

Using Word and Image to Teach a Course on Chinese Culture

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Our team-taught course “Word and Image in Chinese Culture,” introduces students to the intercreative relationship between Chinese poetry and painting, or in some cases more generally between word and image. Professor Hong Jiang is a Chinese literature specialist, and Professor Tamara Bentley is a Chinese art historian, therefore we have tried to find ways in which our two fields inform each other.

The Roman poet Horace proclaimed: “as in painting, so in poetry,” and this point of view has been influential in the Western tradition. In 11th-century China, the Song poet-scholar

Su Shi expressed his great admiration for the Tang poet-painter Wang Wei in the words: “There is painting in his poetry and poetry in his painting.” Perhaps even more so than in the West, in China, poetry, painting, and calligraphy have been considered integrated art forms. To fully appreciate these arts requires some understanding of their shared aesthetics.

Our course is based on a four week intensive format. We teach the first two weeks in the United States, addressing thematic topics. Then we take the class to mainland China for two additional weeks of hands-on study.

Below we consider a few of the themes that have seemed to work best.

1. Han Dynasty *fu* poetry, and the interplay between Confucianism and Daoism

Confucianism and Daoism were both developed towards the end of the Zhou dynasty in the 6th Century BCE. However, it is under the Western Han ruler Han Wudi

(r. 140 – 87 BCE) that Confucianism was really taken up as the central ideology of the Chinese state. Han Wudi for example established the first Hanlin academy of scholars at court; and he favored *rujia* (Confucian scholars) for official positions. He emphasized Confucianism even though his mother was an ardent Daoist.

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In spite of these developments, when we look at evidence from Western Han tombs, particularly tombs from the H u b e i - H u n a n region of Chu such as Mawangdui (168 BCE), we see motifs which resonate with religious Daoist ideas, such as the magic mountain of

the West; the emanation of the *qi* energy force from the caves in this mountain; and the flowing, unfolding life-force of this *qi*, which alternately manifests itself as clouds, tendrils of plants, water, mountains, or sinuous dragons. (There are also Han objects from other regions that show magic mountains or *qi*-like flowing lines. Still, Chu thought does seem most strongly configured in this direction.) Spinning off, almost born out of this *qi*

we not infrequently find representations of the myriad creatures. On the side of one of the Mawangdui coffins for example we find a gazelle, a panther, a bird, and an immortal within the dragon-based *qi* lines (see fig. 1). The addorsed dragons face a magic mountain and are bordered by cloud motifs.

In contrast to the imagery on the coffins, the T-shaped silk banner originally draped over the outer coffin of the interred Lady Dai depicts a sort of “passport” to the afterlife—with ordered stages rising from her funeral, to her greeting of ministers, to her passing beyond heavenly bureaucrats to the moon. Here the sense of decorum in Lady Dai’s portrait, the hierarchy of stages, and the recurrent picturing of officials—all resonate primarily with Confucian traditions.

The coexistence of Confucian and Daoist imagery in the Han dynasty shows that these two belief systems were not mutually exclusive. Rather than looking for black or white belief systems, then, we might more usefully concern ourselves with the relative level of each mode of thought in the writings of any given thinker, or within any particular set of objects. What aspects of the work at hand may be considered Confucian in orientation? What aspects may be considered Daoist?

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Figure 1: Daoist motifs on Mawangdui coffins

Sima Xiangru (179-117 BCE) is perhaps the most important Han dynasty poet working in the *fu* format—that is in the form of long, embroidered elegies. Sima Xiangru was brought into the circle of poets working for Han Wudi, and his poem on Han Wudi’s Shanlin hunting park, scripted in about 130 BCE, reveals a lyric, unfolding line similar to the flowing dragon-line we saw in the Mawangdui coffin. In the poem, this *qi* line is initially associated with racing waters:

Eight rivers, coursing onward,
Spreading in different directions, each with its own
form.
North, South, East, and West,
They race and tumble,
Pouring through the chasms of Pepper Hill,
Skirting the banks of the river islets,
Winding through the cinnamon forests,
And across the broad meadows.

