in our daily use of phrases such as *shu li* 樹立 (to erect and let stand), *jiàn-shu* 建樹 (accomplish) besides the *shu-mu* and *shu-ren* mentioned above. They all point to their capacity of agency which is defined by Hoffmeyer as “the capacity of an agent to act in the world” (HOFFMEYER; STJERNFELT, 2016, p.10). Aligned together they become parts of the paradigm Zapf suggests as “exemplary, model-life” characters; and when used in literary texts, they serve as “long-term, self-reflexive models of ecosemiotic complexity”. As rhizomes within the semiome of Chinese language itself, the combined effect of nature/culture gives rise to many other rhizomatic ideograms which are, directly and indirectly, related to the plant world. From this unique ideogram *shu*, we can now move on and bring forth a whole set of characters which belong to the “family tree” of plant beings. Besides the obvious cases where characters with radicals such as *mu* 木, *hua* 花 (flower), *cao* 草 (grass) and *zhū* 竹 (Bamboo) all of which give rise to thousands of other characters, we also find characters which hide their plant-related origin from sight. Ideograms such as *sheng* 生 (birth; life), *xin* 新 (new), *xiao* 笑 (laugh), *si* 思 (in mind/heart), and *xiang* 想 (think) all have their original plant aspects hidden from their ordinary use, becoming Hoffmeyer’s “sign processes” that organize activities moving onto other rhizomatic structures of Chinese language. They function to generate interspecific behavior as is “dramatically illustrated in Nature’s many symbiotic interactions”

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(HOFFMEYER, 2014, p.14). Here we should be impressed by the fact that plants perform such a major feat in the Chinese language as a whole. For example, the ideogram *sheng* 生 shows a young shaft of plant shooting up from the soil. Also *si* and *xiang* put together as *si-xiang*, they bring forth the signified as “thinking” itself, while at the same time, both are equipped with some plant elements hidden in the “heart,” couching its biosemiotic elements in a vocabulary derived from plant-related radicals. Can we find a better exemplary model to testify to the claim that all thinking is thinking ecologically? Or, what else can we put forward except this ideogram *sheng* to give adequate support to the claim by Hoffmeyer and Stiernefelt that “the conception of life and semiosis as co-extensive?” (HOFFMEYER; STIERNFELT, 2016, p.7). All these characters ram home the fact that all life forms make use of expression of their own physiologies bearing semiotic resonance. We do not just learn to listen to the lacunae and silences of language, we are also granted the privilege of recognizing that the other is totally from within.

The ideogram *sheng* does, with its own signified as signifier, point to the fact that life is simply an emergent phenomenon of transversity, proximities and symbiosis. Right here, and within one single character, we find a form-event assemblage intersecting the natural form of life and its striving to make life happen within a processual event where, as Bennett puts it, “life forces at work around and within us” (BENNETT, 2015, p.223). As at once signifiers and signified, images as well as metaphors, words and rhizomes, taken as integral parts of an ecosystem which includes singular ideograms, literary works such as poetry and even critical discourse of the Chinese poetics, these ideograms function as a body, a bodily encounter beyond representation. As text-bodies, these ideograms harbor their “ability to gesture towards something more ... a function of a *distributive* networks of bodies: words on the page, words in the reader’s imagination, sounds of words”; they can light up, by rendering human perception more acute, “those bodies whose favored vehicle of *affectivity* (emphasis mine) is less wordy: plants, animals, blades of grass, household objects, trash” (pp.234-235). Here we have, a criss-cross relationship between plants and the human language which underscores, as Denise Riley suggests, a “semiotic aspect of affect” through the “affect-soaked power of language” (Riley: 2005, p.5). Here, affect theory by Spinoza seems to be a significant and appropriate conceptual tool-box for our further discussion on Chinese plant-related ideograms, and how, as rhizomes in an ecosystem, they serve as the first tier of a structure of biosemiotics pointing to both Chinese poetry and poetics. In Part III of the *Ethics*, Spinoza’s idea of affect is first introduced:

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*By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections. Therefore, if we can be the adequate cause of any of these affections, I understand by the affect an action; otherwise, a passion* (Ethics III Definition, p.3)

With his concept of “conatus” which ties to a transindividual processuality as an act of, in Caroline Williams’ words “desire as conative striving,” Spinoza’s affects “are always turned towards others, the *conatus* is part of an intrahuman dynamic ....” (WILLIAMS, 2012, pp.19-20). What is important to us in our context is that Spinoza’s theory of affect can help us pursue further the concomitant drives towards the human and nonhuman interaction; and the emphasis on the body, on the meandering through and between bodies where “non-human individuals’ also have a conatus” (WILLIAMS, 2012, p.23).

At this point we should bring forward a Tang poem by Bai Ju-yi白居易 (772-846) to actually illustrate the very eventfulness within the mutual communication, expression and interaction between the human and the nonhuman: through a process of conative striving:

### 賦得古原草送別

離離原上草，一歲一枯榮。  
野火燒不盡，春風吹又生。  
遠芳侵古道，晴翠接荒城。  
又送王孫去，萋萋滿別情。

“Saying Good-bye on Ancient Prairie”

*Li-Li* Grass on Prairie, One year one Withering-Flourishing.

Wild-Fire burns but not exhaustive, Spring Wind blows, again, alive.

Far fragrant flowers got to ancient lane, Green plants link up abandon city.

Again seeing *Wang Shun* away, *qi-qi* full of good-bye sensation.

(translation mine)

We have quite a bit to say about this famous poem in terms of biosemiotics. We can even create a short story, “the story we go by” in ecolinguistics by singling out the first line alone. *li-li* 離離, a repetition of the same character taken to point to a state of distance, or widely proliferating of things,<sup>i</sup> whereas in this poem these first two characters foreshadow the very mood of parting between friends as the title of the poem indicates. However, very few readers, even for native speakers, are reminded of the fact that the ideogram *li* originates from ancient etymologies such as *jia-gu* 甲骨文 (oracle-bone) and *jin* 金文 designating a composite of images, namely a bird, a net



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with a wooden handle, a piece of wood on the top of the left side representing trees or forest. Hence with *li-li* followed by the other three characters *yuan-shang-cao* 原上草 (prairie or grass on plateau), we have a full picture of extended prairie on the plateau. Again and upon scrutiny, our attention is first drawn to the design of *cao* 草 which has another superimposed images of grass, a sun and grass-root. We then learn that the character *shang* 上 (up, above) has a dot on a horizontal line of field, with *yuan* 原 being originally associated with rock and running water. Now taken as a whole, the five characters trigger a trajectory of linguistic stories surrounding water, earth, and with wood *mu* repeatedly emphasized within the Chinese cosmology of *wu-xing* 五行 (Five Elements). The story we go by here narrates the grassland being already embraced by the repeated *li*, with *cao* itself being part of the adjective which describes it, the signified being the signifier. As a whole, the line imparts not only a visible scene of prairie, but, the phrase *li-li* also displays blocks of sensation which function as an act of “affective attunement” within biosemiotics.

