

鷺詣醫鷓憶: A One-Syllable Classical Chinese Poem in the Style of Yuen Ren Chao

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Abstract

In 1916, Yuen Ren Chao 趙元任 published Hu Mingfu's 胡明復 Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den 《施氏食獅史》, shocking the world with its esoteric, homophonic nature. This poem replicates his narrative poem in its full complexity, this time using the syllable /yi/, following a cycle of crime, punishment, and tragedy.

Keywords: poetry, fu, Mandarin, Chinese, Classical Chinese, wenyawwen, wenyaw, one-syllable article, homophony, Literary Chinese, Yuen Ren Chao, 賦, 文言

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《鷺詣醫鷓憶・沙洛思》

鷺壹弋鷓，鷓殪，鷺逸。

鷺已吧，依；疑，倚異意。

鷺詣醫鷓，鷓默，翼夥。

鷓醫憶，“鷺異訖，齟肄！”

鷓醫咦：“噫！刈鷺翼！”

鷺佑肄譯，弋鷓，夥圍。

伊默鷓殪。

以譯鷺。

“The Memory of a Seagull Visiting an Egret” by Llinos Evans

This poem's rhyme cannot be replicated in English.

The Seagull single-mindedly hunts and shoots an Egret; the Egret falls, the Seagull flees.

Guilt chokes the Seagull: Alas! Paranoid, it leans on unusual thoughts.

The Seagull sees one Doctor Egret; Egret is skilled, wings black as naught.

Doctor Egret remembers: "Seagull is abhorrent, such biting cruelty!"

The Egret hisses: "Ah! Cut off Seagull's wings, please!"

The Seagull hesitates, processing. Shooting the Egret dead, a dark mist falls coldly.

Try to interpret the Seagull.

Background: The One-Syllable Article

This poem takes inspiration from the work of Hu Mingfu and Yuen Ren Chao, a linguist who produced three one-syllable articles (同音文章 *tóngyīn wénzhāng*) poems. Starting in 1916, Chao published Hu Mingfu's *Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den* 《施氏食獅史》 (Chao, 1916), which he would progressively refine over time. He later published *Aunt Yi* 《漪姨》 and *Record of Chickens Perching on the Machine* 《飢雞集機記》 in his book "Language Problems" 語言問題 (Chao, 1980). The trio were most famously showcased in one of his major works, *Yuyan Wenti* (Chao, 1968), though they were made at different times. Despite their strange names and even narratives, the symbolism is incredibly deep (Chao, 1980; Ceng and Chu, 2022)¹. He called them stories in his original text, but they are often referred to as, and in my opinion are, poems. He Hengxing (2018, 2019) has written admirable work on this subject, even showing ways to lengthen the work within the syntactic constraints.

Chao's trilogy of works was originally made to demonstrate the homophony of Mandarin Chinese in comparison to Literary Chinese, within the context of a campaign to phoneticize Sinitic languages. Chao is often misconstrued here as being anti-romanisation entirely given the creation of these poems, with *Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den* being memetically² cited online as a titular example. However, this could not be further from the truth, and Chao himself notes such in *Yuyan Wenti*, believing to have been misrepresented by a rushed media interview. It should be noted that Chao himself was a proponent of romanisation, having been an architect of Gwoyeu Romatzyh (Chao, 1980) and General Chinese (Chao, 1983). Chao's position was that he acknowledged that Chinese as a language family cannot be fully romanised: when studying philology, one should write in the script they are studying; when studying Chinese literature or history, characters are an obvious must; but in contexts such as science, engineering, agriculture, commerce, military affairs,

¹ All poems are available online: <https://www.gushiwen.cn/shiwen/4b4ce1decf73.aspx>,
<https://www.gushiwen.cn/shiwen/29c3f37284ae.aspx>,
<https://www.douban.com/note/198170836/?i=5775698NIgwjE5>

² Pertaining to the replication of concepts, usually in an ironic way, as seen in memes.

and education, Chao believed his Gwoyeu Romatzyh was perfectly justified (Chao, 1980). It should nevertheless be noted that Sinitic languages already have some form of phoneticization: the Dungan language of the Mandarin family is cyrilized and has been for generations, and Southern Min often uses the Church Romanization promoted by missionaries due to the spoken word diverging too far from the Han script to fully map meanings anymore (Klötter, 2005). There is no greater case for the need for characters than Literary Chinese, where every character is of a single syllable, the syntax is based on Classical Chinese, and the script represents a semantic system that is fundamentally different to Mandarin Chinese (Chao, 1980; Fuller, 2024). This was Chao's core argument: Literary Chinese is the absolute barrier in the pursuit of Chinese romanization.