These waters are varied in their movement, and at times resemble cloud forms:

Darting and twisting,
Foaming and tossing,
In a thunderous chaos;
Arching into hills, billowing like clouds,
They dash to left and right,
Plunging and breaking in waves
That chatter over the shallows;

These rivers, with their free “left and right” movement “billowing into clouds” draw us back to visual representations of the *qi* force. If we look back at the Mawangdui coffin (fig. 1), we can, for example, relate this description to the sinuous dragons and to the cloud forms bordering the dragons—the crossed lines at times culminating in billowy forms. In fact, these line-to-cumulus forms date back to Shang and Zhou bronzes.

It is interesting that the four flowing rivers in the poem are seen as germinative—the way into the poem, almost as though we were riding the water. Reading through the long poem, the force of the transforming, moving line seems to transfer itself from the water to the mountains, to the vegetation, to roaming animals and birds, to paths around palaces, to trees with “limbs entwined,” to gibbons among trees “sporting among the limbs,” to the hunting chariots of the Son of Heaven and his entourage, which “race in droves,/Rounding the hills, streaming across the lowlands,/Like enveloping clouds or drenching rain.” (translation Victor Mair, *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, p. 399-410.) It is on the momentum of this flowing line that the embroidered details are hung.

In terms of Han thought overall, it is interesting that this poem is comprised of a somewhat contradictory set of rhetorics—in substance it is very Daoist, yet it ends with a moralistic Confucian lesson. Towards the end of the poem, the Son of Heaven has an epiphany about this hunting, stating: “Alas! What is this but a wasteful extravagance?” He determines to reform himself:

He sports now in the Park of the Six Arts,
Races upon the Road of Benevolence and
Righteousness,
And scans the Forest of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

Thus, in Sima Xiangru’s *fu* poem the ruler ultimately turns to learning for guidance and amusement, and spends his time hunting within the written classics and devoting himself to moral cultivation. In this poem, then, as in Han dynasty tomb objects, we see a mix of Daoist and Confucian thought.

2. The use of imagery in Tang dynasty poems

Tang poetry was built around emotions evoked through exterior scenery (*jingjie* “scene-and-emotion”). The emotional dimension of most Tang poetry is best expressed by way of poetic images, because the deepest meaning of the poem cannot be conveyed by words. (This concept is both Buddhist and Daoist.) Ironically perhaps, the formal requirements for parallel couplets

in *shi* (regulated verse) poetry also demand a consummate level of skill with the language.

Tang poetic language emphasizes word/image conjunction. These lines from a poem by Tang poet Wen Tingyun reveal no linkage of any kind from one word to the other.

Rather, the nouns of each word work together in a compound fashion to create a visual scene:

Ji sheng mao dian yue
Cock (n.) crow (n.) straw (n.) inn (n.) moon (n.)

Ren ji ban qiao shuang
Man (n.) trace (n.) plank (n.) bridge (n.) frost (n.)

More fluidly translated this way:

Cockcrow, the moon above the straw inn,
Footprints upon the frost covering the plank bridge.

The question to students is: What connects these isolated nouns together to create a poetic scene? We would argue that the poetic scene is created by means of visual imagery. It is an early winter morning. On the country road, there is a traveler, who is hurrying on his trip. The poetic language creates for the reader a cinematic visuality.

