

Curriculum Project
2007 Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad to China

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Tang Dynasty Poetry: Introduction and Reflection **A Project for High School/College Students**

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I. INTRODUCTION

This project began with my experience on the 2007 Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad to China trip. Knowing that we would be visiting places in China relating to the Tang Dynasty (primarily Xian) and wanting to immerse myself more in Chinese culture and poetry, I brought with me several volumes of Tang Dynasty poems. As we traveled and as I read the poems, they became a catalyst for reflection upon my experience. I then began writing a journal based on these reflections which I published in blog form on the internet.

I wrote the following reflection after my home stay in Beijing:

Thoughts in the Silent Night

*Beside my bed a pool of light -
Is it hoarfrost on the ground?
I lift my eyes and see the moon,
I bend my head and think of home.*

Li Bai

This is one of my favorite Tang poems from the great master Li Bai. Li Bai is awakened suddenly and sees a light. He is confused at first about what it is and then notices the moon. It seems he thought for a moment that he was home and then realized he wasn't. This brought out in him a sense of longing for home.

This kind of thing happened to me twice recently. Two nights ago we had the opportunity to go on a home stay with students and their families from the middle school (like our high school) associated with Beijing Normal University. This is one of the top middle schools in Beijing and the students are extremely gifted and fairly fluent in English. The school has a beautiful city campus with excellent facilities that would be envied in the US.

I was graciously hosted by the family of Zhang Zeyu. They brought me to their nice apartment in the outskirts of Beijing and we had the opportunity to talk about many things in China and the US. What struck me was that people to people contact brings out the best in us. The Zhangs were wonderful hosts and welcomed me into their home and went out of their way to make me feel comfortable. Mrs. Zhang even taught me to make dumplings (see below). Mine didn't turn out so well. The food was fantastic though, probably the best I've had in China!

That night, lying in bed, I woke suddenly and didn't know where I was. For a split second, I thought I was home and then remembered where I was. Perhaps a taste of home life brought out a little homesickness as I thought about my own family. I am having fun here but I do miss them!

Here is an excerpt of a reflection written after our group meeting with Prof. Wu Qing in Beijing:

Today we met someone who surely is one of the world's best-kept secrets. Prof. Wu Qing is simply one of the most amazing people I have ever encountered. Meeting her brought to mind a line from a Du Fu poem which reads, "There is a beauty of the ages, who lives obscured in an empty valley." Now Wu Qing does not live in an empty valley, but she is a "beauty of the ages" who deserves to be better known than she is in the U.S.

At age 70, Wu Qing is a bundle of energy, belief, commitment, and passion for helping others. The daughter of the famous writer Xie Bingxin, she has survived the trials of the Cultural Revolution and emerged as a noted scholar and activist, particularly on behalf of rural and migrant women in China. In 2001 she received the Magsaysay Prize (the “Nobel Prize” of Asia) and is the deputy-director of the Beijing People’s Congress. She has traveled all over the world speaking out about many causes and has received many other awards and recognitions. Our whole group was simply blown away by her and her honesty, intelligence, and eloquence. This will be a highlight of the trip!

I found this process of reading Tang Dynasty poetry and reflecting upon my experience on the trip to be very fruitful and meaningful. There is something about Tang poetry that is at once ancient and contemporary. Phrases, words, and images imbed themselves in one’s consciousness and bubble up unbidden as one ponders and meditates upon one’s experience.

When I returned home and to teaching, I wondered if somehow my experience with Tang Dynasty poetry could find its way into the classroom. I teach a class called “Asian Studies” to juniors and seniors at Princeton Day School that provided me a perfect platform for a project like this. So I planned and implemented a series of lessons and classes with the goal of introducing Tang Dynasty poetry to students and also of giving them an opportunity to reflect upon its meaning for their life experience.

II. LESSON PLAN

A. Goal

To provide students with an introduction to Tang Dynasty poetry and to give them an opportunity to choose a particular Tang Dynasty poem to interpret and reflect upon.

B. Audience

The intended student audience is advanced high school students or college students. The lesson was tested on a class of juniors and seniors at Princeton Day School (a college preparatory school in Princeton, NJ). The lesson could probably be adapted to students of somewhat lower or higher age and experience.

