

Week 13:Poetry

Section 1: Introduction

1. Composing a Poem, Finding a Song

Poetry is important in China's past. It was something every literate person had to do, and could do. And it was the glue that held society, or literate society, together. Writing poems is part of Chinese life. You can find lots of examples on the web where people join together to write poems in ancient style, and regulated verse in modern style. There are more poems in Chinese history than any person can read in a lifetime, and more poets that I can enumerate.

But when I think about it, poetry is not the daily activity of people here in the United States -- even well-educated people. Why would I need a poem? When would I need a poem? When I feel sorry, when I feel regret, when I'm lonely, when I'm heartsick, when I long for someone, when I want to return home, I don't think of poems.

This is what I think. I think here, in this country, I think we think of songs. And we use songs to find the emotion we think we're feeling at the moment. And they speak for us, and they speak to us, and we speak with them. There's a difference, however, in that for poets, every day you have to write a new poem. You can't simply recite the same old song, the one you like. Other people can do that-- they can have poems that are favorites. But if you're writing poems, you always have to be creating a new one.

Now, if songs are our poems, we'd agree that some are vulgar and some refined. Some are cheap and easy. Some are highbrow and deep. And the same thing is true for poems as well. And so perhaps what we have to do in reading a poem from the Tang dynasty, which poems we'll be concerned with mainly today, and poems by two of the greatest poets, Du Fu and Li Bai, maybe what we have to do is, when we read a couplet, to think of the appropriate song.

So when Li Bai says in his poem "To Someone Far Away"-- "When she was here, pretty darling, flowers filled the hall. Now she's gone, pretty darling-- left her bed behind," perhaps we should think of Bill Withers' song "Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone." Now, I'm going to leave the rest of the analogies up to you. But lines from poems can be memorable. They can say, I want you, I need you-- happy birthday, even. Do you love me?

But again, remember, it's not enough just to sing the song. Every day, you have to compose a poem. It's an ongoing social process.

2. What makes a Poem Interesting?

"Let me just give you examples of couplets from poems, and you can think of the emotional valence, and the kind of song you might find that fit that. "Raising my head to watch the moon, laying it down, thoughts of home arise." By Li Bai. From Meng Haoran, "The man may be a promise to come at night. My heart waits alone along the wine-hung path." From Wang Wei, "Don't ever think the favor I had from another could make me forget your kindness in the past.

From Zhang Ji, "I return not only your pearls, but my tears too. I only lament marrying before meeting you." From Wei Yingwu, "I looked for you. I found you not, and turned back home in vein. From one of

the Nineteen Old Poems, "I go out the door and walk alone. To whom can I tell these dark thoughts? I crane my neck, go back in the room, and tears that fall are soaking my gown.

From Wang Anshi on the death of his wife, "It pains me that we will not live out a lifetime's worth of pleasure." Li Bai in the poem, "Bring on the Wine"-- "And never let a goblet of gold face the bright moon empty." To write a poem is to reveal what you care about at this moment, at this place. It's to share something of yourself with others. It's private, and yet it's public. It's individual, yet it's social. And it has an added benefit too, because in poetry, you can say things that would not be easy to say in words in regular conversation. I think the same thing is probably true of songs as well.

Now, we'll be talking today about poems from the Tang dynasty, and the reading of poetry. And one of our goals here is to help you learn how to take a poem that seems very opaque and bland, and rather meaningless, and see that it's filled with emotion, with concern, with dilemmas, with problems-- that it really is speaking to the human condition in a way that crosses centuries and cultures, even though we're reading it in translation.

I'll give you just an example. The example I'm going to give you is from Du Fu. It's called "A Guest Arrives." And we'll be using it as an example later on, when we're trying to show you how to read a poem, and the rules for reading a poem. I'm going to read it to you now. "North of my cottage, south of my cottage, spring waters everywhere. And all that I see are the flocks of gulls coming here day after day. The path through the flowers has never been swept for a visitor. The wicker gate today, for the first time, stands open just for you. The market is far, so for dinner there'll be no wide range of tastes. Our home is poor, and for wine, we have only an older vintage. Are you willing to sit here and drink with the old man living next door? I'll call him over the hedge, and we'll finish the last of the cups."