The following three couplets are from one of Wang Wei’s poems:

Gu mu wu ren ji, Old wood no human tracks
appear,

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| <i>Shen shan he chu zhong.</i> | Deep mountains, somewhere a bell. |
| <i>Quan sheng yan wei shi,</i> | Brook voice chokes over craggy boulders |
| <i>Ri se leng qing song.</i> | Sun color chill in the green pines. |
| <i>Kong shan bu jian ren,</i> | Empty hills, no one in sight, |
| <i>Dan wen ren yu xiang.</i> | Only the sound of someone talking. |

“A bell” in the first couplet seems to identify the existence of the temple, but it is the sound of a bell from somewhere in the deep mountains. In the second couplet, instead of presenting the brook and sun, the poet speaks of “brook voices” and “sun color,” which, as descriptions of the natural scene, are almost conundrums. The third couplet opens with “kong,” empty, a word that in Wang Wei’s poems indicates extreme stillness and remoteness; at the same time, the Buddhist connotations of “kong” suggests the illusory quality of the entire natural world. Following “empty hills,” there is a continuing emptiness – “no one in sight.” The second line seems to show a scene of human activity, “the sound of someone talking,” but there is still no definite subject: who is talking? Students concluded that “someone talking” may imply not the presence of humans, but the mountain/pure phenomena that is speaking in the poem. The poet becomes essentially a part of nature.

3. The reinvention of Tang poetry in later paintings

Many later Chinese paintings are based upon Tang poetry. Sometimes we find inscribed entire poems on paintings, at other times only single couplets. The Northern Song painter Guo Xi, for example, painted “Lofty Message of the Forests and Streams” based upon Tang poet Wei Yingwu’s poetic couplet: “Heavy with the rain, the spring flood rushes rapidly through the night;/ Not a soul on the bank, a solitary ferry lies aslant the water.” (*chun chao dai yu wan lai ji, ye du wu ren zhou zi heng.*) Later, the well-known Ming scholar painter Wen Zhengming used the same couplet to create a painting. Comparing these paintings brings out the ongoing influence of the poetic tradition; and



Figure 2: Song artist Ma Lin’s fan painting

also allows us to identify differences in the styles of paintings from different time periods.

In the Southern Song, the academy painter Ma Lin produced a fan painting for emperor Lizong that illustrated a famous couplet by Wang Wei (see fig. 2). This couplet, inscribed on the reverse of the fan by Lizong, is again profoundly Buddhist in its contemplation of the void:

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| <i>Xing dao shui qiong chu,</i> | Walking to where the water end, |
| <i>Zuo kan yun qi shi.</i> | Sitting to watch the time the clouds arise. |

Wang Wei (699-761 CE) was often paired with Tao Qian (365-427 CE) as a leading figure in the galaxy of nature poets. But Tao Qian saw himself as being at home in the world of nature. Wang Wei’s poems have a greater sense of emptiness.

4. Wai-lim Yip and “The Daoist Theory of Knowledge”

In his article titled “The Daoist Theory of Knowledge,” Wai-lim Yip discusses two aesthetic issues derived from Daoist thought that have significant impacts on how we see Chinese art. One issue is the multiple perspectives allowed in, for example, a Song landscape painting. As Yip writes: “In most Chinese landscape painting, the front mountains, the back mountains, the front villages, the villages behind the mountains, the bays in front of the mountain, the bays behind the mountains, all can be seen simultaneously. This is because the viewer has not locked himself into only one viewing position nor restricted his view of things from one, determinate visual category.” He provides this example: a man may be standing on a bridge looking out at the scenery, and that locus delineates his “scenic view.” However, another man may be standing on a hill looking down at the man on the bridge, and that bridge figure is thus incorporated into the “scenic view” of the man standing higher. In like manner, we find in landscape paintings a multiplicity of viewpoints.

A second issue concerns the dual meaning of the Chinese character *jian*. *Jian* means to see, or look at from here to there, but it also means to appear—the emergence of an object. The second meaning reverses the relationship of subject to object, letting the object essentially disclose itself. The implication of this idea is that the viewer and the viewed are in a non-dichotomous relationship. The lack of subject-object dichotomy also extends to the ability to “view things as things view themselves” (*yi wu guan wu*).