C. Teaching Plan

This lesson is intended to be taught over four to five class periods. Teachers can adapt the lesson to suit their time constraints and class size. If class size is large, student presentations can either be eliminated, pared down to a selected number of participants, or done in small groups.

1. Day One

Before the actual class session, assign students a general reading on the historical background to the Tang Dynasty. Many world history and Asian history textbooks have such sections. My class is using Patricia Ebrey, et al. *East Asia: A Cultural, Social, and Political History*. In class, the teacher can provide a lecture on the historical background to the Tang Dynasty.

2. Day Two

Before class, ask students to go to the website “Chinese Poems” (<http://www.chinese-poems.com/index.html>). Ask them to browse through the poems, looking for one that interests them or catches their eye. Students should then write down the name of this poem and its author.

In class, give students a *brief* introduction to Tang Dynasty poetry. A nice, readable introduction is provided by Kelly Ann Long in her essay “Writing as a Means to Express and Cultivate Self” (http://www.askasia.org/features/VISIBLE_TRACES/curriculum/pdf/CSFessay1.pdf).

Emphasize especially this quote from Long:

The written word—whether a single character, a poem, or a prose essay—played a key role in Chinese history and in the self-expression of the

cultured individual. China's writing system extends back thousands of years to the beginnings of Shang civilization in the seventeenth century b.c.e. [sic], providing cultural continuity and links to the past. The appreciation and execution of poetry and calligraphy, and later painting, became the means by which the Chinese have understood and expressed themselves as individuals and as members of a society.

In my class, I point out that knowledge of and references to poetry, particularly Tang Dynasty poetry, remains a crucial part of what it means to be an educated person in Chinese culture. As Long says, "From the time of Confucius, educated Chinese referenced, collected, and wrote poetry, embracing it as a crucial part of their lives."

(http://www.askasia.org/features/VISIBLE_TRACES/curriculum/pdf/CSFessay1.pdf)

To demonstrate this point in a fun way, I reference the contemporary writing of Qiu Xiaolong. Qiu is a native of Shanghai who currently teaches literature at Washington University in St. Louis. He also is the writer of the Inspector Chen series of mystery novels, a series which has garnered international acclaim. His first novel, *Death of A Red Heroine* (2001), won an Anthony award for best first novel. The hero of his novels, Inspector Chen, is a Shanghai police detective who also is a poet and a translator of poetry. Throughout Qiu's stories, Chen is fond of quoting Chinese poetry, especially Tang Dynasty poetry. When asked by an interviewer about this, Qiu responds:

In the tradition of classical Chinese literature, there is a lot of poetry in fiction. Much more than in my novels. So you can say it is a deliberate imitation on my part. As for Chen, he wrote poetry long before he became a cop. The road not taken leads to an inner tension, which gives him a needed distance too, especially in his imagination of what he might have been. Besides, there are certain moments of lyrical intensity, as he would like to feel, which may come out more expressively in poetry. Or the emotion is too complicated for him to describe in a rational or even totally conscious way. (Cara Black, Qiu Xiaolong Interview, *Mystery Readers International*, <http://www.mysteryreaders.org/athomeqiu.html>)

While there are many sections of Qiu's novels that reflect this point, his latest book, *Red Mandarin Dress* (New York: St. Martin's, 2007), has an interesting dialogue between Chen and female professor of women's studies (pp. 150-58). In it Chen and the professor flirt as they speak of marriage, love, and the portrayal of women in Chinese literature. The conversation touches on Confucius, Mencius, contemporary Chinese history, and of course classical poetry. In the dialogue, both characters quote freely from Tang Dynasty poetry as they dance around various sensitive issues. (*Note: this section in the novel has some sexual imagery in it that some may deem inappropriate for younger readers.*) Not coincidentally, Qiu also recently published a beautiful book of translations of Tang Dynasty poems (see bibliography).

3. Day Three

Before the class period distribute the handout describing the assignment (see below section III.A). You may also distribute the sample essay I prepared for my class (see below section III.B). I've found that students like to have a concrete example of what is expected of them.

In class, I discussed expectations for the assignment using my sample to demonstrate. I then gave them independent time to begin their research. I collected an assortment of collections of Tang Dynasty poetry (see bibliography) and suggested that they make photocopies of several translations of their poems. Perhaps the single most helpful source for students turned out to be Stephen Johnson's *Fifty Tang Poems* (San Francisco: Pocketscholar, 2000) as it has line-by-line commentary on each poem. As well, the internet is a good source for information about the poets.

