A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHINESE POETRY: CLASSICAL TO CONTEMPORARY

Title: A Brief History of Chinese Poetry: Classical to Contemporary
Author: Phil Smith
School: PS 41M
Subject Area: Art/Poetry
Grade Level: 6-8
Time Required: Two 50-minute periods
**Standards:**

**Standard 1: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.** As listeners and readers, students will collect data, facts, and ideas; discover relationships, concepts, and generalizations; and use knowledge generated from oral, written, and electronically produced texts. As speakers and writers, they will use oral and written language to acquire, interpret, apply, and transmit information.

**Standard 2: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.** Students will read and listen to oral, written, and electronically produced texts and performances, relate texts and performances to their own lives, and develop an understanding of the diverse social, historical, and cultural dimensions the texts and performances represent. As speakers and writers, students will use oral and written language for self-expression and artistic creation.


**Keywords / Vocabulary:**

"Five Classics": “Since the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220BCE) the “Five Classics” refer to a divination manual, the *Classic of Changes*; the oldest anthology of poems, the *Classic of Poetry*; a collection of speeches and decrees, the *Classic of Documents*; a historical chronicle, the *Springs and Autumnns*; and three handbooks of rulers and behavior named together as the Ritual."

**Literati:** “The northern state of Qin established China’s first unified dynasty (221-207 BCE) (The English word “China” comes from Qin.) One key to Qin’s success was its development of a bureaucracy of able scholars granted official positions and forged a bond between written culture and politics that would last until the late 20th century. This group was known as the Literati.”

**Dynastic Era:** A dynasty is a line of hereditary rulers of a country. In the long recorded history of China the following dynasties have been recorded:

- *Xia Dynasty* About 1994 BCE – 1766 BCE
- *Shang Dynasty* 1766 BCE – 1027 BCE
- *Zhou Dynasty* 1122 BCE – 256 BCE plus supplement
- *Qin Dynasty* 221 BCE – 206 BCE
- *Early Han Dynasty* 206 BCE – 9 AD
- *Xin Dynasty* 9 AD – 24 AD
- *Later Han Dynasty* 25 AD – 220 AD
- *Three Kingdoms – Period of Disunion* 220 AD – 280 AD
- *Sui Dynasty* 589 AD – 618 AD
Confucius: Confucius, whose dates are usually reckoned as 551 – 479 B.C., is one of the most influential thinkers in Chinese history. He was the founder of the school of thought called Rujia (Confucianism or, literally, the School of the Literati). It was one of the many original philosophies including Daoism, Legalism, and Mohism that were conceived of to cope with the social instability, political turmoil, and incessant war associated with the Spring and Autumn Period (770 – 476 BC). After suffering from a short period of suppression during the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC), Rujia thinking was established as the official ideology by the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). After more than two thousands years of consistent institutionalization, Rujia thinking has become deeply embedded into almost all aspects of Chinese people’s social and cultural life.

Tiananmen Square: Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, also called the June four Incident in China in order to clarify this from another Tiananmen protest. Since 1978, Deng Xiaoping, late leader of the Communist Party of China, had led a series of economic and political innovations which had led to the gradual success of a market economy and some political liberalization that relaxed the system set up by Mao Zedong (Former Leader). But then some of the students and intellectuals charged that innovations had not gone far enough as the influence of the economic reforms had only affected farmers and factory workers, the incomes of intellectuals lagged far behind those who had benefited from reform policies.

There were a series of demonstrations led by labour activists, students and intellectuals in China on April 15 and June 4, 1989. While the protest lacked an identical cause or leadership, most of the protesters were generally against the economic policies and authoritarian of the ruling of the Chinese Communist Party and expressing calls for democratic reforms in the structure of government. The PRC government then used betrayal as an excuse and in Beijing, and used military force to suppress the demonstrators. The resulting military crack down caused a number of innocent citizens dead or injured. The report on number of deaths and injured ranged from two hundred – three hundred (PRC government) to two thousand – three thousand (Chinese Red Cross).

Following the violence, the government carried out mass arrests of demonstrators and suppressed their supporters and other protests around
China. They also banned foreign journalists from the country to strictly control the Chinese Communist Party in the incident report of the news. Party members have publicly expressed sympathy. Violent suppression of Tiananmen Square protest caused widespread international condemnation of the government of the PRC.

**Misty Poets:** From the Beijing Spring of 1979 until the student uprisings of 1989 a new generation of poets flourished in China. Influenced by contemporary Western poets and modernist imagist techniques the Misty Poets challenged the Maoist artistic ideology of social realism. Their political protest and social commentary manifest itself largely through obscure and hermetic images and metaphors, a practice that resulted in the designation “Misty Poets.”