Being made by a linguist, each of Chao's works carries the same gimmick: every single syllable is the same, only differentiated by tone when read in Mandarin, yet they are all perfectly legible when read in Old or Middle Chinese. Ergo, should a Mandarin speaker hear these poems, they would sound completely incomprehensible. When one knows the characters and Literary Chinese, though, the meaning reveals itself. The goal of this work was to replicate Chao's study and show the potential for variety within what could be a literary genre in its own right.

Methodology

With the aforementioned understanding, I chose /yi/ as my syllable to replicate this linguistic experiment. It is not terribly difficult to make one of these: /yi/ syllables are plentiful, and Chao demonstrated their potential in *Aunt Yi*. I used Pleco's search function to find syllables with the term "yi" + the tone number, formed a lexiconary, and inspected dictionaries to find and understand ancient meanings (Kroll *et al.*, 2017; Love, 2025).

One challenge I faced with this is that one cannot decide a narrative before writing a one-syllable article; or at least, one must be extremely familiar with the wordstock to conceive a poem. The writer is dealt the cards, and they must write with them. Upon reviewing the lexiconary produced, I chose the narrative of an individual killing another, fleeing, and, when seeking therapy for what they did, the psychologist, of the slain's species, was not very forgiving. One can interpret this, including who is right or wrong, in many ways. What I will say is that this reflects some of my own past mistakes – and many have I made!

Another challenge is ensuring that what is written works within the poetic and grammatical constraints of Classical Chinese (Van Norden, 2019; Fuller, 2024), as well as considering the classical meanings of characters (Zhang and Chen, 2015; Lu, 2016; Kroll *et al.*, 2017). Should this not be done, the work falls apart. I took some inspiration from 賦 *Fu* poetry as well, which commonly focuses heavily on one or two topics, uses an excessively wide vocabulary, and varies line lengths, aiming to be chanted to encapsulate a situation (Cai, 2007; Cui and Cai, 2012). While I did not focus on a single topic, the wide vocabulary and varied line lengths gave me security in my choices. I would therefore not call this a *Fu* – it is a one-syllable article through and through. It could perhaps

be considered 志怪 *Zhiguai* literature, with its tall tales and odd premise being reminiscent of Pu Songling (Pu, 2017).

So, what is the result? Let the Hanyu Pinyin speak for itself:

Yī yī yì yì, yì yì, yī yì.

Yī yǐ yì, yǐ; yí, yǐ yì yì.

Yī yì yī yì, yì yì, yì yī.

Yì yī yì, “yī yì yì, yǐ yì!”

Yì yī yí: “Yī! Yì yī yì!”

Yī yǐ yì yì, yì yì, yī yì.

Yī yì yì yì. Yǐ yì yī.

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Appendix A: Han Character Annotations

Because many of the Han characters used in this poem are obscure, it becomes necessary to include annotations. These will be extensively detailed to cover the full breadth of linguistic meaning. As there is an appendix with Simplified characters, both scripts are included. The criteria for inclusion was based on the 汉语水平考试 Chinese Proficiency Test 3.0's Band 7-9 list published by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2021). All characters mentioned below are not on the cited list. Quotes from the Classical dictionaries³ are included not just for evidence, but also to make the table pseudo-bilingual; some are definitions, others refer to usage, depending on what was accessible to me at the time.