As I said, we'll be coming back to that poem. And I hope that by the end of the sequence, you'll begin to see why that poem can be interesting. As I said, we plan to introduce to you poetry of the Tang dynasty. That's our primary goal. We want you to learn how to read poems so they no longer seem bland and opaque. And at the same time, we want to put the rise of poetry in a larger historical context. And we want to reflect on what Chinese poetry does that other kinds of writing in the Chinese tradition do not do.

And we want to introduce you to two of the greatest poets, Du Fu and Li Bai, both from the eighth century, during the Tang Dynasty. We want to give you some practice in reading poems by these two great poets, and perhaps also some training in how you might write one yourself.

To do this, we're going to go and talk to Stephen Owen. Stephen is a professor here at Harvard. He is, I think, probably the greatest interpreter of Chinese literature alive today working outside of China-- certainly one of the greatest scholars of Chinese poetry I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. And we'll talk with him and learn more about what poetry is doing in his view.

Section 2: Structure (1)

1. The Structure of Regulated Verse, Looking at "A Guest Arrives"

In this part of the sequence, we're going to show you how a regulated verse poem is structured and how it can be read. We'll be using one poem by Du Fu, "A Guest Comes," which you've already heard earlier in the sequence. And we're going to pause at various moments to give you a chance to answer some questions, to analyze the poem, to annotate it, and so on. So we'll have various steps along the way.

But let's begin with the poem, and I'm going to recite it, and on the screen, you'll see it both in English translation and with the Chinese characters. And the easy question to ask now is, first, how many characters are there in a line? And the second question, which is much more difficult and will involve you spending some time thinking about it, is how are the lines organized? Now, let's begin with the poem.

"A Guest Comes."

North of my cottage, south of my cottage, spring waters everywhere, and all that I see are the flocks of gulls coming here day after day.

The path through the flowers has never yet been swept for a visitor; the wicker gate today for the first stands open just for you.

The market is far, so for dinner there'll be no wide range of tastes, our home is poor, and for wine we have only an older vintage.

Are you willing to sit here and drink with the old man living next door? I'll call him over the hedge, and we'll finish the last of the cups.

2. The Structure of "A Guest Arrives"

Well as you may have figured out to this point, there are seven characters to the line in this poem, and in fact in the regulated verse, your choices are seven characters-- Chinese characters--to the line or five. In this case, we have seven.

The second question we asked was, how are these lines structured in relationship to each other? And what I think you will have seen by now is that they're organized two by two in couplets.

Let's go on to the-- and we'll come back to the importance of those couplets later, but when we talk about the poem, we'll speak in terms of the first couplet, second couplet, third, and fourth. There are eight lines in total.

3. Sound Effect

Let's look now at the sound effects. This is fairly straightforward if you know Chinese. But if you don't, it's a bit of a problem.

There are four tones in Chinese, as you've heard before. And they're classed into two groups. One is what's called a deflected tone. These are the tones which rise and fall-- ma, ma, ma.

And then there's a level tone, what's called the ping tone. The deflected tone was called a ze tone. And the way couplets are organized is that every character in the line is either level or deflected.

And the second line in the couplet should be just the opposite. And you can see the example here where the ze, or deflected tone, is marked by the plus and the level tone is marked by the minus. So for example, one might go, ze, ze, ping, ping, ze, ping, ping, ze, ze, ping, and so on.

Now, tones or poems also have rhymes. But what's the rhyme? In this case, what we want you to do is we want you to look at the Romanization, the spelling of the sound of the Chinese character, and see if you can figure out what the rhyme scheme is for this poem, "A Guest Comes."

4. Rhymes of “A Guest Arrives”

Now I think what you will have seen is that the second line, the fourth line, the sixth line, and the eighth line-- there's the final lines of each couplet-- and the last word, or the last Chinese character, in each one of those lines is rhyming-- so lai, kai, pei, bei, and so on.

Now, pronunciation of Chinese characters today is very different from what it was in the Tang Dynasty 1,300 years ago. In China, Cantonese still maintains some of the final sounds, the final consonants called glottal stops that were common in the Tang Dynasty. So if you really want to understand the rhyme of this poem, we should listen to it in Cantonese. So we can hear that now.

Section 3: Structure (2)

1. The Structure of Language and Parallelism

I hope you heard as she read the poem how those final words rhymed in Cantonese.

Let's turn now to the structure of language within a poem. One of the rules, although rules of course are meant to be broken, is that words are not repeated in a poem. Now this is probably impossible-- almost impossible-- to do in English, but using Chinese characters, it's much easier.