Their celebration of subjective experience and individuality ushered in a new era of artistic expression. The literary journal *Jintian (Today)* [1978-1980], founded by Bei Dao and Mang Ke, was a nexus around which the Misty Poets congregated. Many of the Misty Poets have been in exile since the massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Some poets of the Misty School include: (most famously) Bei Dao, Yang Lian, Shu Ting, Jiang He, Gu Cheng, Duo Duo, Mang Ke, Chou Ping, Xi Chuan, Zhang Zhen, Tang Yaping, Fei Ye, Bei Ling, and Ha Jin.
Essential Question(s):

1. How has the place of poetry in Chinese cultural, spiritual and political realms changed from Classical times to Contemporary times?
2. What may have caused these changes?
3. How did Confucius see the purpose of literature and poetry?
4. What were the 5 Classics (jing)?
5. In which dynasty were the “5 Classics” designated?
6. What were the 5 types of Classical Poetry?
7. Who were the Literati?
8. Who were the leading poets of the Dynastic Era?
9. Who are the leading contemporary poets and how have their form and purpose changed from the Classical times?
10. How did the Communists view the purpose of poetry?
11. What was poetry’s role in creating the atmosphere that culminated in the Tianamen Square Massacre?

Learning Objectives / Goals / Aims:

The main goal of this lesson is to show how art and poetry (expression) in all its forms is a powerful, living organism that changes, vibrates, bends and fluctuates between then and now (the past and present) and nowhere is this more evident than in the form and purpose of poetry in China’s long documented history.
Introduction: Chinese poetry can be divided into three main periods: the early period, characterized by folk songs in simple, repetitive forms; the classical period from the Han Dynasty to the fall of the Qing Dynasty, in which a number of different forms were developed; and the modern period of Westernized free verse.

Early poetry The Shi Jing (literally “Classic of Poetry”, also called “Book of Songs”) was the first major collection of Chinese poems, collecting both aristocratic poems (Odes) and more rustic poetry, probably derived from folk songs (Songs). A second, more lyrical and romantic anthology was the Chu Ci (Songs of Chu), made up primarily of poems ascribed to the semi-legendary Qu Yuan (ca. 340-278 B.C.) and his follower Song Yu (fourth century B.C.).

Classical poetry During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220), the Chu lyrics evolved into the fu, a poem usually in rhymed verse except for introductory and concluding passages that are in prose, often in the form of questions and answers; often called a poetical essay (i.e. Robert van Gulik). One of the fine examples of fu is Xi Kang’s Qin Fu, or “Poetical Essay in Praise of the Qin”. From the Han Dynasty onwards, a process similar to the origins of the Shi Jing produced the yue fu poems.

Again, these were song lyrics, including original folk songs, court imitations and versions by known poets (the best known of the latter being those of Li Bai).

From the second century AD, the yue fu began to develop into shi or classical poetry- the form which was to dominate Chinese poetry until the modern era. These poems have five or seven character lines, with a caesura before the last three characters of each line. They are divided into the original gushi (old poems) and jintishi, a stricter form developed in the Tang dynasty with rules governing tone patterns and the structure of the content. The greatest writers of gushi and jintishi are often held to be Li Bai and Du Fu respectively.

Towards the end of the Tang dynasty, the ci lyric became more popular. Most closely associated with the Song dynasty, ci most often expressed feelings of desire, often in an adopted persona, but the greatest exponents of the form (such as Li Houzhu and Su Shi) used it to address a wide range of topics.

As the ci gradually became more literary and artificial after Song times, the san qu, a freer form, based on new popular songs, developed. The use of san qu songs in drama marked an important step in the development of vernacular literature.

Later Classical Poetry After the Song dynasty, both shi poems and lyrics continued to be composed until the end of the imperial period, and to a lesser
extent to this day. However, for a number of reasons, these works have always been less highly regarded than those of the Tang dynasty in particular. Firstly, Chinese literary culture remained in awe of its predecessors: in a self-fulfilling prophecy, writers and readers both expected that new works would not bear comparison with the earlier masters. Secondly, the most common response of these later poets to the tradition which they had inherited was to produce work which was ever more refined and allusive; the resulting poems tend to seem precious or just obscure to modern readers. Thirdly, the increase in population, expansion of literacy, wider dissemination of works through printing and more complete archiving vastly increased the volume of work to consider and made it difficult to identify and properly evaluate those good pieces which were produced. Finally, this period saw the rise of vernacular literature, particularly drama and novels, which increasingly became the main means of cultural expression.