5. The experiential dimension: taking students to China for two weeks

It can be difficult to subject abstract academic themes to the concrete world of modern China and the vicissitudes of travel. On the other hand, the sense of space realized *in situ*—contrasting for example the narrow hutongs/alleys of Beijing to the vast courtyards of the Forbidden City—provides an experiential understanding that cannot be accomplished by way of one-dimensional powerpoint presentations or slides.

In our two weeks in China, we travel first to Beijing, and from there to Xi’an. We then travel to Shanghai, Suzhou, and

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set of binary oppositions taken, it would seem, from some Orientalist primer: “Goddess versus man, superstition versus progress, the people versus the state—mile by mile, India is struggling to modernize its national highway system, and in the process, itself.” The article ends with a reference to the goddesses Durga and Saraswati, and lest we miss the significance, a reference to “idol-makers” clearly contextualizes the goddesses as belonging to a more primitivistic religion, one that stands in clear contrast, in Waldman’s prose, to the “highway overpass” and “the sound of speeding cars.” (*New York Times*, December 4, 2005).

Again, whether the details are accurate or not is not the question. Such representations become tropes, part of the politics of representation: “knowledge no longer requires application to reality; knowledge is what gets passed on silently, without comment, from one text to another” (Said, 116). From a pedagogical point of view, such representations constitute a “second-order knowledge” (Said 52) that serves a hermeneutical function. Some images may have been embedded in students’ minds since childhood. Disney of course is one of the worst perpetrators of neo-Orientalism. “Aladdin” opens with Arabian Nights music that sounds almost like a spoof of itself. An image superimposed on flames would suggest either a sinuous woman or a snake. Protests from Arab American groups forced the producers to eliminate the original version of the fourth line of the song: “Where they cut off your ear/ if they don’t like your face,” but the line “It’s barbaric, but hey it’s home” was left in. All the “bad guys” have dark skins and accents that veer between South Asian and Middle Eastern, while Aladdin and Jasmine

who, surely, are of the same ethnicity, have light skins and American accents instead. Aladdin becomes familiar Al and has Caucasian features, having been spared the huge Semitic noses the villains sport. Other stock Orientalist figures in the film include aggressive salespeople, avaricious shopkeepers, fakirs lying on beds of nails or traversing hot coals. Such stereotypical characters are especially pernicious post 9/11, when even the most tenuous resemblance might provoke random attacks. Disney did not even think it necessary to use actual Arabic script instead of meaningless scribble. Important Indian characters on children’s TV shows are often highly caricatured or Orientalized with exaggerated accents and behaviour. Even “Sesame Street” is not immune—on older shows there would be the inevitable snake charmer blowing letters of the alphabet out of his pipe. One hopes they have moved on since! “The West moistens

everything with meaning,” Barthes states in *Empire of Signs* (1982,70). Such meanings can be metonymic, syllogistic and signifiatory. Such meanings come into the classroom just as surely as the folders, notebooks and pens that students bring with them. ●

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Hangzhou, before flying back to America from Shanghai. As students walk along the paths of Suzhou gardens, and meander on bridges over water, the scene unfolds before them, like a scroll, gradually. They also see the buildings and trees reflected in the water. The colors of the flowers, the feel of pebbles underfoot, the scents around them, and the imaginative use of compressed space—all are part of this experience.

In Hangzhou, we were able to arrange a one-day class on traditional and contemporary Chinese art at the *Zhongguo Meishu Xueyuan* (China Art Academy)—previously the *Zhejiang Meishu Xueyuan*. Students toured this impressive campus and gallery; and more, they practiced painting mynah birds and writing calligraphy (such as the word *jian* “to see”) with a Chinese brush. We were amazed at the two-storey calligraphy of Zhuangzi’s Daoist text *Xiaoyao you* (freely flying) recently painted by an art professor at the campus (see fig. 3). The flowing line of the calligraphy, and the Daoist significance of the text, suitably returned us to some of the key themes of our course. ●



Figure 3: Giant rendition of Zhuangzi text at the China Art Academy in Hangzhou