

Chinese Literature

An Introduction

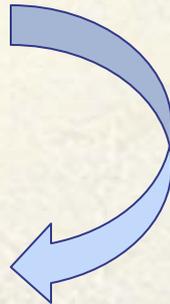
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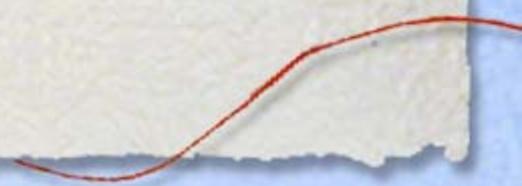


Pre-modern era



Dividing line: 1919

Modern era



Basic outline for today

- Overview
- Pre-modern (example: poetry)
- Modern (example: Lu Xun)
- Contemporary (example: the Nobel laureates)

wen 文

- modern definition: writing, literary composition, essay, refined, civilized, civil
- etymology: (elegant) pattern, tattoo (Bronze age: man w/ taboo on chest)
- human patterning (vs. heavenly or earthly patterning)



甲骨文

Oracle-bone script



金文

Bronze script



小篆

Small Seal Script

the written language

- 50,000 discrete units – characters – that convey sound and meaning
- 1000 basic literacy, 4000 full literacy
- morphosyllabic: each unit is one syllable but the lang. has words of various syllabic length
- 4% pictographic (e.g. 山)
- *high prestige of the script*

Civil Service Examination

- 605 – 1905
- literary composition the mark of distinction, membership in the ruling elite
- intimate link between fine writing and moral/political concerns

Ethos of *wen*

- High premium on advanced literary ability
- Learning commanded high social prestige
- Formation of literati culture

"Ascending on high, a gentleman can/must make a rhapsody."



- 1) That the noble person is capable of expounding his lofty perceptions brilliantly;
- 2) And that he is compelled by circumstances to do so.

My favorites of Pre-Modern Literature

Poetry: Li Bo, Wang Wei, Li He, Su Shi, Li Qingzhao

Drama:

The Orphan of Chao

The Injustice of Dou'e, Moving Heaven and Earth

Peony Pavilion

Fiction:

Journey to the West (Monkey King)

Strange Tales from a Make-do Studio

Dream of the Red Chamber

Six Records of a Floating Life

Challenge: How to teaching tradition

- 傳 / 传 (*chuan*)
v. to give, deliver; to transmit; to teach
- 統 / 统 (*tong*)
n. unbroken thread of silk

Poetry

- 1) canonical status
- 2) high moral purpose
- 3) part of the civil service examination

“Poetry is where the resolve goes. In the heart, it is resolve; manifested in words, it is a poem. Emotion moves within and takes shape in words. Words are not enough, and so one sighs it. Sighing it is not enough, and so one draws it out in song. Drawing it out in song is not enough, and so unknowingly one’s hands dance it and one’s feet tread it.”

-- Preface to the *Canon of Poetry*

Confucius addressed Boyu [his son] saying,
“Have you done the first two sections of
the *Poetry* yet? He who has not done
even those is like someone standing with
his face pressed against a wall.”

“If you do not study *Poetry*, you will not be
able to speak.”

-- *Analects*

Poetry: *shi* 詩

- full flowering in Tang dynasty (618-907)
- regular meter (5 or 7 syllables per line)
- highly condensed (40 or 56 words)
- imagistic density
- parallelism
- regulated word choice, structure, syntax and tones

This is what it looks like...

玉階生白露
夜久侵羅襪
卻下水晶簾
玲瓏望秋月

A white dew forms on jade stairs,
As night draws on, it penetrates
silk stockings.

But she lets down the crystal curtain;
It tingles and sparkles as she gazes
at the autumn moon.

-- Li Bo (701-762)

Poetry: *ci* 詞 (song lyric)

words to songs, origin in the cosmopolitan culture of the Silk Roads of central Asia (9-11thc)

- less unified in structure, less parallelism
- shifting between imagistic presentation and quotation of speech







And this is what it looks like...

虞美人

- 李煜

春花秋月何時了，
往事知多少？
小樓昨夜又東風，
故國不堪回首月明中。

雕欄玉砌應猶在，
只是朱顏改。
問君能有幾多愁，
恰似一江春水向東流。

Ci poem: To the Tune 'The Beautiful Lady Yu'

by Li Yu (937-978)

When will the last flower fall, the last moon fade?

So many sorrows lie behind.

Again last night the east wind filled my room –

O gaze not on the lost kingdom under this bright moon.