The second line works as a further description of the wild grass on the plateau, where plant life of this kind takes up an annual circularity in time. The ideogram *yi* (one) has been ingeniously rendered by Ames and Hall as “continuity,”<sup>iii</sup> and then *sui* 歲 (year) originally signifies Jupiter, which in Chinese as *mu-xing* 木星 (wood-star). Then the last two ideograms *ku-rong* 枯榮 (wither and flourish) are preoccupied by wood images designating the withering and blooming of plant life alternately in a year’s time. Note that the five ideograms together generate continuous, seasonal cycles, with the most fundamental ideogram *yi* repeated, creating an ever-ongoing rhythm of the great chain of transformation within the form-event assemblage. As, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “Affects are becomings (*APT* 256), with the title of the poem in mind, the first two lines narrate an interspecies of a shared life between human friends and plant existence with “cycles of energy” which “circulate superorganisms and microorganisms to produce good and bad climates of affect and biological well-being” (WILLETT, 2014, p.86). From a new ecocriticism perspective, this emerging/emergent shift to a threshold where, as Timothy Clark argues, the “human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlining the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the ‘environment,’” we are forced to “trace often invisible lines of interconnection and affect between bodies across space and time” (CLARK, 2011, p.57). Here affect is the matter in us responding and resonating with the matter around us, it being always at the point of emergence in its actual specificity. The one year one

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cycle does the work of side-stepping the human selves, naming the risings and fallings, the movements from one state to another, the passages of intensity, immanent to all matters on earth.

Since the third and fourth lines are known almost to every Chinese native speaker, I am not prepared to say too much about them, except that the ideograms *ye* 野 (wild), *chun* 春 (spring) and *sheng* 生 (becoming alive) all have hidden wood element, together with the other elements such as fire and earth. Starting with the fifth line to the end, the second half of the poem sticks to the traditional pattern of Chinese lyrical poetry in which we have first presentation of the external scene, which then triggers forth the subjective feeling, emotion or the affective/sensation of the poet. Here, the reason I avoid using the word “objective” by opting for “external” instead is that even though the fifth and sixth lines depict an environment which comes close to the human world, their structure and syntax pose some problems in their semantic meaning. Given the very nature of Chinese language being mono-syllabic and the five character-a-line in Tang poetry there is a possibility of our taking the *yuan-fang* 遠芳 (far-away; fragrant plants) and *qing-cui* 晴翠 (clear as blue sky and bright sun; bird with green feather) as subjects of some active action. They are the subjects, grammatically speaking, of the two transitive verbs *qin* 侵 (invade into) and *jie* 接 (link up; receive, take over) to be followed respectively by two objects of the verbs, namely, *gu-dao* 古道 (ancient road) and *huang-cheng* 荒城 (deserted city). We first notice both subjects are associated with plants, even the character *qing* 晴 has a hidden plant in its etymology. And that is not all, we then discover that the character *huang* 荒, meaning abandoned or deserted, pictures a scene where wild plants are taking over everywhere. These two lines taken together, they unfurl a nostalgic sentiment on the part of the poet, with the plant world being granted agency of expressing itself. The two grammatical subjects here can then be considered, as Caroline Williams suggests, “subjectivity without the subject” (WILLIAMS, 2012, pp.11-27). They are what Massumi calls “prepersonal intensity,” an augmentation in the body’s agency to act and to strive (MASSUMI, 1988, p.xvi). Once again, we can well remind ourselves what Spinoza calls “the active affects” which are “subject to vacillation or ambivalence (*fluctuatio animi*), and the object or image of the other can be the cause of many conflicting passion”. (*Ethics*: Part III. Proposition p.17 Scholium). Here bodies do not just absorb impulses or discrete stimulations from their environment, they unfold historical contexts which are imbricated with affective waviness in response to situated conditions.

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As Spinoza tells us that affectivity works by a process of intermeshing of things “outside our physical and mental boundaries” (*Ethics*: Part II, Lemma 7 Scholium), his idea of “expression” harnesses the whole immanent connectedness between different materials and immaterial spheres of the world. In Part IV of *Ethics*, he associates music with “green plants” as ways of cultivating the body to enable the mind to “understand many things at once” (*Ethics*: Part IV. Proposition 45 Scholium). According to Amy Cimini, “Spinoza implicitly posits music and sound as rich sites for cultivating knowledge and responsibility for our mental and bodily relationships to substance and its modes” (CIMINI, 2012, p.99). Hence I am arguing here that as far as our analysis goes, the first six lines of the poem, both the ideograms in them and the ambience created, establish an affective attunement which enacts a process of becoming sonorous. Remember that in these six lines we have a lot of plant images, in some of which we even find birds. Such a mix of animal and plant ecosystems does fall into what Deleuze and Guattari call “becoming-consistent,” its very process or event of bodies becoming expressive and their way move and rest in their speed and slowness:

*Every morning the **Scenopoetes dentirostris**, a bird of the Australian rain forests, cuts leaves, makes them fall to the ground, and turns them over so that the paler internal side contrasts with the earth. In this way it constructs a stage for itself like a readymade; and directly above, on a creeper or branch, while fluffing its feathers beneath its beak to reveal their yellow roots, it sings a complex song made up from its own notes and, at intervals, those of other birds that it imitates; it is a complete artist (WP: 1994, p.184).*

From this example, Elizabeth Grosz goes on to trace the origin of arts not only from birdsong, but also from “olfactory dance of insects, the performative displays of vertebrates, including humans” (GROSZ, 2008, p.12). It is a pity, I would note here, that Grosz does not pay much attention to the leaves themselves. It is then up to a later critic, in our case Amy Cimini, to complete the story by including the partnership between the animal and the plant worlds, asserting that “The bird and the leaves are expressers; they start out as co-existent singularities or ‘molecularized’ things.” This sounding song, as Cimini argues, belongs to “the bird-leaf composite” where “expressive relationship between the bird and the leaves becomes a thinkable reality through the event of song. The event of sound provides *evidence* of their shared capacities” (CIMINI, 2012, p.102). Back to Bai’s poem, we now can easily weave together the horizontally stretching grassland, the repeated cycle of *yi* — (oneness) as the primordial time and place in a cosmic sense, the withering and blooming of life, with plants as major imagery all the time. Expressivity is then granted by the

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ever-self-renew capacity of plant life, and their being subjectivities without subjects is ascertained by their will to strive by being armed with their “striving affects” as ambient intelligence.