Depending on the level students are at and the kind of research resources that are available, teachers will need to tailor the amount of time allotted for research and the level of guidance they give students. I found my students were all able to handle the assignment as given. Generally they needed about a week to complete the assignment.

4. Days Four and Five

After giving students the requisite time for research and writing (the amount may vary), I asked students to present their findings in class. I gave each student about five to ten minutes to introduce his/her poem and discuss his/her interpretation and reflection. We proceeded poet by poet in class, allowing a general discussion of biography for each and then proceeding to individual poems. We projected each poem on the screen and some students chose to project their work as well. After each student presented her/his poem, brief questions and discussion of the poem took place. My class of fourteen students took two class periods to complete the presentations. If a teacher has a larger class or if time won't allow for this, he or she may want to choose a few students to present or do it in small groups. Also, it is possible to eliminate this part of the exercise altogether. However, I found the student presentations to be very interesting and discussion provoking.

III. HANDOUT & TEACHER AND STUDENT ESSAYS

A. Assignment Handout

Tang Dynasty Poetry Assignment

Go to the Chinese Poems website and browse through the poems there. Find one that interests you or strikes you in some way (if the poem is long, it may be easier to choose a portion 10 lines long or less). Then take the following steps to write a short paper (3 pages or so):

- 1) Do some research on the author of the poem. Depending on the fame of the author, you should find enough material on the internet. Write a short biography of your poet (1/2 - 1 page typed). Cite your sources!
- 2) Do some research on the poem itself. See if you can find references to it on the internet. Look for alternate translations (if you know another language, look for a version in that language). If the poem has references to specific historical events, people, places, images, etc., see if you can find background material to help interpret them in context. Note that many poems may not contain such references.
- 3) Copy the word for word English translation and the complete English translation and include them with your paper.
- 4) To the best of your ability write an interpretation of the poem, taking into account your research when possible. Note the interpretational issues, nuances of meaning, etc., that emerge as you read. Take into account the interpretational move from the word for word translation to the full translation. (1 page or so)
- 5) Write a personal reflection on the poem. Why did you choose this poem? What does it say to you? What elements strike a chord for you? What feelings and ideas does it evoke in you? Why? (1 page or so)
- 6) Be prepared to share your poem and interpretation in class.

B. Teacher Writing Sample

Interpretation of Wang Wei's "Deer Enclosure" Mr. Freedholm

Note: This is a rough draft and not a finished product. It is just for use as a teaching sample.

Poet's Biographical Info

Place here – especially any info that helps one interpret the poem.

Poem (Stephen Johnson 25-26)

Literal:

empty mountain not see person
only hear person speech sound

return shadow enter deep forest
again reflect green moss on

Free:

I see no one on this lonely mountain,
hearing only voices echo by.

Beams of light reflect into the grove,
to linger shining on the deep green moss.

Interpretation:

In the first line, the mountain(s) is described as “empty.” The adjective “empty” may simply accent the absence of people on the mountain. Chang, for example, translates the term as “deserted.” Or emptiness could describe the spiritual or emotional state of the poet. Hence many translators choose the word “lonely” instead of “empty.” Location is an issue in interpreting this line as well. Where exactly is the poet located? Is he the one doing the “seeing” or is he at a distance (real or imagined) describing the scene? Many translators locate the poet on the mountain – “I see no one on this lonely mountain.” (Johnson 25) It seems to me that the poet is located on the mountain, perhaps even deliberately seeking a place of solitude for meditation and reflection. Johnson notes the “meditative” quality of the poem and says that it is part of a collection “characterized by a sense of Buddhist introspection.” (Johnson 26)

The meditative nature of the poem seems confirmed by the second line which mentions the sound of voices being heard. These voices are noted by the person on the lonely mountain, probably the author. The term “only” is used indicating that the voices are out of place in the natural setting of the mountain. This gives the reader the sense of interrupted thought or meditation. Thus it is easy to envision the poet seeking a quiet spot on a mountain for introspection only to have it disturbed by human voices. Paz translates, “Only voices, far off, are heard.”