A more important rule is the rule of parallelism. Now the simple way to remember parallelism is to think of yin and yang, and we've talked about that before. Words can be different but semantically parallel. For example, the mountain is high. The valley is low. Mountain and valley, high and low are parallel to each other in those two lines.

But yin and yang actually has a larger function here, because the notion that everything can be divided into parallel sets of twos runs all through painting and poetry and literature. It's the very basis for parallelism. And so when you read the poem, you should start to look for parallelism within a couplet.

So let's read this poem again, and as we read it, I want you to be able to annotate the poem to mark which lines are parallel to which lines. So here we go.

North of my cottage, south of my cottage, spring water everywhere, and all that I see are the flocks of gulls coming here day after day.

The path through the flowers has never yet been swept for a visitor; the wicker gate today for the first stands open just for you.

The market is far, so for dinner there'll be no wide range of tastes. Our home is poor, and for wine and we have only an older vintage.

Are you willing to sit here and drink with the old man living next door? I'll call him over the hedge, and we'll finish the last of the cup.

Now we want you to turn now to that question. Annotate this poem and mark up the lines that are parallel and which couplets contain parallelism. Not all the couplets do.

2. “A Guest Arrives”: The Rules of Parallelism in Regulated Verse

Well what you will have noticed, I think, is that the middle couplets, couplets two and three, have parallel lines, while the first and last, one and four, are free so to speak. Now again, always keep in mind that you will find exceptions to these rules, but one of the reasons this type of poetry is called regulated verse is it has lots of rules. So, couplet one, free, two, parallel, three, parallel, and four is free.

Parallel means that words are in the same position in the two halves of the couplet and that they must be the same syntactically or semantically. Their category, syntactic semantic categories, should be similar. Sometimes the relationships are of similarity-- birds and beasts, for example. Sometimes of opposition-- mountains and valleys. Mountains and rivers could be another opposition.

In this poem in this case, the parts of speech that are parallel and the kinds of words used are of a category even though they may be opposite. That's the flower path, not ever, due to, a guest, swept, wicker gate, today, first, on behalf of you, open. Or as we've translated it, the path through the flowers has never yet been swept for a visitor; the wicker gate today for the first stands open just for you.

Section 4: Structure (3)

1. Progression of Couplets

Let's look now at the progression of couplets within a poem. One of the things that I've always found very useful in reading a poem is to realize that when the poet puts down a word, he's already begun to constrain us, to focus our attention on something. When he says cottage-- north of my cottage, south of my cottage, spring waters everywhere-- he's located us somewhere in space, and he's put us in space but also in time when he talks about spring.

And then he says, all I see are flocks of gulls coming here day after day. He's looking up, but he's also seeing something that has to do with change over time. The gulls are moving, migrating, flocks coming through. So we have time, space, movement, season. And then as if he's making a film, he focuses in on the particular instance. Here he is in his house, in his cottage, with a path and so on.

Now when we talk about the progression of couplets, we're looking at not only the way he builds up this scene, but also the way he sets it up as something that he is responding to. So we can see a couplet as an independent entity, and any couplet to some extent can be an independent entity, but we also have to pay attention to how one couplet relates to the next couplet. And since this is a regulated verse poem, you can figure out there are probably some rules for that.

Now this is not going to be particularly easy, but we think that once you start to discuss this among yourselves, you may come up with some good ideas. So why don't you look at the poem again and see how you would understand the progression of couplets from beginning to end.

2. Two Progression of Couplets

So the progression of couplets-- there are really two major models for the progression of couplets, and you've already seen, now, the first. In this case, couplet one, the first couplet, introduces the themes and images of the poem-- that "north of my cottage, south of my cottage, spring waters everywhere, and all I

see are the flocks of gulls coming here day after day." So he has a cottage. He's somewhere. He has a sense of isolation. And that sense, the issue of isolation, being alone, is something that runs through the poem-- is going to be resolved at the end of the poem.

Couplet two elaborates on the images of couplet one. So the image of the lonely cottage comes through in the second couplet. The path through the flowers has never yet been swept for a visitor-- all alone, isolated. The wicker gate today, for the first time, stands open just for you. Again, that isolation is elaborated on, but it's now going to come to an end. Couplet three is sometimes called "the turn"-- a change in the direction of the poem's development. Perhaps it's going to create a new tension, unexpected tension in the poem. And when it does that, of course, couplets one and two come to be seen in a new light. But sometimes it just muddies the waters-- confuses us a bit about where the poem's going.