Whereas the first half of the poem depicts a natural world, and where the fifth and six lines come close to the human world, one that is still dominated by the agency of plant being, Bai’s last two lines should then be considered an exclusive concern with human sentiment. This may be the case except with, again, the repetition of the character *qi* 萋 (plants flourishing; sound of rain and wind on plants). Upon being allowed to speak for themselves, plant beings now weave a dense, self-reflexive and energetic fabric of signifying change of events with a loop of recursive complexities beyond any sense of epistemological assurance. But then one thing becomes clear, and that is this “inter” zone or inhuman realm between the human and the nonhuman prepares us to wedge into the complexity of biosemiotics itself. By presenting the rhizomatic plants as the “transversality of life processes” (quoted from CHISHOLM, 2010, p.367), these plant images amply testify to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea about “the wisdom of the plants” when they urge us to “always follow the rhizome of rupture; lengthen, prolong and relay the line of flight” (*APT*, p.11). Elsewhere, Deleuze and Guattari write:

*The plant contemplates by contracting the elements from which it originates – light, carbon, and the salts – and it fills with colors and orders that in each case qualify its variety, its composition: it is sensation itself. It is as if flowers smell themselves by smelling what composes them, first attempts of vision or of sense of smell, before being perceived or even smelled by an agent with a nervous system and a brain (WP: 1994, p.212).*

We can take note here that Deleuze and Guattari may have heralded the whole paradigm shift in recent years towards plant thinking, intelligence and expression by philosophers and critics such as Michael Marder, Richard Karban, Luce Irigaray, Daniel Chamovitz, Richard Karban, Eduardo Kohn and etc. But insofar as the concept of “contemplation” is brought up for attention, it points to the Deleuzian “sensation” itself. To contemplate is to express by using sign taken as sign-relation in biosemiotics. The flower contemplates by vibration after vibration in absorbing sun light and water; and sensation is created at the moment when materials become expressive through waves and rhythms, hence affects and percepts.

From here, I will argue that Bai’s poem we have been working on serves as an exemplary case for our establishing a new Chinese ecocriticism as seen through systems of ideograms, poetry as well as poetics. To conclude my analysis of the poem, I would single out the poet’s use of *li-li*

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離離 and *qi-qi* 萋萋 as two pairs of repeated characters, the first as starting the poem in the first line, the second ending the poem in the last. For one thing, it has been a long-time tradition in Chinese poetry where we see numerous usages of such a device, and it has been just as long a critical practice for critics to make sense of these uses as for the purpose of emphasizing, strengthening and prolonging the object being described, or the tonality or sensation being presented. Whereas these critics' observation may be right in general, I still wish to argue that sticking to the traditional reading risks obstructing the growth of meaning, as these ideograms being whittled down to the point of losing its ideogrammatic richness altogether. Hence it is my wish to push this device of repetition further apace to support my using the *shu-shu* or the treeing-of-tree in this paper. This is done to bring them closer to ideas such as affect, sensation and rhythm, and how they find parallel structures in Chinese poetics. It turns out that *li*, linguistically, is a character belonging to the category of *hui-yi* 會意 (matching-with-sense) characters, and *qi* should be categorized as *xing-sheng* 形聲 (shape-sound) characters. This may mean that the design of *li* as an ideogram has more to do with how it makes sense, whereas the pictorial form of *qi* highlights its sounding capacity. Now I would push the etymological logic onto another scale so that both of them inhere a certain power of coefficient in producing actual, physical sound, rhythm and even music, the kind of sounding that is enshrined in aggregates which move towards a certain indiscernibility through a process of the Deleuzian becoming-molecular. Also, the character *yi* 意 has an ideogrammatic composite of a sound or an act of sounding above the heart. At any rate, I would propose that many of the Chinese *die-zi* 疊字 in Chinese language can be understood as a linguistic lay-out under the Deleuzian notion of “difference through repetition,” something that is different from “*rengaine* (mere repetition without creativity) in *Difference and Repetition* (DELEUZE, 1994, p.14)<sup>iii</sup>. Here with *li-li* and *qi-qi* taken together, they perform a kind of refrain which circles around the milieu and join “cosmic forces” of the Chinese concept of *tien-lai* and *de-lai* 天籟 ; 地籟 (sky-music; earth-music) by the poetic maneuver of *ren-lai* 人籟 (human-music). Such a refrain becomes possible by embracing “sonorous, gestural, motor lines” which give birth of “loops, knots, speeds, movements, gestures, and sonorities” (*ATP*, pp.311-12)<sup>iv</sup> within tightly interlaced networks. The character *lai* here establishes an intrinsic link of sound-making, with a congeries of human and plants now seamlessly articulated in its design, mutually dependent and co-evolving in time and space.