The final two lines seem to shift the scene. It is hard to say whether the “deep woods,” (Jenyns) the “grove” (Johnson), or the “forest” (Fletcher) is in the same location as the “mountain.” Most translators leave it indefinite as they leave uncertain again the location of the poet. It seems clear that someone (probably the poet) witnesses the interplay of shadow and light in the grove. Bynner and Kiang make this explicit by saying “Shines back *to me* from the green moss. (emphasis mine)

According to literal transliterations, the actual Chinese characters in the beginning of line are “return” and “shadow.” The “return” of shadow seems to indicate that sunlight could not enter the at some time, most likely during midday when the forest’s canopy kept the light out. Interestingly, most translators speak not of “shadow” but of “light” or “sun” or “beams of light.” This leaves the shadow implied. Many translators understand this interplay of light and shadow as the light entering the forest at or near sunset. Thus Chen and Bullock say, “At an angle the sun’s rays, enter the depths of the wood.”

This filtering of light through the trees then illuminates the ground and the objects upon it which sit underneath the trees. This seems to catch the eye of the observer as the light plays upon certain things, bringing to life color. As Rexroth says, the rays of light “gleam again on the shadowy

moss.” Johnson gives this a spiritual twist declaring that these lines symbolize “the poet’s ekstasis – his complete immersion into the specific reality of this scene.” (Johnson 26)

Reflection

This poem resonates with me for a number of reasons. It recalls for me my childhood experience of camping in the 1970s at Calvin Coolidge State Park in Vermont. There the forest was so thick that little light could penetrate it, leaving little undergrowth and a soft bed of pine needles around the trunks of the many large pine trees. We would run through those trees in the late afternoon after a day of sightseeing. I remember the light slanting in as the sun went down in the evening, creating this weird patchwork of light and shadow. It was both beautiful and a little eerie at the same time. I remember feeling that I was in a different world, far removed from my everyday experience. This seems to be a feeling similar to that of Wang Wei in “Deer Enclosure.”

As well, the poem appeals to my longing at times to be alone in nature, to find an “empty mountain” to sit on. This longing rarely, if ever, is satisfied as opportunities for solitary reflection in nature are not frequent for me. Wang Wei here finds his meditation interrupted by voices from people he cannot see. Whether or not he finds this frustrating or not is unclear. As meditators we are trained to recognize potential distractions, like voices, and let them go. Though it is easier said than done. I often find myself easily pulled away from meditation by inopportune distractions. I think I then read this poem as a moment of interrupted reverie followed by a deeper glimpse into the beauty of nature.

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C. Student Writing Sample

Note: This is included with the permission of the student and is submitted without editing by me.

Brad Wilson

Question And Answer on the Mountain
-Li Bai

Characters:

Ask me what reason stay green mountain
Smile but not answer heart self idle
Peach blossom flow water far go
Apart have heaven earth in human world

Translations:

You ask for what reason I stay on the green mountain,
I smile, but do not answer, my heart is at leisure.
Peach blossom is carried far off by flowing water,
Apart, I have heaven and earth in the human world.

You ask me why I dwell in the green mountain;
I smile and make no reply for my heart is free of care.
As the peach-blossom flows down stream and is gone into the unknown,
I have a world apart that is not among men.

You ask why I nestle in the green mountains.
I laugh but answer not - my heart is serene.
Peach blossoms and flowing waters go without a trace.
There is another Heaven and Earth beyond the world of man.

My Translation:

They ask me why I stay in these green mountains,
And I smile, but I need not answer—my heart is at peace.
It is the peach-blossom flowing far off along the water:
Apart, so it can have heaven and earth in this human world.

Li Bai, also known as Li Po, Li Pai, and Li Bo, is widely regarded as among the best Chinese poets during the Tang Dynasty. In fact, many literary scholars regard his work as the greatest in Chinese history. His life spanning from 701 C.E to 762 C.E., Bai has become a highly stylized historical figure; there is a good deal of mythology surrounding his life and works, much of it self-imposed. For example, he enjoyed pretending to be a member of the royal family and his death is rumored to have occurred when he drowned after falling off a boat chasing the moon's reflection. Because of this, it is difficult to separate fact from fiction in his life. However, it is widely accepted that the earliest of his poetry dates back to before 725 C.E., and much of it was written during a nomadic period of self-discovery and tutelage over the next twenty years (Encyclopaedia Britannica). He was also a court poet for a period of time between 742 and 745 before resuming his nomadic ways (Britannica). His only remaining position in the court was brief employment under Prince Lin, dying shortly thereafter (Britannica). His writing is colorful and imaginative to an extent often lost in Chinese poetry due to the inherent limitations of logographic language. His imagery is often associated with universal pleasures that any audience can relate to; the romance of joy, friendship, and drinking, for example (Britannica). He also touched on some more solemn, but equally universal human experiences such as solitude and time, and the occasional traps that accompany them, such as isolation, aging, and emotional distance (Hinton). His focus on these themes lends a very Daoist feel to his poetry; often he not only extols the virtues of introspection, but does so in relation to nature, often using metaphors very similar to those seen in the Dao De Jing itself. This poem—"Question and Answer on the Mountain" or "Conversation in the Mountains"—is an ideal illustration of this trait in Bai's poetry.