So couplet three, "The market is far, so for dinner there'll be no wide range of tastes. Our home is poor, and for wine, we have only an older vintage." So at this point, with this poem, we have this sense, again, of loneliness passing, but not a terribly convivial scene-- impoverished, nothing fancy.

And then couplet four, the response to the dilemma created in couplet three-- how are we going to get food, what's there to eat, how can we celebrate when a guest comes-- with an answer. And the answer may be an equivocation. It may be an escape. But maybe it's an answer. Maybe it satisfies us, maybe it doesn't.

And couplet four, in this case, are you willing to sit here and drink with the old man living next door? What? We have an old man living next door? We didn't know that. It turns out he's not as isolated as he thought. The guest has come. I'll call him over the hedge and we'll finish the last of the cups. And so we're going to have a party after all. It's a nice poem. But there are other kinds of poems you're going to see in a minute that are more demanding, and perhaps more emotionally involved.

There's another kind of progression, a second model for the progression. You can see here the rules of it. And that is, the first couplet sets forth two themes, one in each half, in the first line and the second line. The second couplet elaborates on the first theme from line one. Couplet three elaborates on the second part of the first couplet, line two. And couplet four ties it all together.

Let me give you an example. And this is again from Du Fu, and it's called "Moonlit Night." "The moon tonight in Fuzhou she watches alone from her chamber, while far away, I think lovingly on daughters and sons who do not yet know how to remember Chang'an. In scented fog, her cloud-like hairdo moist, its clear beams, her jade-white arms are cold. When shall we lean in the empty window, moonlit together, in light drying traces of tears?"

I'd like you to think about this poem, not only because it's a good example of the second progression, but also what the poem is saying. It is, to some extent, an erotic poem. It is taking something that is very private, talking about your wife, and making it public. In any case, why don't you go discuss what you think is going on with this poem? But along the way, do identify the way in which the progression of couplets works in this case.

3. Reading Du Fu's "Moonlit Night"

So the way I read the poem is that the first couplet divides into two. The moon tonight in Fuzhou, she watches alone from her chamber. The moon tonight in Fuzhou is where Du Fu is. He is thinking of his wife watching the same moon.

While far away, I think lovingly of daughters and sons-- again, an elaboration of what he's doing-- who do not yet know how to remember Chang'an. So here I am, alone from my family who also are far away from the city.

In scented fog, her cloudlike hairdo moist, in its clear beams, her jade-white arms are cold. Now, we're over there with his wife, she apart from him but watching the same moon, leaning out of the window.

And then couplet 4 tied it all together. When shall we lean in an empty window, moonlit together, its light drying traces of tears?

4. More Selections from Du Fu

Now, we're going to go on with a series of other poems, again by Du Fu. And we'll ask you to read them and to consider how you might interpret each one of these poems now that you've learned something about how to understand the structure of a poem. The first is called "Fall Rains."

"Wind of rain, lurking rain, autumn flurry in turmoil, seas and wastelands circling the Earth share a single cover of cloud. Horses going, oxen coming can no more tell them apart, the muddy Ching and the clear-wave rivers. When again can we distinguish them?"

Fungus grows on the heads of rice. The wheat turns black. From farmers and field hands, no news yet. While here in the city, a measure of rice can be had for your bed roll, agreed without an argument if their values are the same."

From "Unclassified Poems in Qinzhou--" on the frontiers, fall shadows swiftly turn evening. No more can we make out the light of dawn. Rain from eaves streams down curtains in disorder. Clouds from mountains cross low over my wall.

A cormorant peers into a shallow well. Earthworms climb far into the hall. Drearily, horses and carriage pass by. And before my gate, all the plants grow tall.

Another-- "a visible darkness grows up mountain paths. I lodge by river gate high in a study. Frail cloud on cliff edge passing the night, the lonely moon topples amid the waves.

Steady, one after another, a line of cranes in flight. Howling over the kill, wild dogs and wolves. No sleep for me. I worry over battles. I have no strength to write the universe."

And finally, "A View in Spring," one of the most famous poems by Du Fu-- "The state broken, its mountains and rivers remain. The city turned spring, deep with plants and trees. Stirred by the time, flowers sprinkling tears.

Hating parting, birds alarm the heart. Beacon fires stretch through three months. A letter from family is worth \$10,000 cash. I've scratched my white hair ever shorter, pretty much the point where it won't hold a hairpin."