**Modern poetry** Modern Chinese poems (vers libre/free verse) usually do not follow any prescribed pattern. Poetry was revolutionized after the May Fourth Movement when writers try to use vernacular styles closer to what was being spoken rather than previously prescribed forms. Early twentieth-century poets like Xu Zhimo, Guo Moruo and Wen Yiduo sought to break Chinese poetry from past conventions by adopting Western models; for example Xu consciously follows the style of the Romantic poets with end-rhymes.

In the post-revolutionary Communist era, poets like Ai Qing used more liberal running lines and direct diction, which were vastly popular and widely imitated.

In the contemporary poetic scene, the most important and influential poets are the group known as Misty Poets, who use allusion and hermetic references. The most important Misty Poets include Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, Duo Duo, and Yang Lian, all of whom were exiled after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.
LESSON I

1. In this first lesson we will begin our discussion about how art is a living organism that reflects the ideas and culture of a time and a civilization. As time creates new contexts (and texts) and ideas change, the art will reflect these changes. China has a vast recorded history which illustrates this concept of art.

2. We will then hand out this brief overview of the history of Chinese Poetry to read and discuss: Beginning with Shi Jing, translated variously as the Classic of Poetry, the Book of Songs, the Book of Poetry, or the Book of Odes, which is the earliest existing collection of Chinese poems. It comprises 305 poems, some possibly written as early as 1000 BC. Shi Jing contains some of the oldest pieces of Chinese literature. We will discuss how poetry in China has served many purposes beginning with Confucius’ appreciation of the musical qualities of the Classic of Poetry and its powerful place in exemplifying moral virtues. He is quoted to have said “If one does not study poetry, one will be without the means to speak.” There are claims that Confucius edited these poems. Poetry had a very important role in the Chinese world of morality and governing. It was the most revered form of writing. It was not about the individual but a direct reaction to the world and a “vessel of shared emotion”. Poetry was a tool to teach and organize the “way” of life through philosophical reflection combined with emotion. At the fall of the Manchu/Qing Dynasty in 1912 and the dissolution of the civil examination and poetry lost its very high stature in Chinese thought and influence. In exchange came a new class of poets who were now advancing individual, self expression. The revolutionary change in the relationship of man to nature from Classical Chinese poetry to modern Chinese poetry is exemplified by the “New Literature Movement” of 1917 and Shen Yinmo’s poem “Moonlit Night” which reads:

“The frosty wind howls loudly,  
the moon shines brightly.  
I am standing next to a tall tree,  
But I am not leaning on it.”

The relationship to nature is very reminiscent of Classical Poetry but the last line takes a radical turn. In the last line, the speaker affirms his independence from nature while still deferring to its nobility and grandeur.

When the Communists came into power, poetry was relegated to a mere tool of the CCP and had lost its place of literary influence. In time, with the economic and cultural failures of the Cultural revolution under Mao Zedong’s leadership, the now “lower” class literati/students, revolted and led a revolution in poetry which helped precipitate what is now known as the “Tiananmen massacre”. It was the birth of a new class of Western-influenced
poets.

LESSON II

1. Our second lesson will be to look at a few primary sources of Chinese Poetry and introduce the differences in each period of writing.

There are three eras of Chinese poetry: Early Poetry, Classical Poetry, and Modern Poetry.

Early Chinese Poetry

As with other civilizations, the folk songs and stories of early people are the origins of Chinese poetry and other forms of art.

• Examples of poetry from the Early Poetry period are found in the first major collection of Chinese poetry that is called Shi Jing. It is translated “Classic of Poetry” also called the Book of Songs. It contains aristocratic poems, or odes, and poetry from folk songs.
• Another collection of poems is the Chu Ci, or Songs of Chu. These poems are more lyrical, and most of them come from the poets Qu Yuan and Song Yu.

Classical Chinese Poetry

Classical Chinese poetry originated during the Han dynasty from 206 BC to 220 AD.

• Chu lyrics changed and became the fu, which is a poem that rhymes, except for the beginning and ending sections, which are written in prose. These were often in the poetical essay form, which has questions and answers.
• Another new form of poetry was the yue fu. They were song lyrics and folk song lyrics.
• Toward the end of the Han dynasty, the yue fu evolved into shi, which had five or seven lines. This was the dominant form Chinese poetry took until modern times.
• Next came the ci lyric poems, which were new lyrics written to existing melodies.