"Question and Answer on the Mountain" is a very short, very concise poem, but it is full of meaning. It is worth noting that it displays one of the hallmarks of a Li Bai poem: nothing in "Question" gets thoroughly lost in the translation. The images still resonate. The first line—"Ask me what reason stay green mountain"—is all too clear; we know that somebody is asking him why he stays. However, there is nuance in this line. The reader does not know who is asking him this question. This could indicate that the person asking him is insignificant to the rest of the poem, their significance lying in that they are an average person or an everyman, conveying that everybody seems to want to know this even if only one person has asked. But many scholars do not translate it as such. They refer to the person asking him as "you," indicating a personal significance and relation to Bai himself. However, this is not the only interpretation; due to the wording of "Ask me," it does not specify that the asker is an outside source. Bai himself could be asking himself this question, which would add a very honest and reflective layer to it which is also very human; who has not wondered sometimes why they are where they are? It is also notable that the poem already utilizes natural imagery in calling his mountain "green," adding to its significance in the context of both the poem and the Daoist philosophy it displays. The second line, "Smile but not answer heart self idle," is more straightforward, but there is a question about the last word: "idle." Most translators interpret this word in a positive light; the three displayed above use "leisure" "free of care" and "serene." Of these, I believe "free of care" is the most interesting interpretation, and certainly the most in tune with Daoist thought; the fact that something that we do not yet know, possibly related to the mountain or to his own solitude or self-

reflection, has allowed him to be “free of care” is another very Daoist idea. The third line is where the poem begins to take a life of its own. Almost a non-sequiter, “Peach blossom flow water far go” is certainly a serious depart from the previous lines. Many translators make no attempt to connect this line with any of the others, which is an interesting choice. As a non-sequiter, it communicates a certain simple beauty inherent to the peach blossom itself; it is there simply because it is there, for no greater purpose, and that is what is beautiful. However, I believe that the peach blossom communicates a distinct connection with the next line of the poem: “Apart have heaven earth in human world.” Just like the peach blossom which has floated so far away, Li Bai is apart, and that is what allows him to understand—have—heaven and earth in the context of the human world. Many translations do interpret this line differently; one says that “There is another Heaven and Earth beyond the world of man,” which is certainly a more broad, sweeping and, frankly, Christian argument, which does not support the ideas in the characters, or the philosophy behind Bai and his poetry.

I chose this poem because I believe it illustrates Li’s style and articulation particularly well. The imagery and metaphors are creative and evocative in ways that bypass the intellect of the language itself—there is very little lost to the translation with this poem. It is also as concise as it is evocative, making sure the reader’s interest is maintained. However, the poem also maintains a very distinct Daoist character, making it very interesting to me personally; the Dao De Jing is among my favorite pieces of writing and this poem’s reminiscence makes it almost equally interesting; the ideas of introspection and synchronization with nature in order to achieve some greater level of understanding and insight are fascinating to me. It also proposes a very interesting insight into Li Bai as a person. His activities during his life may indicate to some that he was, on some level, a somewhat frivolous person, given his tendencies to drink and be merry. This poem alleviates this image given its depth, both of thought and language. In all his poetry, this is perhaps the best instance of Li coming off as not just clever, but wise. The imagery is also appealing because of its universal nature; the metaphor and symbolism of flowing along the river as the peach-blossom does, into a place far away, somewhere where heaven and earth function on a greater plane, is an idea that everyone has felt and everyone can identify with. Li Bai’s poem is articulate, interesting, revealing and appealing, as well as satisfying on a higher, philosophical level.

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