Now, this has been our introduction to reading Chinese poems from the Tang Dynasty. And we hope you'll do more on your own. And we've included some references to sources where you can find wonderful translations of poems, including by Stephen Owen, who's been our guest today. Thank you very much.

Section 5: Professor Stephen Owen on Chinese Poetry

Professor Bol: We're here in the Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard, and we're talking to Steve Owen, a great authority on Chinese literature, and particularly on the poetry of the Tang Dynasty. So let's begin. As

an historian, when I think about literature, I think about it as, in some sense, the way to think about culture. And in the Chinese case, I go back to say, well, we have this notion of wen, of both the notion that there are patterns in the world that we can translate into human affairs, into the ordering of human affairs, to the idea that there are classics, that there are a series of text that accumulate over time. That there is a notion of the civil versus the military, that we can take people who are schooled in culture and who can write and who know the texts and we can entrust them with responsibility for government. So that's sort of an historian's take on why literature, and being literary, and literacy all matter. But in some sense it doesn't help me understand why poetry matters. And so that's why we asked you to come here to help guide us.

Professor Owen: Well, let's think of poetry in a larger sense. Poetry is hearing that in action. This was the promise in the Classic of Poetry-- that there's one thing of knowing history, it's another thing of being there, hearing it, hearing somebody talk about it. And the promise that you could actually make that moment last, make that person last, make that response last-- that's a grand promise. And that you have immediate access to the past-- not mediated, historians' knowledge, but really immediate access, if you read well.

And of course, the famous essay on literature by Cao Pi says, "literary works are the greatest accomplishment in the workings of the state, a splendor that never decays. Glory and pleasure go no further than the body. To extend both of these to all time-- nothing can compare with the unending permanence of a work of literature. It was for this reason that writers of ancient time gave their lives to the ink and the brush"-- and that's a nice phrase. They spent their lives on it, time on it. "And reveal what they thought in their writings. Without recourse to a good historian or dependence on a powerful patron, their reputations have been passed on to posterity on their own force."

Professor Bol: Well, that's a big claim, isn't it?

Professor Owen: It's a huge claim, and it's not always true. But it's a promise that--

Professor Bol: It's a promise but what strikes me about this passage is that it's both political in the first paragraph, but in the second paragraph it says, but you know, it doesn't depend on politics. There's something here that has enduring value beyond what historians think and what politicians do.

Professor Owen: Indeed.

Professor Bol: But if we think of The Book of Odes, the book of poems, as sort of this primal work of literature in Chinese history, it's also, at the same time, isn't it sort of responses to the political order of the day?

Professor Owen: It's responses to the political order of the day. I think that's one thing true about Chinese poetry, that it always contextualizes. But again, it's one thing to know it, another thing to be there and hear it. And as the Classic of Poetry, The Book of Odes says, poetry articulates what's on the mind.

Professor Bol: There's that famous phrase, [shi yan zhi]

Professor Owen: [shi yan zhi] Right, and that's that you actually hear the moment in the poem.

Professor Bol: So are we in a situation that when we're thinking about poetry as self-expression, the individual expressing himself or herself and responding to the moment? Is that it?

Professor Owen: I think that's it, but that subsumes history in itself.

Professor Bol: What do you mean?

Professor Owen: I mean that history gives you the knowledge of. It depends on what can be manipulated, the way you can massage data. But the promise of poetry is, you really reveal when you speak in poetry. You reveal how you really feel about it. You reveal what's there. That's why you don't depend on the good historian.

Professor Bol: Well, but in a sense, when you're saying you reveal what's there, poetry is still-- a poet is interpreting the world, isn't--

Professor Owen: Yeah. A poet's interpreting the world, but can you interpret the world without somebody responding to it?

Professor Bol: OK. Can you give me an example?

Professor Owen: I can give you the way the classical poetry was read. That is, what would we know about what's going on in the domains, how it was, without the persons speaking of the situation?

Professor Bol: So in that sense, the record of poetry is also a kind of reality of its own.

Professor Owen: It is a reality of its own. It's a mediated reality. By that I mean that it's the way an individual sees it, the way an individual responds to it. But what we know of the world is always that.

Professor Bol: Tao Qian comes up as one of the great early poets in Chinese history. And also as an example of somebody who's responding to the world in a way that goes through the prism of his own consciousness and personal experience.