Table 1: Annotations for characters not within the HSK 7-9 vocabulary list (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021)						
Traditional	Simplified	Hanyu Pinyin	Components	English meaning	Classical Source(s)	Quote
鷺	鹭	yī	鷗 + 鳥	Seagull, syn. 鷗鷺 (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	<i>Jiyun in Kangxi Dictionary</i> (Zhang and Chen, 2015)	《集韻》煙奚切，𪚩音鷺。水鳥。鷺也。一名水鷺。
壹		yī	士 + 冫 + 豆	To concentrate solely on; single-minded (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017). In modern China, it is also an anti-fraud version of 一	<i>Kangxi Dictionary</i> (Zhang and Chen, 2015), specifically citing the classics 孟子 <i>Mencius</i> (Meng, 2016, p. 98) and 左傳 <i>Zuo Zhuan</i> (Zuo, 2018, p. 186). ⁴	《孟子》志壹則動氣，氣壹則動志。 《左傳·昭二十年》若琴瑟之專壹，誰能聽之。

³ For an easy way to view Classical dictionary sources digitally, particularly *Kangxi Dictionary* and *Shuowen Jiezi*, I must recommend <https://zi.tools/>, which includes modern equivalents as well.

⁴ Oddly enough, my version of *Mencius* corroborates the *Kangxi Dictionary* quote, whilst my copy of the *Zuo Zhuan*, from the same publisher, does not. Because they are Simplified Chinese editions, my assumption is this is due to differing simplification ideologies between *Baihua* translators, as *Zuo Zhuan* has an additional translator involved. The quote can be verified at the following Chinese Text Project (Sturgeon, 2020, 2021) link: <https://ctext.org/pre-qin-and-han/ens?searchu=%E8%8B%A5%E7%90%B4%E7%91%9F%E4%B9%8B%E5%B0%88%E5%A3%B9%EF%BC%8C%E8%AA%B0%E8%83%BD%E8%81%BD%E4%B9%8B%E3%80%82>

			(1) for use with bank notes (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Li, 2022).		
弋	yì	弋 (itself a radical)	To shoot (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	<i>Kangxi Dictionary</i> (Zhang and Chen, 2015)	《疏》弋謂以繩繫矢而射也。《列子·湯問篇》蒲且子之弋也。弱弓纖繳，乘風振之，連雙鷂於青雲之際。
鷓	yì	益 + 鸟	Egret, water bird. Defining it as an egret is a little difficult, as identification chiefly comes from a <i>Spring and Autumn Annals</i> description. Kroll <i>et al.</i> (2017) states it is a heron; Pleco states it is an egret-like bird (Love, 2025).	<i>Shuowen Jiezi Zhu</i> (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字注》五歷切鷓鷁鳥也。[字見《春秋經》文十六年。水鳥也。《博物志》曰：鷓雄雌相視則孕。或曰：雄鳴上風。雌鳴下風。薛綜曰：鷓首者，船頭象鷓鳥。厭水神。按今字多作鷓。]从鳥。兒聲。[五歷切。十六部。]《春秋傳》曰：六鷁退飛。[三傳皆同。今皆左兒右鳥。]鷁或从鬲。[兒聲鬲聲益聲皆十六部也。]司馬相如鷁从赤。[按赤聲古音在五部。而用爲鷁字者合韵也。蓋《凡將篇》如此作。今《上林賦》濯鷁牛首。祇作鷓。]
殪	yì	歹 + 壹	To kill with a bow and arrow (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017).	<i>Shuowen Jiezi Zhu</i> (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字注》於計切殪死也。[《左傳》。聲子射其馬。斬鞅。殪。將擊子車。子車射之。殪。《小雅·毛傳》，文穎注《上林賦》皆曰：壹發而死爲殪。是也。故其字從壹。按尚書言殪戎殷。殪，仆也。此引伸之義。《中庸》言壹戎衣。注。衣讀爲殷。聲之誤也。壹戎殷者，壹用兵伐殷也。郭忠恕《佩觿》乃引鄭注云：壹當爲殪。此記憶之誤耳。凡恃記憶而

