

Modern Chinese Poetry in a Global Context—Sample Syllabus

Smash the iron gates of the Concessions!
Smash the pious doors of the missionary houses!
Smash the revolving doors of the Jim Crow Y.M.C.A.'s.
Crush the enemies of land and bread and freedom!
Stand up and roar, China!
You know what you want!
The only way to get it is
To take it!
Roar, China!

-Langston Hughes, "Roar China" (1938)

Instructor: Dr. Chloe Estep
Office Hours MW 9-10 AM in 854 Williams Hall
(or virtual by appointment)

I. Course Description

The tumultuous political and economic history of modern China has been mirrored in and shaped by equally fundamental revolutions in language and poetic expression. In this course, we will take Chinese poetry as a crucible in which we can observe the interacting forces of literary history and social change. From diplomats who saw poetry as a medium for cultural translation between China and the world, to revolutionaries who enlisted poetry in the project of social transformation, we will examine the lives and works of some of China's most prominent poets and ask, what can we learn about modern China from reading their poetry? In asking this question, we will also reckon with the strengths and limitations of using poetry as an historical source. In addition to poems, the course will include fiction, essays, photographs, and films by both Chinese and non-Chinese artists that place our poets in a broader context. We will pay close attention to how these poets represent China's place in the world, as well as the role of language in social change. Topics of discussion include: national identity, revolution, translation, gender, the body, ethnicity, and technology.

Familiarity with Chinese or related cultural context is beneficial, but not required.

This course introduces students to Chinese poetry in English translation, as well as global poetry that speaks to and about the concerns of China and Chinese poetry. Students will leave the course with an in-depth understanding of the main figures, themes, and techniques of Chinese poetry, and will be introduced to some of the major developments in the history of China and to some major figures in other global poetic traditions. Through a focus on primary texts, students will develop the vocabulary and analytical skills to appreciate and analyze poetry in translation and will gain confidence as writers thinking about literary texts.

Week 1: Course Overview (Jan. 11)

(No readings)

Topics for Discussion: Introduction to the syllabus and to each other. Overview of Chinese poetry and its history. Introduction to the basics of Chinese language. Discussion: ways of reading poetry.

Week 2: How do we read a translation? (Jan. 23)

Reading:

Wang Wei, Elliot Weinberger, and Octavio Paz. *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (New York: Moyer Bell Limited, 1987)

Supplemental [Supplemental readings are optional and often provide further historical, literary, or theoretical context for those interested]:

James J. Y. Liu. *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), ix-87

Topics for Discussion: translation, classicism, ecopoetry

Week 3: The *Book of Songs* and the making of New Poetry (Jan. 30)

Reading:

“The Great Preface” to the *Book of Songs* 《詩經》 and commentary

Book of Songs assorted poems and translations
Wen Yiduo, “Form in Poetry” and “Dead Water”

Supplemental:

Lydia H. Liu, “A Folksong Immortal and Official Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century China,” in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003., 553-609.

Topics for Discussion: folklore, form, nation

Week 4: Li Bai and Ezra Pound (Feb. 6)

Reading:

Li Bai, “Changgan Ballad” 《長干行》 and Ezra Pound, “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter.”

Ernest Fenollosa. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. Ezra Pound (San Francisco: City Lights, 1936)

Topics for Discussion: script, mediation, orientalism

Week 5: Huang Zunxian’s San Francisco Poems: Racial politics and the Chinese Exclusion Act (Feb. 13)

Reading:

J.D. Schmidt, *Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848-1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) (selections)

Topics for Discussion: xenophobia, diaspora, the Sinophone

Week 6: Vernacular poetry and language reform (Feb. 20)

Reading:

Xu Zhimo, "Saying Goodbye to Cambridge Again" 《再別康橋》

Hu Shi, "Some Modest Proposals for the Reform of Literature." In *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*, ed. Kirk Denton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 123-139 and other selections

Additional articles posted under "Hu Shi and Xu Zhimo Readings"

Topics for Discussion: utopia, reform, romanticism

Week 7: Charles Baudelaire and global modernisms (Feb 27)

Reading:

Charles Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil*, ed. Marthiel and Jackson Mathews (New York: New Directions, 1955) (selections and translations)

Haun Saussy, "Death and Translation." *Representations* 94 (Spring 2006): 112- 130.