Professor Owen: And that's sort of another level of poetry, which is to use poetry in your life.

Professor Bol: OK, so I'm going to read you a Tao Qian poem, and I want you to then tell us how we should read it and how we should think about it. So this is the poem. It goes like this-- "I built a cottage right in the realm of men. Yet there was no noise from wagon and horse. I ask you-- how can this be so? The mind far away, its place becomes remote. I picked a chrysanthemum under the eastern hedge and off in the distance gazed on South Mountain. Mountain vapors glow lovely in twilight, where birds in flight come together and return. I have a sense of some truth in this-- I want to expound it, but have lost the words."

Professor Owen: Well, let's put that in context like a good historian would do. Tao Yuanming served, and he found it made him unhappy. The only legitimate--

Professor Bol: Served, you mean--

Professor Owen: In the government. The only legitimate thing for a person to do for a member of the gentry was to serve in the government. But it made him unhappy. And so he decided to give up his position and go back and take the very risky business of farming. Now, that's a hard decision to make. And much of his poetry is about justifying that choice, reflecting on that choice, reflecting on the world that he himself had chosen. And the poem basically says that-- "I built a cottage in the realm of man." I'm right here in a village. It's noisy outside, but I don't hear any of that. Well you have to hear it not to hear it.

Professor Bol: ask you how can this be so?"

Professor Owen: How can this be so? Because the person creates their own space. And the mind far away, and the place becomes remote. And then "I picked a chrysanthemum under the eastern hedge. And off in the distance gazed on South Mountain." And something's missing there.

Professor Bol: Well, you started out by saying that he had built a cottage right here in the realm of man.

Professor Owen: Yes, and that, suddenly, somehow has disappeared. He looks down, he looks up. He refuses to see that space or does not see that space, even.

Professor Bol: The place becomes remote

Professor Owen: The place becomes remote. And then--

Professor Bol: The mind is far away.

Professor Owen: The mind is far away and the eyes are going off to those mountain vapors, which the sun's hitting, and seeing the birds returning there. And of course, the famous thing-- "I have a sense of truth in this. I want to expound it, but have lost the words." And you catch him gazing, reflecting far away, the mind being far away. So he's created his own world. Now, that's very different than what we were saying about The Book of Odes. But it's a new possibility for poetry. And Tao Yuanming is certainly well over 1,000 years after The Book of Odes. And poetry's taking on new functions and new roles.

Professor Bol: And it's also taking on authorship, it seems to me as well.

Professor Owen: Oh, very much, here. So almost everything in The Book of Odes is anonymous. So it's speaking of a moment in a kind of normative voice. But this is only Tao Yuanming here.

Professor Bol: And everyone would know it was Tao Yuanming

Professor Owen: Everyone would know it was Tao Yuanming. Everyone did know it was Tao Yuanming.

Professor Bol: Do people still read Tao Yuanming today?

Professor Owen: Oh, certainly.

Professor Bol: Because I know in the 11th century we find people reading him, but he's lasting.

Professor Owen: I think it was in a fifth grade Chinese school textbook; they were going over this poem. That's a large audience.

Professor Bol: A very large audience, indeed.

Professor Owen: We were talking about Tao Yuanming. And--

Professor Bol: Tao Qian, Tao Yuanming.

Professor Owen: Tao Yuanming, right. And we can move from that to the way poetry eventually comes to interact with others. So Tao Yuanming is a solitary voice. Then you begin to have individuals speaking to other individuals. A nice example, one of the most famous examples in Tang poetry is a Wang Wei poem which has several names, but its technical name is, "Sending Mr. Yuan On His Way on a Mission to Anxi." Now, Anxi is in the middle of Central Asia. It was not a pleasant place to go on a mission.

Professor Bol: It's way out past-- in fact, going beyond Xinjiang even.

Professor Owen: Way beyond Xinjiang, yes. That's toward the edge of Afghanistan, I think, that's where you're going. And the Tang, when you went on a mission like that, all your friends would go out with you

for the first stage of the journey. You would drink heavily, sleep over and then see the person on his way. This became in the Tang, the equivalent of singing "Auld Lang Syne" on New Year's Eve. Everybody knew. Every time there was a party, you always would sing this poem. "By the walls of Wei City the rain at dawn dampens the light dust, all green around the guest lodge the colors of willows revive. I urge you now to finish just one more cup of wine. Once you go west out Yang Pass, there will be no more old friends."