Modern Chinese Poetry

Modern Chinese poetry has no set pattern or style.
• Poets of this time wanted to break with the traditional forms and adopted some of the Western styles.
• A group of poets named Misty Poets were influential during this time. They used allusion and references that made their writing obscure and hazy.
• Important Misty Poets include: Bei Dao, Duo Duo, Gu Cheng, and Yang Lian. After the crackdown on civilian protests in 1989, they were all exiled.

2. We will then read, compare and discuss two poems from the Classical Period and two “Misty Poets” from the Modern Period.

**Du Fu:**

*Country damaged mountains rivers here*
*City spring grass trees deep*
*Feel moment flower splash tears*
*Regret parting bird startle heart*
*Beacon fires join three months*
*Family letters worth ten thousand metal*
*White head scratch become thin*
*Virtually about to not bear hairpin*

The country is broken, though hills and rivers remain,  
In the city in spring, grass and trees are thick.  
Moved by the moment, a flower’s splashed with tears,  
Mourning parting, a bird startles the heart.  
The beacon fires have joined for three months now,  
Family letters are worth ten thousand pieces.  
I scratch my head, its white hairs growing thinner,  
And barely able now to hold a hairpin.

**Li Bai:**

*Ask me what reason stay green mountain*
*Smile but not answer heart self idle*
*Peach blossom flow water far go*
*Apart have heaven earth in human world*

You ask for what reason I stay on the green mountain,  
I smile, but do not answer, my heart is at leisure.  
Peach blossom is carried far off by flowing water,  
Apart, I have heaven and earth in the human world.

**Duo Duo:**
Dusk
Trailing the sun’s green rays
Once more, in my subtle heart, the symbols are set alight:
Illusions begin moving in and out of the jungle of thought
Riding on the backs of countless stampeding wild beasts
And bathing in the hazy sunset
The golden dust of twilight
All the images attached to my retinas
Are so profound and so rich
As if many strangers
Were slowly walking toward me
From their voices
As if those red and black
Diseased thorns
In the valleys
Were secretly spreading and surrounding me...

Bei Dao
The Boat with a Red Sail
If the ruins of the walls are all about,
how shall I insist
the only road is the one we’re on?
Are you fooled into believing
the streetlights that fill the eyes
come out nightly like stars?
I won’t deceive you anymore,
won’t let your heart, like a trembling maple leaf,
be written all over with lies about Spring.
I can’t comfort you anymore
because, after heaven and earth,
only time witnesses to our existence.
On the beach, where sands are pulverized darkness,
when the spray runs off our eye-lashes,
we see the sea behind it is boundless.
Still, however I want to say,
wait, girl,
wait for the boat with a red sail, that brings the wind.

3. We will then create a word bank from the words in all 4 poems, combining the past and present (Classical and Modern) and then, using these words we will create our own transmutation/poem that will bridge the time and sensibility of each poetic era. The following is an example of such a word bank and a poem written using that word bank:

Word Bank
damaged mountains rivers trees grass deep green regret bird
startle heart beacon fires metal white scratch thin hairpin
smile blossom peach flow water heaven earth human dusk sun
illusions jungle stampeding wild beasts hazy sunset golden dust
retinas strangers voices red and black diseased thorns valleys
secretly spreading red sail boat road street lights stars time spray
trembling maple leaf existence pulverized darkness boundless
lies about Spring wind

THROUGH THE HEART OF BOUNDLESS TIME
(a transmutation of Du Fu, Li Bai, Duo Duo and Bei Dao)
The deep green mountains
are damaged by the diseased thorns
The red and black wind blossoms
Heaven and earth is secretly spreading stars
into the pulverized darkness
The hazy sunset and wild beasts are stampeding
into the sun’s illusions
Existence is a trembling maple leaf of golden dust
Lies about the Spring startle the birds
flying into street lights
The white and black jungle rivers flow
through the heart of boundless Time

Discussion Points / Groups Interaction:
1. What are the similarities and differences in the form and content between the Classical and Modern Chinese poetry. 2. What events and/or philosophies caused the changes in the form and content of Chinese Poetry.

Assessment: Have the students learned and understood how art and literature changes its voice, content and form based on historical events and ideas that ultimately shape the culture of a society? Can the students research and point to events and ideas that have changed the form and content of the poetry written in America?

Closure: Have the students read American poems written in the 18th and 19 centuries and compare them in form and content to poems written in the 20th and 21st centuries. What events or ideas account for these changes?
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