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CHIN 313L.01: Chinese Poetry in Translation

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The Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures

CHIN 313L: Classical Chinese Poetry in Translation

Spring 2019

SYLLABUS

“[P]oetry is woven into the life and history of the Chinese people, and perhaps no other facet of their traditional culture possesses such universal appeal.”

- Burton Watson, The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry

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General Introduction and Overview of the Chinese Poetic Tradition

Until the early twentieth century, all educated Chinese, men especially, were expected to be able to compose poetry written in classical Chinese. Even Mao Zedong (1893-1976), who belonged to perhaps the last generation of Chinese to receive a classical education, was not merely a revolutionary but a competent poet as well. From early times, poetry was considered an integral part of the moral education of China's elite, the ability to write verse a refinement that was taken for granted, like possessing good table manners. Confucius (6th century BCE) urged his disciples to study and memorize the poems in *Shi Jing* (The Book of Odes), the earliest extant body of Chinese verse. He viewed these poems as a repository of timeless truths, values, and lessons, and thus an essential instrument for moral cultivation, especially where gentlemen who aspired to enter public service were concerned.

Genuine folk verse as composed (and actually sung) by the peasants and city dwellers of China constitutes only a minor proportion of the total extant poetic canon; the Chinese poetry that has been preserved and transmitted over the centuries was largely the preserve of the male scholarly elite, who made up the tiny literate fraction of the population. Professional poets *per se* were atypical: most poets saw themselves primarily as scholar-officials, whether in office or not, and considered poetic skills and practice far below service to the state in importance. By the seventh century, the composition of poetry had become part of the curriculum for the civil service examinations, although its importance therein decreased in later centuries.

Over time, poetry ceased to be written merely for didactic reasons, lyrical verse becoming increasingly prominent from around the fourth century A.D. and attaining full maturity in the Tang dynasty (618-907). Writing poetry for no purpose other than to capture the beauty of a landscape or to give vent to personal feelings was completely acceptable, and the absence of an overt moral message was not considered a shortcoming as long as the language and sentiments were refined and tasteful. The range of acceptable poetic subjects and themes broadened even further in the Song/Sung dynasty (960-1279), and new heights in lyrical intensity were reached by many of the Song poets.

Compared to Western verse, Chinese poetry tends to be on the short side, although lengthy descriptive “prose poems” were once popular; the long epic poetry associated with the Greco-Roman world is not a feature of the Chinese poetic tradition. Chinese verse is also more world-centered; poems

dealing with metaphysics, religious speculation, and philosophical discourse exist but are relatively uncommon, especially the further forward we go in time. Occasional verse exists in abundance, since convention required that poems be composed to mark every important social event or personal milestone. Tens of thousands of Chinese poems have been handed down over the centuries and for every surviving poem there are doubtless hundreds that were never preserved, occasional verse especially. Relatively little of the total corpus of extant verse has been translated. The Chinese themselves have tended to focus on a rather small slice of the poetic tradition as a whole, reading just the most renowned poets, most of whom you will encounter in our two anthologies. Historically, verse from beyond the Song dynasty, although often excellent, has been slighted somewhat (as you will see if you examine the index of *Sunflower Splendor*), largely because it tends to recycle old themes and displays few innovations.

The ability to write classical Chinese poetry is almost a lost art today, especially among younger generations of Chinese. Nowadays poetry is often written in the more accessible *baihua* (modern or “plain” speech) rather than *wenyanwen* or *guwen* (classical or “literary” Chinese). Nevertheless, Chinese people of all ages still feel a close affinity with their literary heritage and are especially proud of their poetry. Schools throughout the Chinese-speaking world have continued to foster an appreciation for classical verse and students are often required to commit famous examples to memory, much the same way as their counterparts in English-speaking countries might be required to memorize passages from Shakespeare.