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Despite the fact that Bai's poem thematizes human friendship, it in actual fact flips over into interspecies ethics and aesthetics where plants, streams, animals with fire and wind, are now bundled-up bodies through which affects are created as dark precursors of our contrapuntal rhyming system. The poem invites us to immanently experience "vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind" (DELEUZE, *WF*, p.8). For Cynthia Willett, this means that we are "to engage multilayered symbiotic agencies and biosocial communities" (WILLETT, 2014, p.7), so that there is "a multimodal flow of affect attunement in mixed species societies" (p.81). From such a perspective, we can easily attribute the expressions of treeing-of-tree to a general project of articulating a preverbal biosemiotics as characterized by our nonconscious immersion in an act of affective attunement, the kind that coincides with Willett's wave-like contagion of affect-clouds. Here we need to hark back to the Chinese poetics of *hui-yi* just mentioned. We can now take the expression as a dynamic composite of the form-event assemblage, with *yi* as affect when human and nonhuman communicate in a two-way traffic, and the process being presented as the unstoppable eventfulness of an act of matching, entrainment and attunement. But there is a major difference between the West and the East in terms of the language structures between them. For Willett, interspecies encounters manifest themselves through "waves of energy transmission" (2014, p.85). But then she duly recognizes the fact that "Perhaps the fluidity of waves escapes conventional metaphysics due to our cognitive and linguistic limits, given that the human species often learns by pointing and communicates through words that are names for things" (2014, p.87). What she points at is close to de Saussure's signifying practice in which the signifier and the signified do not have a "positive term." In this regard, we have kept repeated that transversality in communication between humans and nonhumans is to a certain extent facilitated by the linguistic structure of Chinese ideograms as rhizomes within a linguistic eco-system. These ideograms, those associated with the plant world, not only function as signifiers pointing to "things" in the human world, but also circle back to themselves as their own signifieds which embrace countless events wrought by the inexhaustible wellsprings of life known as the Deleuzian "desiring machine."

This difference between the East and the West notwithstanding, I still wish to follow Willett's two modes of the interspecies, biosocial attunement in an act of sharing affects. They are: ○,<sup>1</sup> the wavelike contagion of an 'affect cloud' across a social field and ○,<sup>2</sup> a singular response of a particular, particle-like creature to the expressed affect of another" (2014, pp.135-136). Our

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discussion will involve concepts in Chinese poetics such as *chi* 氣 (vital force), *yi* 意 (sense, meaning, or even nuanced affect) and *xing* 興 (giving rise to) and *xing-chu* 興趣 (interest).<sup>v</sup> All these are deeply enmeshed with the Chinese Buddhism and Daoism which provide solid foundations for poetic theories and practice. But before delving into them, I would turn my attention here, for further support of my argument, to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty as a model for later development of biosemiotics in terms of cross-species affinity. Initiating a whole movement of embodied thinking, phenomenology argues for a return to the immanently concrete, lived experienced by breaking away from the Western tradition of mind-body dualism. Within our context of human-plant sign-relation, we can remind ourselves here that Heidegger, when explaining his idea of “dwelling” (*buan*) on earth, claims that the word “means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care--it tends the growth that ripens into its fruits of its own accord” (HEIDEGGER, 1977, p.325). This caring for the fruition in the plant world as the basic meaning of our dwelling on earth poetically is how we sing the world in concert with all the other-voices of the biota” (WESTLING, 2014, p.34). For such a reciprocity and entanglement among and across species, Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of “synergy” to emphasize not the cogito, but rather the ecological interrelationships of all beings on *earth*:

*Now why would this generality, which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies ... Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each? Their landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly ... For as overlapping and fission, identity and difference, it brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1968: p.142).*

When Merleau-Ponty states that “the whole landscape is overrun with words,” and when he quotes Valéry that “language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and forests” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1968, p.155), it may sound contradictory to the Chinese Daoism’s saying that “The heaven and the earth have the highest virtue, but they do not speak a single word. The four seasons occur in regular cycles, but they do not raise a single argument. All things in the world grow in a fixed pattern but they do not give a single explanation” (Trans. by WANG RONGPEI, 1999, p.305). However, the contradiction can only be superficial at best, since the expressions *yen* 言 (speak), *yi* 議 (argue) and *shuo* 說 (explain)

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can only be the signifiers of human language. Now the capacities for things to express their virtues, following their cycles and growth in accord with certain patterns, are all sign-relations that could be embraced by the nowadays biosemiotics, simply because “Language is everywhere”<sup>vi</sup>. For Zhuangzi, all fundamental aspects of life owe much to heaven and earth, since our body, our growth and our life turn out to be products of their *wei-xing* 委形 (endow form), *wei-he* 委和 (concordance) and *wei-shun* 委順 (shifting accordingly). We should note here that the character *wei* (following the shift) uses the shaft of a plant to designate the movement of energy flow, the kind of rhythmic resonance found in the pair, *li-li* and *qi-qi* in Bai’s poem. Moreover, the character *he* 和 (harmony, resonating of sound) with *wei-he* even doubles the efforts of our relying on the plant world to get across the *tien-lai* and *di-lai* (the sky-music; earth music) we brought forth earlier; and again the ideogram itself is largely associated with a shaft of plant, embracing the act of sonorous and gestural affects with oscillating attunement. For Merleau-Ponty, “the body is a natural power of expression” (2012, p.187). For Daoism, the primordial silence of the heaven and the earth only hides a common gestural biosphere which affords “so many ways of singing the world” and that is why “the *full* sense of a language is never translatable into another” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p.193).

We are now prepared to finally crystalize our strategy of providing new energy to the Chinese ecocriticism with the help of biosemiotics. As pioneered by George Bateson’s “ecology of mind” (1972) and “the cybernetic self” (1972, p.323), J. von Uexküll’s “Umwelt” (2010), C.S. Peirce’s semiotics (1998), as well as the latter’s recent exploration of semiotics of nature (2015), biosemiotics has now flourished as an integral part of environmental humanities. It is then up to Jesper Hoffmeyer to establish the concept to be an independent field of studies, as he defines it right from the start of his *Biosemiotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and the Life of Signs* (2008) as: “the name of an interdisciplinary scientific project that is based on the recognition that life is fundamentally grounded in semiotic processes” (2000, p.3). What this means is that “Life on Earth manifests itself in a global and evolutionary *semiosphere*, a sphere of sign processes and elements of meaning that constitute a frame of understanding within which biology must work” (p.5). For our purpose of making a case for Chinese ideogrammatic language, poetry and poetics as exemplary and evolutionary biosemiotics, we have yet to resort to Wendy Wheeler’s exploration in the field so as to put our feet on a firmer ground. In her *Expecting the Earth: Life, Culture, Biosemiotics*, (2016) Wheeler makes it absolutely clear that “*mind is a sign relation*,” and that



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“human semiosis is only a small species-specific element. The biosphere and the semiosphere are co-extensive” (p.2). As different from the Chinese saying that heaven and earth does not speak, Wheeler reconfirms the “ecological intertwining of flesh, sign and world – an evolutionary ontology of sign relations which characterizes the biological and cultural, aesthetic and technological, ecologies which biosemiotics reveals” (p.4). By emphasizing the ontological status of historical evolution over time, and by reminding us of Deleuze’s notion of relation being external to its terms within the duration of life’s lines of flight, Wheeler faithfully models her biosemiotics on Hoffmeyer’s “semiotic scaffolding” by reiterating the fact that “sign is also a living thing” (p.59), and that “biological and cultural meanings grow” (p.70).