					不檢閱者多此病。]从卣。壹聲。[形聲包會意。於計切。古音在十二部。]古文殫。从死。[從古文死。壹省聲。]
逸	yì	辵 + 兔	To flee, escape, evade (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017). It comes from rabbits being able to flee.	<i>Shuowen Jiezi Zhu</i> (Xu, 2015) <i>Erya Xin Zhu</i> (Wang, 2021, p. 125)	《說文解字注》夷質切逸失也。[此以疊韻為訓。亡逸者，本義也。引伸之為逸游，為暇逸。]从辵兔。[會意。夷質切。十二部。]兔謾訑善逃也。[說从辵兔之意。謾，訑皆欺也。謾音蠻。訑《言部》作詖。音大和切。兔善逃，故从兔辵。猶佳善飛，故奪从手持佳而失之。皆亡逸之意。] 《爾雅新注》逸，讐，過也。
呬	yì	口 + 邑	Shortness of breath; palpitations (Zhang and Chen, 2015; Love, 2025). ⁵	<i>Erya in Kangxi Dictionary</i> (Zhang and Chen, 2015; Wang, 2021, p. 142)	《爾雅·釋言》優呬也。 《註》鳴呬，短氣。 《疏》孫炎云：心呬也。
偯	yǐ	亻 + 哀	To sob or wail. ⁶	<i>Jiyun in Kangxi Dictionary</i> (Zhang and Chen, 2015)	《集韻》《韻會》隱豈切，忝音哀。哭餘聲。
倚	yǐ	亻 + 奇	To incline towards, to lean, to pause (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017).	<i>Kangxi Dictionary</i> (Zhang and Chen, 2015)	《康熙字典》又偏也，側也。《禮·問喪》居于倚廬。
默	yì	黑 + 弋	The colour black (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017).	<i>Kangxi Dictionary</i> (Zhang and Chen, 2015)	《亥集下》《黑字部》《廣韻》與職切《集韻》《韻會》逸職切，忝音弋。<廣雅>黑也。

⁵ *Kangxi Dictionary* is not an English-medium source, so this definition is translated by myself.

⁶ Translated from *Kangxi Dictionary*.

					又作弋。前漢・文帝贊>身衣弋綈。 <註>如淳曰: 弋, 皐也。 又《爾雅・釋天》太歲在壬曰佞默。
黦	yī	黑 + 多	A shining black, associated with wood in classical sources (Xu, 2015; Zhang and Chen, 2015).	<i>Shuowen Jiezi Zhu</i> (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字注》烏雞切黦黑木也。[《周書》王會篇夷用闌木。《古今注》。烏文木, 出波斯國。南方艸木狀。文木樹高七八丈。色正黑。如水牛角。] 从黑。多聲。[烏雞切。古音在十七部。] 丹楊有黦縣。[《地理志》本作黦。師古所據作黦。乃誤本耳。今安徽徽州府黦縣是其地。]
𧮙	yì	壹 + 乚	To be stingy and greedy.	<i>Fangyan</i> states that it is a dialect term specific to the state of Chu (Yang, 2022, p. 229). This claim is repeated in <i>Kangxi Dictionary</i> (Zhang and Chen, 2015).	《方言》𧮙、嗇, 貪也。荊汝江湘之郊凡貪而不施謂之𧮙, 或謂之嗇, 或謂之悋。悋, 恨也。
齧	yǐ	齒 + 奇	To bite (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017).	<i>Shuowen Jiezi Zhu</i> (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字注》魚綺切齧齧也。[史, 《漢・田儋傳》。齧齧用事者墳墓。如淳曰: 齧齧, 猶齧齧也。齧, 齧也。按凡從奇之字多訓偏。如倚訓偏引, 齧訓側齧。《索隱》注高紀云: 許慎以爲側齧。] 从齒。奇聲。[魚綺切。古音在十七部。]
肄	yì	匕 + 矢 + 聿	To exercise, train, practice, rehearse; to take pains and	<i>Fangyan</i> states that it is a regional synonym from between the states of	《方言》烈、枿, 餘也。陳鄭之間曰枿, 晉衛之間曰烈, 秦晉之間曰肄, 或曰烈。

