

Humanities Seminar Program

Love in Five Chapters: The Aesthetics of Emotion in Chinese Poetry

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Monday 10 AM - 12 PM at the Dorothy Rubel Room in the Poetry Center
October 6, 13, 20, 27, and November 3, 2025
Course Format: Hybrid

Course Description:

China prides itself on being a land of poetry because poetry is not only the longest continuous form of creative writing in the country but also because poetry has been a defining feature in the life of China's elite, from their participating in the civil service exams to their performing rituals on official and leisurely occasions. These occasions give rise to different articulations of thoughts and feelings central to the formation of a distinct poetic culture. The subject of love is an outstanding feature of those articulations because love is not only a desired life experience for everyone but also a trope for aestheticized emotions that convey happiness and console pains.

This seminar organizes Chinese love poetry in five chapters— “The First Sighting,” “Romancing the Heart,” “Heavenly Pleasure,” “Longing in Parting,” and “Regret for Loss”— with a selection of poems from the Pre-Qin to the early 20th century. We will examine the expression of love in various poetic forms and through elaborate figurative constructions. In lectures and readings we will learn that love endures for the Chinese poet despite its difficulty, heartache, and grief, and that the aesthetics of emotion is central to the configuration of a Chinese subliminal poetics.

Text: All readings are in English translations and will be made available at a secure website.

Reference books:

Zong-qi Cai, ed., *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*, Columbia University Press, 2007.

Burton Watson, trans. and ed, *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century*, Columbia University Press, 1987.

Jonathan Chaves, trans., *The Columbia Book of Later Chinese Poetry: Yuan, Ming, and Ch'ing Dynasties (1279–1911)*, Columbia University Press, 1988.

Schedule:

Week 1

Lecture Theme: The First Sighting

Keywords: Surprise in Encountering the Other, Women in Nature, the Poetics of Things (wu jing 物境)

Reading: poems from *The Classic of Poetry* (1046–771 BCE), by Xie Lingyun (385-433; “Exchange of Verse on the Stream”), by Zhang Hua (232-300; “A Love Poem”), by Li Bai (701-762; “River Merchant’s Wife” translated by Ezra Pound), by Li Yu (937-978; “Tune: Joy at the Meeting—Without a word”), and by Su Shi (1036-1101; “Tune: Butterflies in Love with Flowers—Red blossoms fade”).

Week 2

Lecture Theme: Romancing the Heart

Keywords: Beauty in Signs and Figures, the Union of Ying-Yang, the Poetics of Emotions (qing jing 情境)

Reading: poems from *Yuefu* (songs of the Music Bureau from the Han Dynasty; “Oh, By Heaven”), by Li Yi (748-827; “A Song of the Southern River”), by Li Zhiyi (1038-1117; “Tune: The Fortune-teller Song”), and by Liu Yong (ca. 984-1053; “Tune: Bells Ringing in the Rain”).

Week 3

Lecture Theme: Heavenly Pleasure

Keywords: Moralizing Pleasure, Desire and Neo-Confucianism, Erotic Poetry of the Court

Readings: poems by Zhang Jiuling (673-740; “Thinking of My Dear One Far Away While Watching the Moon”), by Li Longji (685-762; “Written on the Portrait of Meifei, the Imperial Concubine”), by Li Bai (701-762; “The Night Sorrow”), and by Li Shangyin (ca. 813-858; “A Letter to the North on a Rainy Night” or “Souvenirs” trans. by Herbert A. Giles), by Tu Xunhe (846-907; “A Sing in the Spring Palace”), and Su Shi (1096-1101; “Spring Evening”).
[Love, Nostalgia, Melancholy]

Week 4:

Lecture Theme: Longing in Parting

Keywords: Life in Constant Parting, the Lure of Unfulfilled Desires, the Poetics of the Realm (yi jing 意境)

Readings: poems from *Gushi* (19 poems in the old style from the Han Dynasty; “The Beautiful Toilet” trans. by Ezra Pound), by Du Fu (712-770; “Lament of the New Wife”), by Su Shi (1036-1102; “A Dream of My Deceased Wife—To the tune of Riverside Town”), Li Qingzhao (1084-ca. 1155; “Tune: Slow, Slow Song”), and by Li Guan (1049-1100; “Tune: Immortal at the Magpie Bridge”).

Week 5:

Lecture Theme: Regret for Loss

Keywords: Prohibited Love, Romance as Nostalgia, Love at Last Sight

Readings: poems by Bai Juyi (772-846; “Song of Everlasting Sorrow” trans. by Stephen Owen), by Lu You (1125-1210; “Tune: Phoenix Hairpin”), by Tang Wan (1128- ca.1156; “Tune: Phoenix Hairpin”), and by Dai Wangshu (1905-1950; “Rainy Alley”).