When Wheeler grants some kind of active response, interpretation and choice to all species even at the cellular level, and when we read that “living things have some form of agency some capacity for making sense of things, some feeling for meaning” (p.77), we are reassured of what we argued earlier in that the *shu-shu*, the treeing of tree, also exhibits agency and striving as a practice or performance first and foremost. And in as much as sign-relations and their meanings are living entities, the whole set of rhizomatic Chinese ideograms which are directly or indirectly associated with the plant world is called to task in Hoffmeyer’s “sign processes” which always catalyze new relations and meanings. The question for us at this point is “how?” What is the specific channel through which the untranslatability of signs will eventually yield up new knowledge, feeling and meaning? For an answer, we are to back-track a number of poetic categories in the classical Chinese ecocriticism and to decipher an innovative paradigm so as to match up with the characteristics of biosemiotics we just delineated. As it turns out, the categories such as *yì*意 (also *hui-yì*會意), *xìng*興 (giving rise to), *hé*和 (harmonious), all commonly accepted as major tenets in the whole of Chinese poetics, can well be “rethought” with specific reference to their advocating for the nuanced affect and affective attunement. They can be put alongside layer upon layer of evolutionary processes through which a structure of semiotic scaffolding appears as an ecosystem as well as a new Chinese ecocriticism. This paper starts out by introducing a set of characters which either point to some plant elements directly, or contain plant radicals which may not signify plant per se. Now we can ascribe them, particularly the latter kind, to be sets of sign-relations which according to Wheeler, demands a “needful shift from the ontology of substance and essence that informs the metaphysics of modernity and towards a biosemiotic ontology of relations” (WHEELER, 2016, p.13). They are relations which are “between” things, rhizomes of

inter-relatedness, ready for new interpretation when the occasion arises. As mentioned, there are quite a number of ideograms with parts of its composites belonging to the plant world, but now possibly forgotten, for example, the ideograms *sheng* 生 (life), *xiao* 笑 (laugh), *si-xiang* 思想 (thinking), *rou* 柔 (gentle, soft), *he* 和 (harmony), etc. My point is that the re-discovery of these characters' connectedness with plant can yield according to Hoffmeyer "new communicative patterns" of meaning "on the top of already established patterns, thereby strengthening the scaffolding of the initial interactive patterns" (HOFFMEYER, 2014, p.27) through an endless waging of events in the making. These ideograms announce their entry into the semantic field by not playing a central role in the event of signification. Instead they fall back on a feedback loop, from being a signifier back to the signified, then another round of being another signifier throughout its history of linguistic structuration.

As it has been well-known, the Chinese written language is called *xiang-xing* 象形 (elephant shape or form), meaning it has been modeled on its pictorial and ideogramatically visual effects.<sup>vii</sup> Again, it has also been understood that even within one single character, as we have illustrated with *shu* 樹 (tree), there is already a composite of an event on display by the side of its form which designates "the conditions of an affective encounter, or an authentic relation with the outside" (ZOURABICHVILI, p.57). From there we can upscale the evolutionary framework a bit to include Chinese calligraphy, since the linguistic structure of *xiang-xiang* would include art form, the two of which are biologically and culturally interconnected. These strokes are usually done separately but not all the time, as they can be scaffolded by a continuous flow connecting different ones, the extreme case of which can be found in *cao-shu* 草書 (grass style). Such a style excels in a let-go kind of unbridleness, free-flow of energy, with affective dancing with dots, slants and hooks. The movements of the brush become rhizomatic and entangled, with curvaceous sweeps of deterritorialized flows, the affective effects of which not unlike the repetitive *li-li* and *qi-qi* in Bai's poem we brought forth. Hence Chinese written language consists of sign-relations between the human and the non-human, bridged over the blocks of sensation it creates through the processuality of *yi* 意在 general. When the literary critic *Zhong-Hung* 鍾嶸 suggests to us that literary style treasures the achievement where "there is an end to speech, but no end to *yi*" 言有盡，意無窮, *yi* here means a multiple dimension of, say, mood, meaning, sensation, in a word affect. In front of all kinds of sign-relations in the literary style of writing, and with its etymological

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design as “sound on the heart,” this *yi* can well be pointing at “a well-tuned sympathy of biosemiotic relationships ... which controls and coordinates the biochemical, physiological, and even cognitive processes that together constitute life” (HOFFMEYER, 2008, p.31).

As *hui-yi* 會意 (matching of sense, meaning) points to sympathizing and empathizing biosemiotic relationships, it also describes, as Deleuze counsels a “state of affairs” which “is adequately exposed by certain physical concepts: *coupling* between heterogeneous systems, from which is derived an *internal resonance* within the system ....” (DELEUZE, 1994, p.117). It occupies the very knots between boundaries, the minute edges of changes of affects at a critical moment of divergents and bifurcations where living things interact in what biologists call “intercalary oscillations” (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, *ATP*, pp.328-329). Hence *hui-yi* also implicates a sense of “transversality” as introduced by Guattari, who emphasizes a “Founding instance of intentionality” which involves taking the relation between subject and object by the middle and foregrounding the expressive instance” (GUATTARI, 1955 [1992], p.22). For Wheeler, there are “Endless comparisons of transversal transductions – in art and techne” which “can be made for understanding the play of parries and responses to similarities and differences ....” (WHEELER, 2016, p.229). With this thinking transversally as guide, we can now move on to a brief introduction of the character *he* 和 (harmonious) as a typical Daoist part of the Chinese ecosystem as a whole. Once again, we need to rehearse again to the most famous passage in Laozi’s 老子 *Daodejing* 《道德經》 which directly unpacks the secret of the Daoist *yin-yang* 陰陽 natureculture as rendered by Roger Ames and David L. Hall:<sup>viii</sup>