Chinese poetry affords a wealth of insights into the values and aesthetics of this illustrious civilization and its study provides an invaluable *entrée* to the understanding of China’s cultural heritage. Accordingly, this course will be beneficial for people engaged in any field of Chinese studies, not simply literature. Students in a wide range of academic disciplines will discover an entire new dimension added to their understanding of China past and present, through the study of its poetry. You will eventually discover how helpful familiarity with, and appreciation for, traditional Chinese poetry can be in developing friendships and ties with Chinese people throughout the Chinese-speaking world. There is also a vast realm of aesthetic beauty that you will gain access to by taking this course; even in translation, much of this charm and elegance still shines through. You may well be surprised by the extent to which the sentiments in this verse transcend the boundaries of culture and time, speaking to us vividly and compellingly even today.

Course Content and Structure:

There are no prerequisites for this course. No prior acquaintance with Chinese civilization is required or expected, although any such knowledge will naturally be helpful. The course is taught in English and the poems will be read in translation. Occasionally, we may also examine texts in the original Chinese to gain a better grasp of certain qualities and features of Chinese poetry. We will begin the course with some selections from China’s earliest known poetic anthology, *Shi Jing* (The Book of Odes, compiled circa 600 B.C.) and end with verse from the Song/Sung dynasty (960-1279). Although good poetry continued to be written beyond the 13th century, the great age of Chinese verse was by this time over. Miscellaneous additions from later on may be included in this course if time permits.

Class meetings will include introductory lectures designed to provide historical and cultural background on individual poets and the times in which they lived. Our main task, however, will be the close reading and discussion of the poems themselves. Active involvement in class discussions will be required, and part of your final grade is allocated to your performance in this area. It is essential for you to have read the day’s selections before class and to come prepared to ask questions and answer questions, demonstrating that you have actually engaged the material and not merely given it a cursory glance.

Outcomes:

After successfully completing this course students will have read a wide range of works from China's classical poetic heritage and be familiar with many of the fundamental elements of Chinese poetics. You will be conversant with the main genres, themes, concerns and literary techniques of Chinese poetry and will be acquainted with many of the key private and public values of the Chinese people. Through the class discussions and essays, students will emerge with sharper analytical and critical skills; in addition, while the written assignments and the feedback provided thereon will lead to an improvement in writing abilities. You will also acquire a broader awareness of the role (or roles) poetry can play within a society, as well as the different reasons and forces that impel people to versify.

Course Requirements and Grading:

***Attendance** at all classes is expected. Anyone absent five times will fail the course.

Latenesses may also be counted as absences if they become a pattern.

***Four essays**, each 5 pages long and each worth 15 % of your overall grade.

All written assignments will be graded for composition as well as content, and you may expect plenty of written feedback and comments concerning both areas.

***A comprehensive final exam** on the semester's work: 30%. University regulations forbid giving exams before exam week begins, so please bear this in mind when making travel plans.

***Class participation:** 10% per cent of your overall grade will go toward your demonstrated level of preparedness during the course and for contributions made to class discussions.

Reminder: All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at <http://www.umt.edu/SA/VPSA/index.cfm/page/1321>

Texts: Please purchase the following works, which are available at the UC Bookstore:

Watson, Burton. *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century*. (Columbia U.P)

Liu, Wu-chi and Lo, Irving Yucheng. *Sunflower Splendor: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry*. (Indiana U.P)

Supplementary photocopied material will be provided periodically.

COURSE READINGS

Note that the poems below will not always be read in the exact order as presented. Additions and subtractions may be made as the course proceeds. Although both course texts use the Wade-Giles system of romanization for poets' names, I have also given you the pinyin equivalents, mainly to assist you with web searches.

Abbreviations: BW= Burton Watson, SS= Sunflower Splendor

Week One

Course introduction, Chinese poetry and poetics, plus a glance at a couple of poems in the original Chinese.

