

ENG 201NA

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

Class Outline:

***Review the main
points of Early Chinese
Literature & Thought
as it relates to the
Classic of Poetry***

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

□ POETRY

- - Form: Poetry
 - Genre: Lyrics
 - Country of Origin: China
 - Key Themes: Nature, Agriculture, Politics, Gender, Xing, Religion
 - Summary: Many of the poems consist of three rhyming stanzas of four or six lines with four syllables each. The poems give voice to many different players in Zhou society.

□

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- The Classic of Poetry has been regarded as a central aspect of educational formation and rhetorical instruction since the time of Confucius.
- It has served as the central, foundational model of poetry in China, and, as such it has been tremendously influential in the education of generations of students.

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- However, in the *Analects* (a collection of short literary or philosophical extracts), Confucius places special emphasis on the Classic of Poetry as being essential for education.
- He suggests that ***virtuous action and rhetorical sophistication can be gained through the study of poetry***, and in his wariness of the particular power of poetry ***to shape the moral education*** of the young, Confucius is remarkably similar to Plato.

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- The value of such education through poetry is apparent throughout our selection, particularly in “**She Bore the Folk,**” *which not only contains religious instruction and a story of the origin of agriculture but does so in a beautiful diction that is itself the prayer that it describes:*

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- “We heap the wooden trenchers full, /
wooden trenchers, earthenware platters. /
And as the scent first rises / the high god is
peaceful and glad. / This great odor is
good indeed, / for Lord Millet began the
rite, / and hopefully free from failing or
fault, / it has lasted until now” (66–73).

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- One of the primary manners in which repetition is employed in the Classic of Poetry is in relation to agricultural matters, and in part this represents the repetitive nature of the agrarian (relating to cultivated land or the cultivation of land) cycle.
- In “Peach Tree Soft and Tender,” **the imagery associated with the repeated line in praise of the tree is that of the summer, with “leaves spread thick and full” (10) with “ripening fruit” (6).**

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- In “Plums Are Falling,” however, the autumnal harvest is indicated with the falling plums, and the need to “catch them in the basket” (10).
- These repeated lines, with their varying agricultural and seasonal associations, mirror the cyclical aspect of planting, growing, and harvesting.

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- These associations, moreover, have ritual significance, as rituals themselves are repeated actions and performances, and in unifying the imagery and cause of the ritual, the motion of the poetry itself captures aspects of reproduction and growth.

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- Confucius indicated that poetry should be *didactic*, or *at least morally edifying*, and reading the Classic of Poetry in light of this position raises the difficult question of the degree to which these works are allegorical, political, and religious.
- Such a debate cannot be answered here, but it is important to acknowledge that many of the works in the Classic of Poetry have certain ambiguities that allow for a variety of interpretations.

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- Confucius indicated that poetry should be didactic, or at least morally edifying, and reading the Classic of Poetry in light of this position raises the difficult question of the degree to which these works are allegorical, political, and religious.
- Such a debate cannot be answered here, but it is important to acknowledge that many of the works in the Classic of Poetry have certain ambiguities that allow for a variety of interpretations.

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- In “Fishhawk,” for example, it has been suggested that the work is praising a woman for proper behavior when her husband finds a new love. However, depending upon the degree to which the work is allegorically read, ***it can also be taken to be a condemnation of political tyranny. In such an interpretation, the xing of the watercress being gathered is expressive of the unbound appetite of the tyrant:***
- “Watercress grows here and there, / right and left we gather it” (5–6). *Various other commentaries and analyses of the work abound, ranging from interpreting the poem as a work of praise from a palace lady to her queen to reading the work as an epithalamium (a song or poem celebrating a marriage) .*

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- *Finally, xing is an essential poetic trope and concept in Chinese poetry, and particularly in the Classic of Poetry.*
- **Xing can be described as the pairing or association of images that imaginatively relate to one another, though not necessarily in the strict sense of metaphor or simile.**

**Its use is said to not be apparent to Western students, as this trope has no direct correlative in English literature.*

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- For example, in “Fishhawk,” watercress is associated but not directly compared to the maiden: “Watercress grows here and there, / right and left we gather it. / Gentle maiden, pure and fair, / wanted waking and asleep” (5–8).
- Yet the appetitive sense is conveyed in both cases, *as the watercress is gathered and the woman too is desired.*

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

- Similar instances of xing can be found in many of these poems, with particularly resonant (*tending to reinforce or prolong sounds, especially by synchronous vibration*) occurrences in “Peach Tree Soft and Tender,” “Plums Are Falling,” and “Dead Roe Deer.”

Early Chinese Literature and Thought

□ Conclusion: Reminders

1. Submit your response essay to turnitin by 11:59 pm Friday Evening (12/8/22) *Extra time given since your literary analysis essay is due tonight(12/7/22) by 11:59 pm.*
2. Study, Study, Study! – **Final Exam is on 12/14/22 from 11:10 AM – 2:05 PM**