*Way-making (dao) gives rise to continuity, continuity gives rise to difference, difference gives rise to plurality. And plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (wan-wu). Everything carries yin on its shoulders and yang in its arms and blend these vital energies (qi) together to make them harmonious (he) (2003, pp.142-143).*

Our attention here is drawn to the last phrase in the original *chong-qi ye wei-he* 沖氣以為和, meaning to blend the *yin* and *yang* energies – one interpretation chooses to read the character 沖 as emptiness before blending – so as to achieve *he* (harmonious). What deserves more careful attention to the character *he* is that ideographically, it is made up of a plant on the left with a mouth on the right, hence it becomes another example of the evolutionary process of many Chinese ideograms whose historical semiotic scaffoldings need to be kept in mind. *He* does not appear only

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once in the Daoist classic: in Chapter Two, there is already a phrase *yin-xing xiang-he* 音聲相和 (utterings and sounds mutually harmonize); and in another chapter we read *he-chi-kwang* 和其光 (to harmonize dao's light). The former expression touches directly on the idea of duet in singing, which dictates a mix of two different tonalities jarringly at odds with each other at first, but later yield a perfect single harmonious melody. This melody involves a complex event of purifying dao shinning upon a myriad of happenings for an ultimate harmonious effect. *Xiang-he* here designates a “biological becoming” with a “sense of aboutness, of a being and a getting about in the world” (WHEELER, 2016, p.158) under the concept of biosemiotics.

Such a “getting about in the world” has been a long-time theory and practice of Chinese poetics under the concept of *xing* 興 (arising). Chinese lyricism in which a sign-relation is cherished for an affective attunement, at times emphasizes the sense of obstructless (*pratisamvid*) of Zen Buddhism, where the poet wills the eventfulness of an event as attainment (*prāptih*) by releasing the energies and array them with rhythmic movements between chaos/cosmos/milieus. It is here that *xing* is invoked as metaphor in which the poet's very *yi* 意, her minding with tones and sound waves, emerges as some kind of “consciousness.” It is best described by the Buddhist's *pratityasamutpāda*, a kind of “codependent arising” when the mind can only be a disjunctive, disunified and folded network of processuality, wagering on events in the making. Such a linking-up, matching and entrainment between the external environment and the internal *yi* is rendered possible by the Buddhist notion of emptiness, as both stress a structure of “withness” or immanence in which experiences oscillate at the borderline between concrete signs the poet encounters and the wave-like differential rhythms and affective intensities of evolution or rather, involution. The concept of *xing*, therefore can be delved into alongside the Western discussion of “metaphor,” as, according to Bateson, “pattern which connects” (BATESON, 2002, p.7). Within the discourse of biosemiotics, metaphor, metonymy and story all come from an act of “abduction,” the “carrying of something or someone from one place to another” which is “common to all life” (WHEELER, 2016, p.125). What Wheeler is concerned with is that metaphors do grow and become dead, unless we grant such a relational experience with new energies pumped into it with “*difference* between them”, which “provide a potential source of new knowledge” (2016, p.126). There is this strange agency of signs everywhere in nature across species, where *xing* can be invoked as a “structuring movement in cultures”. Wheeler here has an elaborate description of how it works:

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*It acts like waves, currents and eddies moving living bodies and sands and rocks and islands before them, altering temperatures and weathers, grinding dam, building new formations from dead bodies, moving markets and powers, repeating formal effects in clouds, estuaries, pulmonary and cardiovascular systems, brains and plants... these possibilities of relation are effects of semiotic scaffolding as a great chain of relational being between past, present and future (2016, p.132).*

Nature being poetic in itself, the Chinese poetics of *xing* as depending arising, together with the wave-like spread of semiotic scaffoldings, all could well be subsumed as the difference provided by the *yin* and *yang* composite, the vital energies of which achieve the very *he* 和 through Willett's "affect clouds."

How about the exact way *he* is to be achieved? The expression we just brought forth, *xiang-he* 相和 will provide a passage into it, as the character *xiang* 相 comes to our aids. The ideogram *xiang* is again relevant to us by its design of having a piece of wood on the left and an eye on the right, pointing to the idea that our placing an eye on the plant world can yield complex connotations. On the pictorial level the character describes a person climbing up to the top of a tree for a panoramic view of its surroundings. Used in ordinary sense and as noun it means surface, outlook and facial feature; as verb/adverb, it signifies an act of synchronizing, mutually transforming, exchanging and matching with each other between two entities. Again, together with another character, say, *xin* 信, we have the simple "believe," and with *ying* 應 (respond) we will have "mutually responding." By the way, we have already mentioned the phrase *si-xiang* 思想 where there is a heart below the *xiang* 相; the phrase presents itself as another case in supporting our proposition that thinking is ecological through and through. No doubt *xiang* can be taken as sign or sign relation in terms of biosemiotics. It adds to Hoffmeyer's semiotic scaffolding, acting like Wheeler's "waves, currents and eddies" with repeated effect in "brains and plants." In our context of the treeing of tree through affective attunement, we can resort to Zhuangzi's fundamental concept of *xiang-yun* 相蘊 (mutually affording) in the first chapter of *Zhuangzi* the classic Daoist text. Once again, we should note the ideogrammatic fact that both characters here are associated with the plantation world, adding again to our set of plant-related radicals in the Chinese language which function as both signifiers and, being self-reflexive, signified. The concept of mutually affordance of the interspecies world in Daoism, of course, coincides with the biosemiotic perspective, as Wheeler has it, which "should both reinforce the importance of a relational ontology and also help to prevent human from seeing themselves and their cultures as

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cut off from nature” (2016, p.206). With “our embodied and enminded *expectations* of our various dependencies upon Earth’s environmental input, to which, of course, we also contribute” (2016, p.208), we have come to expect the Earth for a sense of mutuality, reciprocity and a genuine affect exchange.