Still in her light my palace gleams as jade,

-- It's only the youthful faces that have changed.

I ask you, how much sorrow can there be?

Just as much as a river full of spring waters, flowing east.

Poetry: *qu* 曲(songs)

- words to songs, origin in Jurchen and other northern cultures
- full bloom under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368)
- northern vernacular, vigorously colloquial







“Not Giving In to Old Age”

- Guan Hanqing (ca. 1220-ca. 1307)

I am a *jingling tingling* bronze bean *that remains hard after being steamed, raw after being stewed, that bounces under a big hammer and will not pop when being baked.*

我是個蒸不爛、煮不熟、捶不扁、炒不爆、響噹噹一粒
銅豌豆

The *yin-yang* of the lyrical tradition:

- elite vs. popular
- classical vs. vernacular
- central vs. peripheral



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Timeline of the modern era:

- The Opium Wars (1840, 1842)
- Taiping Rebellion 1850s-60s
- Self-strengthening Movement 1860s – 98
- Political reform 1898-1911
- Cultural reform 1915-1930s

Two examples

- Why Adam Smith in classical Chinese?
- “Do not read any Chinese books?”

Proper Literary Medium?

The New Style

VS.

The Classical Prose

Toncheng Classical Prose

- major literary school of the Qing dynasty
- founded in the early 18th century
- sought to revive the prose style of the Tang and Song dynasty classicists
- literary revival + Confucian revival
- ideal style emphasizes clarity, balance and restraint
- principal issue: the dialogical relationship between *dao* and its formal manifestation in *wen* or letters

Why Adam Smith (or Dickens) should be in classical Chinese

“If one were to use popular vernacular so that it would be accessible to ignorant country bumpkins, that to the literary world is not revolution but butchering. My translation is meant for those who have steeped themselves in the classical tradition. For those people whose eyes have never glanced at the ancient pages, and then proceed to criticize my translation, the fault is with the reader, not the translator.”

-- Yan Fu's letter to Liang Qichao

The May-Fourth Movement

- May 4, 1919, students from Peking University protesting the Chinese government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles, especially regarding the Shandong Problem
- Rapidly growing into a nation-wide cultural movement



The New Culture Movement

- mid 1910s - 1920s
- revolt against Confucianism
- demand for
 - 1) democracy and science
 - 2) vernacular literature
 - 3) individual freedom and women's liberation

“Madman’s Diary”

“Everything requires careful consideration if one is to understand it. In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words: ‘Virtue and Morality.’ Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night, until I began to see words between the lines, the whole book being filled with the two words ‘Eat people.’”

-- - Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936)

Timeline of PRC

- 1949 – founding of People's Republic of China
- 1957 – Anti-rightist campaign
- 1958 – the Great Leap Forward
- 1966-76 – Cultural Revolution
- 1978-81 – Democracy Wall
- 1989 – Democracy movement
- 1990s - market economy

My favorites

- Bei Dao, *The August Sleepwalker*, *Landscape Over Zero*
- A Cheng: *Chess Master*, *King of Trees*
- Can Xue: *Dialogues in Paradise*, *Five Spice Street*

Question: Literature vs. politics

Gao Xingjian 高行健 (1940 -)

- novelist, playwright, critic, translator, screenwriter, director, painter
- Citizenship: China (1949-1996), France (since 1997)
- Nobel Prize in literature, 2000
- Representative works:

Bus Stop, 1983

Wild Men, 1985

Soul Mountain, 1989

One Man's Bible, 1998

Gao Xingjian:

“A writer does not speak as the spokesperson of the people or as the embodiment of righteousness. His voice is inevitably weak, but it is precisely this voice of the individual that is more authentic.”

“Once separated from the so-called land of my ancestry, I gained distance and started writing with a more sober mind.”

Mo Yan 莫言 (1955 -)

1987 *Red Sorghum Clan (5 vols)*

1988 *The Garlic Ballads*

1992 *The Republic of Wine*

.....

2012 Nobel Prize for his work as a writer
"who with hallucinatory realism
merges folk tales, history and the
contemporary"

“Whether the Nobel writers are inside the system or not, all must choose how they will relate to their country’s authoritarian government. This inevitably involves calculations, trade-offs....

While Liu Xiaobo’s [political dissident, winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize] moral choices were highly unusual, it would be wrong for spectators like you and me, who enjoy the comfort of distance, to demand that Mo Yan risk all and be another Liu Xiaobo. But it would be even more wrong to mistake the clear difference between the two.”

– Perry Link