Selections from *Shi Jing/Shih Ching* (The Book of Odes/Songs), China's earliest anthology of verse: See the Rat BW24; Please Chung Tzu BW26; Big Rat Big Rat BW32; A Simple Rustic You Seemed SS4

Week Two

Shi Jing continued. In the Seventh Month SS 8; Thornvine on the Wall BW24; I Climb That Barren Ridge BW31; She Who First Bore Our People BW41

Week Three

QuYuan/Chu Yuan (attrib.):Hymn To The Orange SS15
Jia Yi/Chia Yi: Rhyme-Prose on the Owl BW70

Week Four

Han dynasty anon. folk ballads (yuefu): Dew on the Leek BW 78; The Graveyard BW 78; They Fought South of the Wall(s) SS 35 and BW 79; At Fifteen I Went Off Into The Army BW 81; Chen Lin: Song-I Watered My Horses at the Long Wall Caves BW 107
Cai Yan/Ts'ai Yen: The Lamentation SS 36

Week Five

Selections from *The Nineteen Old-Style Poems*: Nos. 1-4, 11, 13, 15: BW 96-102
Compare: Hsu Kan/XuGan, Boudoir Thoughts, Four Selections SS 40-41 and Ts'aoP'i/Cao Pi: Song of Yen SS46, and Pao Chao/Bao Zhao, "The Weary Road," (Two Selections) BW 68

Poetry from the Era of Division/Six Dynasties (ca. 200-600 A.D.):

Week Six

Cao Cao/Ts'aoTs'ao:Song on Enduring the Cold BW 104; Cao Pi/Ts'aoP'i: Untitled Verse, Poem One SS 44; Cao Zhi/Ts'aoChih:A Song of Lament SS48

Week of Seven

Juan Chi/RuanJi: Singing of Thoughts – Poems 2, 3, 4, 5 BW 149
GuoPu/KuoP'u: Poem on the Wandering Immortal BW170
Hsieh Ling-yun/XieLingyun: Reply to a Poem From My Cousin Hui-lien BW173; Written on the Lake, BW 172

Week Eight

Tao Qian/T'aoCh'ien (T'ao Yuan-ming): On Returning to My Garden and Field, Two Selections SS 52; Begging For Food SS 53; Drinking Wine, Four Selections SS 54; Blaming Sons BW 136; Returning To My Home (Poem 4) BW131
Bao Zhao/Pao Chao: Rhyme-Prose on the Desolate City BW 183

The Golden Age of Chinese Verse: the Tang Dynasty (618-907):

Week Nine

Meng Haoran/MengHao-jan: Stopping At A Friend's Farm SS 95; Spending the Night... Waiting for My Friend Ting, Who Does Not Arrive SS 95
Wang Wei: To Sub-Prefect Chang SS96; The Farms At Wei River SS97; Deer Fence BW 200; Joys of the Country BW 201; Visiting The Temple of Accumulated Fragrance BW 202; Weather Newly Cleared, the View at Evening BW 203

Week Ten

Li Bo/Li Po, Bring The Wine! BW 207; Drinking Alone Beneath The Moon (2 poems) SS 109; Song of Hsiangyang SS102; Still Night Thoughts BW 210; Summer Day BW 210; Wine and Fish Poem BW 213

Week Eleven

Du Fu/Tu Fu: Presented to Wei Pa BW 227; Song of Peng-ya BW 223; Recruiting Officer of Shih-hao SS 130; The Man With No Family BW 228; Seven Songs BW 229

Week Twelve

Han Yu: Poem on Losing One's Teeth SS 172; The Officer at the Rapids SS 188
Bo Juyi/Po Chu-I: Watching The Wheat-reapers SS 202; Bitter Cold, Living In The Village SS 203; The Old Man Of Hsin-feng With The Broken Arm SS 203

Week Thirteen

Verse of Bo Juyi continued

Poems from the Song dynasty (960-1279):

Mei Yaochen/Mei Yao-ch'en: Sharing Lodging With... Being Bothered By The Noise of Rats BW 338; Shih-hou Pointed Out... Poem On The Subject Of Lice BW 339; Sad Remembrance BW 339; Marrying Again BW 341; Aboard A Boat At Night, Drinking With My Wife BW 341; An Offering For The Cat BW 342; Swarming Mosquitoes SS 314

Su Shih (Su Tung-p'o): New Year's Eve BW 299; Long Ago I Lived In The Country BW 308; White Crane Hill BW 310; Black Muzzle BW 311; The Fisherman: Four Poems SS 346

Song dynasty verse – cont'd

Week of Monday April 22rd. FINAL WEEK

This course was taught numerous times by Dr. Timothy Bradstock in the past. With permission, some of his instructional materials will be used in this class.