Relational ontology which triggers off a poetic posture of *xiang-yun* can be found in some Tang poetry within layers of semiotic scaffoldings. The character *xiang* 相, in *xiang-kan* 相看 for example, is seen in Li Po’s famous line “Looking at each other without getting bored / Only with *Jing-Ting* Mountain here” 相看兩不厭，只有敬亭山. This granting a subjectless subjectivity to the nonhuman is again wonderfully described by the same poet in the last two lines of “Drinking Alone under the Moon,” 〈月下獨酌〉 “Forever I invite you (the moon and his shadow) to be my unruly friend / With mutual expectation above the milky way.” 永結無情遊，相期邈雲漢. Here the phrase *xiang-ji* 相期 can well be read in conjunction with Wheeler’s “expectation” by all organisms and life where “we come expecting the Earth; the Earth meets us, and for us the great semiotic dance begins” (2016, p.245). There is yet another couplet by Liu Chang-qing 劉長卿: 溪花與禪意，相對亦忘言 (Stream flowers and the Zen affect/ Facing each other, forget words as well). The poet here proposes the possibility of our recognition for grass and trees to achieve *nirvana*, since all beings share an embryo of the *Tathàgata* 如來, the result of a transformed state with things through affect. For me, these two lines are presenting, in our context of argument, that they actually articulate a rare case of humans sharing with the plant being, amounting to a “full immersion into the ecological context and beingness of humans, plants, as well as other nonhuman organisms with whom we share a common world” (GAGLIANO, 2017, p.96). All these examples, by the way, have targeted specific affects as situated within well-defined contexts. To sum up, it is better that we go into one poem most relevant to many of the issues we have presented so far:

張九齡 《感遇 2》

蘭葉春葳蕤，          桂華秋皎潔。  
欣欣此生意，          自爾為佳節。  
誰知林棲者，          聞風坐相悅。  
草木有本心，          何求美人折。

Zhang Jiu-Ling “Contemplating 2”

The proliferous orchid leaves in spring;  
Cassia flowers glow dazzlingly in the fall.

*Xin-xin*, such affect of liveliness,

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Nature renders its season's greeting.  
Who knows if those who live in the woods,  
Would listen to the wind, sitting in mutual delight.  
The grass-woods, having their own hearts,  
Why do they need to be picked by a beauty?  
(Translation mine)

That the relevance the poem exhibits to our concerns on all levels is explicit. Not only do we spot the set of rhizomes dangling around in the first two lines with radicals of wood, flowers and plants. There we also need some reminding of the ideogrammatic fact that even the character *chun*春 (spring) and *qiu*秋 (autumn) are fully equipped with plant elements. And that is not all, the repeated character *xin-xin* 欣欣 has a hidden wooden handle, and *sheng-yi* 生意 again would point to life (of plant) affect, and then even the character *jie* 節 (seasons) has a pair of bamboo sticks on its head. All in all, throughout their long history of evolution, these signs are now bound-up with each other to form a nature-culture hybrid, where a biosemiotics is on display to illustrate Wheeler's point of "sign relations that are central" (2017, p.298). With the sixth line, we are told that the hermit who lives in the woods now listening to the wind and "sitting in delight." It is here that the expression of *xiang-yue* 相悅 (mutual-delight) becomes more significant than it seems to be. It is the kind of delight that is at a point of emergence in its nascent participating in the virtual, a bundling of the infolding or contraction of potential interactions across species through sensuous immediacy. As it turns out, *xiang-yue* also serves as an example of Willett's "affect cloud," a virtual attunement among species in an act of sharing affects.

In conclusion, I would like to choose the character *xiang* 象 (elephant) to wrap up my major arguments on how to rethink interspecies communication, expression and interaction, so as to establish a new Chinese version of eco-criticism. With this "big animal," we will have to start with Laozi's "form of the formless" and "image of indeterminacy" in *Daodejing* (trans. AMES; HALL, p.96), and then "though vague and indefinite, there are images within it. Though indefinite and vague, there are events within it" (p.107). We first notice here that the translators render *xiang* directly as "image," presumably following the accepted expression of *yi-xing* 意象 (image). More importantly, we must applaud the decision on the part the translators here to translate the character *wu* 物 (matter, thing) as "event" hence giving life back to the myriad things on earth within the Chinese philosophical discourse. We have captured just now the elusive gestures inhered in the

character *yi* 意 and together with *xiang*, we are taken on an audacious journey into the world of “semioeme” Hoffmeyer talks about, as he defines it as “the entirety of an organism’s semiotic tool set which extracts significantly meaningful content from their surroundings and engage in intra-or interspecific communicative behavior” (HOFFMEYER, 2014, p.28). But such a communicative activity is often characterized by an “openness” as illustrated dramatically by the parable in Zhuangzi’s *xiang-wang* 象罔 (shapeless, formless and fuzzy images). For Merleau-Ponty, this letting go of “knowing” “seeing” and even “debating” as personified in *Zhuangzi*, is necessary in order to “send us beyond their (things) determinate manifestations, to promise us always something else to see” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p.27). For *Zhuangzi*, *xiang-wang* or the shadowy image as “Elephant without an image” would mean that we surely feel re-enchanted through conjugating the body of the elephant as we would a verb, as in the expression of *xiang-xiang* 象象 (to imagine or to create an image of elephant)<sup>ix</sup>, much adhering to Deleuze’s form-event assemblage. By highlighting processuality and indeterminacy, both Merleau-Ponty’s “something else” and *Zhuangzi*’s *xiang-wang* are prone to giving rise to improvisation on spur-of-the-moment in any interspecies sign-relationships.

Performance of *xiang-xiang* can be found in Chinese language on all levels, from a single ideogram to poetry as well as the Chinese *ars poetica* mentioned earlier. With my limited space left, I wish to briefly revisit the Tang poet/critic Sikung Tu’s *The Twenty-Four Poetic Styles* 司空圖 《二十四詩品》 for illustration. As it is quite impossible to exhaust an analysis of the work here, I can only bring forth a few lines which are most salient for my purpose of rubbing the Daoist *xiang-xiang* and the natureculture intersectionality of *shu-shu* against each other. My ultimate aim is to establish a dynamic reciprocity of ecology and literature at large towards a new Chinese ecocriticism which is forceful enough in facing the challenge of the anthropocene as a global environment. Now in the first poem,” titled “The Sublime,” we have the line “Beyond the *xiang, hsiung* 雄 (sublimity) is to be found in the centre of empty circle”. We should note also, that a number of images which contribute to the characteristics of this sublime “style” are directly and indirectly made up of plant elements. For example the phrase *ji-jian* 積健 (gathering strength) has this *ji* with plants on both sides so as to make a concrete point for gathering or accumulating. Even when describing cloud, the repeated phrase *huang-huang* 荒荒 (field of wild grass) actually echoes with our *li-li* 離離 and *qi-qi* 萋萋 in Bai’s poem, another case of the co-extensiveness



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between water and wood within the five cosmic elements. A similar landscaping is found in the third poem fitted *xian-nong* 織穠 (patternized, colourful) where even the two title characters subtly implicate the plant world. We then have another pair of repeated *cai-cai* 采采 (flesh and clear) and *peng-peng* 蓬蓬 (luxuriant) which bolster the natural forces of water and spring via the liveliness of plant being. They are then followed by the two lines “Green peach all over the trees” and “willow shading the crooked lane” which come close to granting a sense of “striving” on the part of the plants themselves.

