

The background of the book cover is a traditional Chinese ink wash painting. It depicts a vast, misty mountain landscape. In the foreground, a winding river or path flows through a valley, with small figures of people and possibly animals visible. The middle ground shows steep, rocky slopes with patches of greenery. The background is dominated by towering, misty mountains that fade into a hazy sky. The overall style is characteristic of classical Chinese landscape art, emphasizing the grandeur and beauty of the natural world.

Poems by  
**PAUL ENGLE**

# **Images of China**

# IMAGES OF CHINA

Poems Written in China, April-June, 1980

by Paul Engle

Preface by Nieh Hualing

NEW WORLD PRESS  
BEIJING

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First Printing

NEW WORLD PRESS  
24 Bai Wan Zhuang, Beijing, China  
*Printed in the People's Republic of China*

# DEDICATION

To Nieh Hualing

## I

At the top of my neck there is a time bomb  
Named Paul Engle's head.  
It is set to go off when it doesn't see you.  
It gets tired of exploding. Don't go away.  
Its eyes can look through your eyes,  
They can scratch your face.  
Its mouth can bite you, damn you,  
Or lovingly beg you to come, come.  
Its ears can hear you walking around a corner,  
Its nose catches your scent around a corner.  
Its cheeks can talk to your cheeks.  
This head belongs to you  
As your hand belongs to your arm.

## II

You taught me to make wood out of a fire.  
You showed me all these fabulous facts of love:  
High in the moving wind, hawks hang unmoving.  
Love is a door opening on many doors.  
Love, when you enter, puts locks on your locks.  
Love is a mirror reflecting endless mirrors.  
Love can transform a rock into a heart—  
My bare hand feels it beating on bare ground.

### III

Here on these strange streets in old Henan  
Love seems familiar as a household cat  
Which purrs and rubs against the stroking hand.

### IV

I give you this book because you gave me yourself,  
Because you watched me scratching and muttering  
    when I wrote it,  
Because between the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers  
You showed me the heart of China.

Because you are China.

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# PREFACE:

## ON WATCHING POEMS BEING WRITTEN

Nieh Hualing

Some of these poems were written in hotel rooms, some on planes, in trains, in cars bouncing over mountain roads. Some were written on the boat between Chongqing and Wuhan while going through the Yangtze River Gorges. Some were written on desks, some in a pad held on the lap, some in taxis on crowded city streets, others in rooms full of my relatives or schoolmates from many years ago talking very fast and very loud. A few were written in auditoriums while I was lecturing in Chinese!

I know that is how they were written because I was in all those places with Paul Engle. I watched him scratch when he could not find the right word and heard him muttering when he read the finished poem to himself.

Many people think that poems are written in peace and leisure, but these were written in noise and turbulence. Each morning we went to a meeting or a lake or a temple or museum, each afternoon we made other visits, walking along mountains, and most evenings we went to see operas, dances, or plays. These poems were created in scraps of time in exceptionally active days and nights. Perhaps so many

poems on China were never written in so short a time by a Western poet.

These poems had to be written by Paul Engle in the same way that people have to eat—in order to survive. The experience of China was so intense that he could not simply remember it, he had to express it. He could not have slept at the end of a hyperactive day had he not written.

Because Paul Engle does not know Chinese, when he was surrounded with the sound of men, women and children speaking it (he once asked if dogs bark in Chinese), he developed a heightened sense of English language. The poems were his way of talking to the Chinese when he could not talk.

Paul Engle believes deeply that poetry is not concerned only with “pretty” things, cats, young girls, mountains in mist, flowers, although they are a natural part of writing, but also with the gritty range and variety of life, the direct reality—a girl carrying buckets of excrement is also real, as are horses, bamboo, a writer who suffered, a great city, joy, anger as well as love.

He also believes that poems are not about ideas, or descriptions of how things and people look, but are about the poet's reaction to things, people, and ideas. They become a part of him. These IMAGES OF CHINA are also images of Paul Engle's mind responding to the great experience of closely observing that country, in Xi'an, Yan'an, Chengdu, Chongqing, Wuhan, Zhengzhou, Luoyang, Shanghai,

Hangzhou, Suzhou, Nanjing, Beijing, Guangzhou, and on farms in the landscapes outside those cities. Above all, the poems came from his deep affection for the people of China and their land.

As a writer of fiction, which takes long periods of uninterrupted time, I was amazed that Paul could have an hour on the train from Kaifeng to Zhengzhou, take out his pad, and resume writing a poem from the evening before, then finish it on the plane from Zhengzhou to Nanjing. People were loudly talking Chinese in the same compartment within three feet of him, but he could detach himself from all noise and movements. Nothing existed for him but the words he was taking out of his head and putting on the page.