			apply oneself; to examine or inspect (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017).	Qin and Jin (Yang, 2022, p. 7). However, here it means 餘 “remainder,” a unique classical meaning. It is mentioned in detail in <i>Kangxi Dictionary</i> where its other meanings are shown (Zhang and Chen, 2015).	《廣韻》習也。《左傳·文四年》臣以爲肄業及之也。《禮·檀弓》君命，大夫與士肄。《註》肄，習也。君有命，大夫則與士展習其事。
噫	yī	口 + 意	Sentence-final particle expressing grief; “alas!” (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	<i>Shuowen Jiezi Zhu</i> (Xu, 2015) notes it being used in the 論語 [<i>Analects of Confucius</i>] (Kong, 2016, p. 132).	《說文解字注》於介切噫飽出息也。[各本作飽食。今依《玉篇》、《眾經音義》訂。息，鼻息也。《內則》。在父母舅姑之所。不敢噉噫。《莊子》。大塊噫氣。其名曰風。《靈樞經》曰：五藏氣心主噫。按噫字亦作餒。見《廣雅》。《玉篇》、《廣韻》於北烏克二反。高注《淮南書》曰：垓讀如人飲食太多，以思下垓之垓。以思下垓之垓，乃以息上餒之餒之誤。高注多言心中滿該。亦謂此也。]从口。意聲。[於介切。古音在一部。《論語》。子曰：噫，天喪予。鄭氏《毛詩》。噫此皇父。噫厥哲婦。皆爲有所痛傷之聲。]
刈	yì	乂 + 刂	To mow or chop down; can be used as a noun for a	<i>Kangxi Dictionary</i> and <i>Shuowen Jiezi</i> (Xu, 2015; Zhang and Chen, 2015).	《子集下》《刀字部》（古文）刈《唐韻》魚肺切《集韻》魚刈切《韻

			sickle/scythe (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017). By the time of 玉篇 <i>Yupian</i> (c.543, see <i>Kangxi Dictionary</i> citation in quotes), 400 years after <i>Shuowen Jiezi</i> , semantic broadening had occurred to imply killing, which this poem uses.		會》疑刈切《正韻》倪制切，𠀤音义。《說文》芟草也。[...] 又《玉篇》取也，殺也。又《韻會》絕也。
伫	yǐ	亻 + 台	Stuck fast; inert, immobile, at a standstill, easy and relaxed, slow and measured (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017). Here, the appearance of not moving forward is used to imply hesitation.	<i>Jiyun</i> in <i>Kangxi Dictionary</i> (Zhang and Chen, 2015)	《子集中》《人字部》《廣韻》羊已切《集韻》養里切，𠀤音以。固滯貌。張揖曰：不前也。又《集韻》夷在切。《說文》癡貌。讀若駮。又《呂氏春秋》伫蹶之機。
圜	yì	口 + 緜	The rising up of mist or clouds, a meaning mentioned in 尚書 <i>Shangshu</i> (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	<i>Shuowen Jiezi</i> (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字》羊益切圜回行也。从口睪聲。《尚書》：「曰圜。」圜，升雲半有半無。讀若驛。
伊	yī	亻 + 尹	Here, it is used as a third person pronoun, usage associated with Wu Chinese. In Classical usage, it can be used this way, but the	<i>Kangxi Dictionary</i> (Zhang and Chen, 2015) <i>Hundred Family Surnames</i> (Cheng and Wang, 2023, p. 224)	《子集中》《人字部》〔古文〕𡵚𡵚《唐韻》於脂切《集韻》於夷切《韻會》幺夷切《正韻》於宜切，𠀤音蚬。彼也。《詩·秦風》所謂伊人，在水一方。

			meaning expands further. It is also commonly used for exclamation/rhythm and this/that. Pre-Han dynasty, it is used to introduce a statement contrary to what is expected (Kroll <i>et al.</i> , 2017). It can also be a name, and is among those in the <i>Hundred Family Surnames</i> (Cheng and Wang, 2023, p. 224)		又維也。《儀禮・士冠禮》嘉薦伊脯。《揚雄・河東賦》伊年暮春，將瘞后土，禮靈祇。《註》師古曰：伊，是也。 又姓。 《百家姓》全郗班仰，秋仲伊宮，甯仇樂暴，甘針厲戎
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Appendix B: Simplified Chinese Version

For the sake of completeness and accessibility, this is a version of the poem in Simplified Chinese.

《鷺詣醫鷓憶·汐洛思》

鷺壹弋鷓，鷓殄，鷺逸。

鷺已吧，依；疑，倚异意。

鷺詣醫鷓，鷓默，翼黹。

鷓醫忆，“鷺异戩，畸肄！”

鷓醫咦：“噫！刈鷺翼！”

鷺佑肄译，弋鷓，黹圉。

伊默鷓殄。

以译鷺。

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