Again, my argument finds support in the first two lines of the poem “The Unbridled Letting-Go” 豪放 where we find *quan-hua fei-jin* 觀花匪禁 (looking at the flower without restraint) and *tun-tu da-huang* 吞吐大荒 (Mouthing in and out of the great wilderness). Traditionally they manifest an exemplary statement of the Chinese version of hermeneutics, advocating an opening of literary texts to an unconstrained reading by not heeding the poet’s intention, hence the famous axiom “Looking at the flower, there is no need to ask its master”. We have had a scenario of Laozi’s “enormous image (elephant) without a definite form” quoted above, in which the looker of flowers gets to stand on, as it were, a groundless ground, a vast evacuated emptiness, an affectively blooming space of the *da-huang* 大荒. Such a realm beyond any concrete images situates itself at “the centre of empty circle” to be flanked by “a myriad *xiangs* being hardwired into themselves all around” (*wan-xiang zai-pang*) 萬象在旁. As we all know, contexts are always already co-texts, existing side by side among sign-relations. From all these, the “rethinking” I presented at the beginning of this paper triggers a cascade reaction of matching up a kind of Chinese biosemiotics by harboring an inbuilt circularity and recursivity in hermeneutics, meanwhile framing a proximal zone of *xiang-xiang* as governed by thresholds of intelligibility. Here we are reminded of Zhuangzi’s *wu-wu er bu-wu yu-wu* 物物而不物於物. Along with our context or co-texts, I would translate it, as having been inspired by Ames and Hall’s ingenious decision, as something like “Eventing event (thinging of thing) while not evented by events (things)”. This would make sense if we concede that all genuine events elude intentionality. Together with *shu-shu*, *wu-wu*, and finally *xiang-xiang*, I am now constructing a coalitional triadic structure at which affect and ecocriticism come together, complexly webbed into a universe of biosemiotics. We now appreciate more in depth of Sikung Tu’s words in the poem “Adjectival Style” *xing-rong* 形容: *feng-yun bian-tai* 風雲變態 (wind-cloud transforming), *hwa cao jing-shen*

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花草精神 (flower-grass spirituality), in which the possibility of plant being and its ambient intelligence enacting a process of self-constitution, is rudimentarily suggested. My last reminder here: the ideogram *jing* has a plant in its design, and *tai*, together with *sheng-tai*, has its root with the plant-being and representing the Chinese version of ecology itself.

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<sup>i</sup> *li-li* 離離 belongs to a common usage as “folded characters” which function to emphasize, to strengthen and even to exaggerate states of things.

<sup>ii</sup> The Chinese *yi* translated a “continuity” is chosen, admittedly, in another context. See Roger Aim and David Hall’s translation of Lao Tze’s *Daodejing* where on p.142, I would assume the reason for the translators to use “continuity” rather than “one” could be that they take into consideration of the hexagram for *yang* in the Chinese *yin-yang* emblem has six solid and continuous lines. See my entry *yin-yang* in the *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* (2016).

<sup>iii</sup> I am inspired by such an argument and have been tempted to want to go into a discussion of how the exact repetition of the same character in many of the expressions in Chinese, both in daily use but more importantly in poetry. Such a practice, I would wish to argue, invites comparison with the Deleuzian ideas of singularities and multiplicities. Unfortunately, a discussion of this is beyond the limits of this paper.

<sup>iv</sup> Amazing enough, the ideogram *lai* 籟 means music made out of bamboo stick as flute, another example for the blurring of boundary between nature and culture, natural sonorities and human musical art. Here, milieus are orchestrated into a world where contrapuntal sign-relations compose what we call the music of nature. This character actually “joins up not only its spatiotemporal but its qualitative planes or sections: a posture and a song for example, a song and a color, percepts and affects.” (WP: 1994, 185)

<sup>v</sup> For the character *chu* 趣, “gusto” is James J.Y. Liu’s translation, while questing yüen Hung-tao’s words: “What is rarest in people is ‘gusto’, which is like color on mountains, flavor in water, light on flowers, or airs of women ... wherever one goes gusto abounds: with a face free from serious expressions, eyes whose pupils or never fixed, a mouth ever mumbling and muttering, and feet leaping and jumping without stop – there is no other time in life comparable to this for perfect happiness” (Liu: 1975, p.81).

<sup>vi</sup> This is the title given to Chapter 3 in Louise Westling’s *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language*.

<sup>vii</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.154. Also, while discussing Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “stratigraphy of the Anthropocene,” Claire Colebrook has these words which may be relevant to our contrasting the imperial style and the free-flow one in Chinese calligraphy: “rather than an either for forced choice, one might see any field as composed of contrary tendencies which, when stabilized or stratified, nevertheless see each stratum with one side facing the organization and another side opening our to deterritorialization.”

<sup>viii</sup> I have done a detailed analysis on the passage, particularly the more philosophical way the translators have adopted. See my “The *Yin-yang* Assemblage and Deleuze’s Transcendental Empiricism: How Daoism Became Posthuman.” (2018) *Deleuze and the Humanities: East and West*. Ed. Rosi Braidotti, Kin-yuen Wong & Amy Chan. Londo & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, pp.139-171.

<sup>ix</sup> See my description of the *Xiang-wang* parable in The ‘Thousand-Mile Eye’ and the Image-less Elephant: Image(in)ing the Universe in Eco-Poetics and Philosophy” in *Technovisuality: Cultural Re-Enchantment and the Experience of Technology* (2016) London & New York: I.B. Tauris, pp.21-53 There I wrote: “Two elephants put together, as it were, as in the expression *xiang-xiang*, now come to mean “to describe by analogy the universal phenomena, the former being a verb and the latter, *hsien-xiang* 現象, the noun, *phenomenon* itself.” (P.25).

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