

An Exercise in Parallel Reading: *Shi* Poetry

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Introduction and Goals

Class Outline and Discussion Questions

Instructor Reference

Additional Documents

- Student Handout for Mac Users (requires the use of TimesPinyin, which can be downloaded from <http://www.namkung.com/zev/TimesPinyin.html>)
- Student Handout Front for PC Users
- Student Handout Back for PC Users

Introduction and Goals

This exercise gives students an opportunity to read in depth and understand an 8th century Chinese *shi* poem. Students need not have any knowledge of the Chinese language to do this exercise, though those who can read Chinese are also able to learn much from doing it. The key point is that *shi* poetry must be read using parallelism. While the individual words do carry meaning, the true meaning of the poem exists only in the juxtaposition of various ideas in parallel positions.

A good text to use is “Writes of what he feels, traveling by night” by the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu (712-770). This analysis of the poem draws significantly from Stephen Owen’s discussion of it in *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World*. (See Instructor Reference below for the complete citation.) In the course of doing the exercise, the instructor may also introduce other aspects of Chinese linguistics, literature, or cosmology, but that will vary, depending on the students and the context. Below is a basic plan that can be used with all groups.

Class Outline and Discussion Questions

1. Write the English glosses on the board, in their proper rows and columns (this may be done ahead of time); distribute the handout to the students, gloss side up.
2. Explain that the poem should be read more as four couplets than as eight lines. Ask the students to draw a horizontal line after the fourth row of characters, dividing the poem in half; do the same on the board. Ask them to draw horizontal lines after the second row of characters within each half, resulting in four couplets total; do the same on the board.
3. Explain that in a five character line, there is a caesura, or pause, between the second and third characters. Ask them to draw a dashed vertical line in that position; do the same on the board.

4. Beginning with the first couplet, ask students to read the first character in each line (“fine/thin” and “high/precarious”) in relation to one another. Encourage them to note the part of speech, category of word, senses (sight, sound, etc.) evoked, and anything else they notice; look for both similarities and differences.

5. Do the same for the second character in each line (“grass/plants” and “mast”), and so on. Also look at the characters before and after the caesura as parallel groups, i.e. “faint+wind+shore” compared with “alone/lone+night+boat.”

6. Compare the entire first line of the couplet with the entire second line. Ask the students what seems to be going on in the poem. Where is the poet? On the boat? On the shore? Somewhere else entirely? You might begin to draw a sketch of the “scene” on the board.

7. Repeat steps 4-6 for the remaining three couplets, moving through the steps more quickly if time becomes an issue. As this happens, try to augment and refine the sketch of the poem’s “scene.” Emphasize that in *shi* poetry, the reader presumes that the poet really was there; by the end of the poem, the scene must make sense.

8. Divide the students into four groups. Assign one couplet to each group and ask the group to translate it into comprehensible, idiomatic English. They should try to reflect all of the meaning they have discerned through parallel reading. Allow approximately ten minutes. As each group finishes, they should send a representative to write their translation on the board. Couplets should be placed in the proper order within the poem. As a class, translate the title.

9. Ask a volunteer to read the translation on the board aloud. Discuss the effectiveness of the various translated couplets.

10. Ask the students to turn over the handout, and ask for two volunteers to read aloud, one from Owen’s translation and one from Watson’s. Discuss the three translations.

Instructor Reference

Owen, Stephen. *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985.

Watson, Burton. *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.