Additional poems by Feng Zhi and Li Jinfa

Topics for Discussion: decadence, the macabre, symbolism

SPRING BREAK!

Week 8: Painting, Poetry, and Ekphrasis (March 13)

Reading:

Chiang Yee, *The Silent Traveller in New York* (as much as you can, with special attention to poems, paintings, drawings, and other visual matter)

Lessing, "Laocöon, or the Limitations of Poetry" Sections 1, 2, 15, and 16 (pgs. 1-26 and 145-163)
-For a helpful primer to this piece, see <https://www.thecollector.com/lessing-laocoon-greek-statue/>

Frederik Green, "Painted in Oil, Composed in Ink: Late Qing Ekphrastic Poetry and the Encounter with Western-Style Painting" in *Translating Chinese Art and Modern Literature*, Routledge: 7-29. (recommended for graduate students)

Topics for Discussion: transmediation, visuality, the Other

Week 9: Poetics of Sino-American relations: Wen Yiduo in Chicago, Langston Hughes in Shanghai (March 20)

Reading:

Wen Yiduo, *Red Candle: Selected Poems*, trans. Tao Tao Saunders (London: Cape, 1972) (selections)

Langston Hughes, "Roar China," and *I Wonder as I Wander* (New York: Rinehard & Company, 1956) (selections)

Supplemental:

Liansu Meng, "Wen Yiduo's Ecological Turn in Chicago." In *The Inferno Tango: Gender Politics and Modern Chinese Poetry, 1917-1980*. Diss. (University of Michigan, 2010), 71-122

Topics for Discussion: the natural world, industrialization, pollution

Week 10: Journeys to War (March 27)

Reading:

Mao Zedong, *Poems of Mao Tse-tung*, trans. Nieh Hua-ling Engle and Paul Engle (New York: Dell Publishing, 1972) (selections)

Ai Qing, Selected Poems (at least "Dayanhe—My Wet Nurse," "A Conversation with Coal," "Snow Falls on China's Land," "Morning Snowfall," "Fish Fossil," "The Wall")

W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (New York: Octagon Books, 1939)
You should focus on "In Time of War" (pgs. 259-285)

Supplemental:

Douglas Kerr, "Disorientations: Auden and Isherwood's China." *Literature and History* 5 no. 2 (1996): 53-67

Topics for Discussion: war, propaganda, travel writing

Week 11: The Beats in China (April 3)

Reading:

Poems and articles by and about Allen Ginsburg and Gary Snyder

Pechman, "[China is the Magic Place](#)" (On Marianne Moore and China)

Supplemental:

Yu Min, "Gary Snyder and China," *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 6, no. 2 (Feb 2016): 417-422

Su Hui, "Allen Ginsberg's China," in *American Modernist Poetry and the Chinese Encounter*, ed. Z. Yuejun and S. Christie (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 123-132

Topics for Discussion: Buddhism, oral poetry, counterculture

Week 12: Bei Dao and the Today poets: Chinese Literature as World Literature (April 10)

Readings:

Selected poems by the Today or Misty poets, including Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, Shu Ting, Han Dong, Xi Chuan

Stephen Owen, "What is World Poetry?" *The New Republic*. (Nov. 19, 1990): 28- 32

Topics for Discussion: historical rupture, world literature vs. comparative literature

Week 13: Industrial Fantasies and Realities (April 17)

Reading:

Ouyang Jianghe and Xu Bing, *Phoenix*

Christian Sorace, "[Poetry after the Future](#)"

F.T. Marinetti, *Les mots en liberte futuristes* (Files) and the "[Futurist Manifesto](#)"

Topics for Discussion: futurism, idealism, labor

Session 14: Aku Wuwu's poetic sojourn in America (April 24)

Reading:

Aku Wuwu, *Coyote Traces: Aku Wuwu's Poetic Sojourn in America*, trans. Wen Peihong and Mark Bender (Columbus: Foreign Language Publications, Ohio State University, 2006) (selections)

Aku Wuwu, "Calling Back the Soul of Zhyge Alu"
https://www.ixigua.com/6469708006161383950?wid_try=1

Additional poems

Supplemental:

Wen Jin and Liu Daxian, "Double Writing: Aku Wuwu and the Epistemology of Chinese Writing in the Americas" *Amerasia Journal* 38, no. 2 (2012): 45-63

Topics for Discussion: mother tongues, indigeneity, multilingualisms

Capstone Project due May 1