Sometimes a line would be left half written as he went on to the next line which was already fully shaped in his mind. Then he would finish the half line in the Jin Jiang Hotel in Shanghai. Some nights I would wake up to find Paul at the hotel room desk crouching over a piece of paper, mumbling the words out loud to catch their sound together before writing them on the page. After a long day of meeting people, driving to see old tombs or new farms, he could not sleep until the poem was dragged out of his head the way you drag a snake out of its hole by pulling its tail. I asked Paul how he could write in this jerky way.

"I've led a life full of motion," he told me. "Of course it's better to have a quiet room and a long

period of time for writing, but when you travel as much as I have traveled, you either learn to detach yourself from the distracting world around you, or you quit writing. When I was young I used to ride horses for my father, who had a barn full of horses for rent to people by the hour. I rode across country roads, over hills, fast on long straight stretches, all the time fitting lines of poems to the rhythm of the horse."

"But I can't write stories that way," I told him.

"Stories are tougher to write in little snatches of time. You must keep the whole story, all the individual characters and their conflicts in front of you as the story grows. But the poem is more concentrated. The whole meaning of a poem can be squeezed into one image the way you squeeze a sponge down to a little ball." As he said this, he made a fist with his fingers.

This book is really about marriages.

Without the marriage of a man with a strong American character to a woman with a strong Chinese character, we would not have been in China together and there would have been no book.

Without the fact that Paul is a poet and I am a novelist, even if we had married, such a book could not have been written, because Paul learned much about the people of China through the way I looked at them with a fiction writer's eye.

The poems marry an American poet's speech rhythms, imagination, and insight to Chinese men, women, landscapes, animals, tensions, and history.

As we traveled around the country, Paul Engle's listening was lively, even his looking at people, places, animals, paintings was energetic. An old horse was as exciting to him as a new artist, an old writer, a carving of jade or a sudden star.

When we first visited China in 1978, Paul wrote fifty poems on dance for our daughter Lanlan (the other daughter, Weiwei, was also with us), who demonstrated modern dance in Beijing. In 1980 he wrote these poems, all related to China.

## IMAGES OF CHINA

Four thousand year old water buffalo  
In your foot-furrowed, hand-shaped, eye-loved land.  
Gladly the fields feed the hand that bites them.  
Out of gray water new sprouts sing green song.  
Dragon of history snarls inside your ear.  
The old feed it their bodies.  
The young stamp on its tail.

Your annual Gross National Product is people:  
Between peaks, along valleys,  
Powerful in proud cities,  
In peasant villages, as many millions  
As stalks of rice they bend their backs to raise.  
Their bare feet mutter Mandarin to the mud.

Here death was the guest who came and stayed forever.  
A great day was the day you did not die.  
Never so much air breathed by so many lungs.

Your first words were on bone, that once-live thing.  
When Chinese kids are born, already carved  
On their old bones are signs for laugh, doom, love.

---

This poem was written too quickly in a few days while making a return visit after two years and finding our old and new friends returned to their lives, cheerful and creative.

You painted subtle silk when western man  
Scratched over cave walls with a pointed stick.

Fingers of China sifted your rich earth.  
Forgive my walking it with foreign feet.

Turbulent sky—rock-sharp peaks wound clouds,  
Clouds attack peaks, smother them in white.  
Beautiful land where blood once flowed like tea,  
Where voices cried out, "Kill." Cried, "Hate, love,  
live."

Here suffering became a delicate art.

Your people wore their wars, a coat of fire.  
Agony grew on them another skin.  
Streets were paved with bones, sky crawled with  
screams.  
A gray-haired wind has blown thousands of years  
Red dirt from green fields into your brown eyes.

I heard a grit of granite groaning—Man,  
Learn from plain rocks. We do not torture rocks.

Nothing defeats them. They destroy destruction.  
Survival is a word that means, CHINESE!

Their wounds caress the stone that wounded them.

The mouths of martyrs sing from anonymous graves,  
Their bones are broken but their tongues tell true.



Their history: such brilliant light it blinded,  
Such brutal blackness that it also blinded.

Land of survivors, crutches on their eyes.  
Their old pain led them gently down the street,  
Holding their hand, saying, Don't be afraid.  
Feet said, We're not, but faces said, We are.

China, great tomb where children play, birds sing,  
Where new life threatens past: You've had your time,  
Out of my way, tomorrow's mine, not yours.  
Rain drives into the startled eye of death.

Time is a pink plum blossom on a branch.  
Lost time's a black hole in star-burning space.

Why don't their eyelids turn to stone, glaring  
Over too many years at too much grief?

And yet the yellow-voiced chrysanthemum  
Yells at the sun: My face is gold as yours.

Children of China, all your yesterdays  
Were beauty, horror, joy, hand-trembling pain.  
Rub them on your face like vanishing cream\*.  
The future is a rocket where you ride.

---

\*A soft and scented cream which American women rub into their faces at night in the foolish hope that it will by morning remove the wrinkles which life carved there.