Professor Bol: Well, at first glance, it seems to me that that's sort of like, yeah, you're going away. Goodbye.

Professor Owen: It does. But what freedom does a person have when he's being sent on a mission? You have to go. Here it is. First he creates the inviting space Wei City is just north of Chang'an-- it's the first stage of the journey. It's a beautiful morning, it's green, and he says, just finish one more cup of wine. So please stay a little longer. That's a freedom you do have. And poetry creates that space of freedom, rather than just saying goodbye. And then the harsh persuasion-- once you go, no more old friends. And so that persuades him that he better stay and have one more cup of wine. It's not a big thing to do. But it's poetry making a small space of freedom in a larger space of un-freedom.

Professor Bol: So in some sense what you've shifted now from is the self-reflective part of Tao Qian to the poetry as actually creating a moment which can be shared with others.

Professor Owen: That's right.

Professor Bol: And in which you speak with others.

Professor Owen: So if we begin with a normative voice in a historical situation in The Book of Odes, and then the poet creating his own private reality in Tao Qian or Tao Yuanming. Here we move to poetry as social action in which poetry is used to create a moment, create a space, and create a relationship.

Professor Bol: Now, Wang Wei was from the Tang Dynasty. And we've talked a bit in this course-- I think we will, or we have already talked about the Tang Dynasty. And the Tang Dynasty as being a cosmopolitan moment in Chinese history, but also as being an aristocratic world with a new aristocratic court culture. And one of the things that happens in Tang was the creation or the establishment of the civil service examination, which, although it wasn't used to really populate the bureaucracy as it was later, it still was a very important way for people who were ambitious. And what's always struck me about that as being strange is that poetry is being tested in the examinations. So we have poetry as social practice and so on. But what's happened by this era to poetry? How integrated has it become in Tang society, or is it really only a court culture practice?

Professor Owen: It certainly began as a core culture practice. And poetry is not introduced into the examination system until the last part of the seventh century, which is the reign of Empress Wu. And what that did was, it opened up at least an imaginary route for people from all over the empire to go and have a hope of getting office. And you know, Lord So-and-so's idiot nephew might very easily find a post, but Lord So-and-so's idiot nephew couldn't write a poem. And so gradually as poetry became institutionalized in the examination system, it became highly desirable for people to take the examinations. It became a form of prestige that even Lord So-and-so's idiot nephew might want to take.

And what it also does is, it creates a world outside the examination. It creates a community of people writing poetry to each other, who've learned to write poetry, who are in the capital hoping to get a position, hoping to pass the examination. And the poetry of that world is very different from the poetry of the court. So gradually the court becomes irrelevant in the world of poetry over the course of the eighth and ninth centuries.

Professor Bol: But I wonder if there's not something that's related, in the sense that in the examinations, the promise is the poem will reveal the man. And in the world of poetry outside of the court and outside of the exams, isn't there still some conviction that poetry is authentic, that the person is being revealed? That you're taking this private self and making it accessible to others?

Professor Owen: Yes, indeed, that's very much the case. And in the examination system, you're testing talent-- that was the assumption. It's less, perhaps, related to individuals revealing the individual self as it is to showing a person's capacity to put the world together, see the world in an imperially sanctioned way with parallels and balances. Outside, it's very much revealing yourself, talking to friends, persuading patrons that you are a worthy and nice person. Sometimes, even, in private situations, revealing how you feel but then circulating that poem among people you know.

Professor Bol: One of the things that we've thought about-- the fact that we're still reading poems by a Wang Wei or a Tao Qian today in some sense makes a poet immortal. Right? There's a point in the third or fourth century where people were taking drugs for immortality. Maybe it worked, maybe it didn't, but they're not alive.

Professor Owen: Well, we don't know that they're alive.

Professor Bol: But we're still reading poems. And so there are two poets from the Tang that seem to be somewhat different, but both very famous. One is Du Fu and one is Li Bai, Li Po. And so I wonder if we could ask you to read at least one poem by each person, but also tell us a little bit about who they are-- let's begin with Du Fu-- and how to read, or just read one of their poems and bring us through it.

Professor Owen: Well, in the case of Du Fu, you have a poet who very self-consciously wrote his life. That is, he was leaving notes in his poems for people who would not understand, perhaps, in the future. He documented his life in an unprecedented way. Of course, he lived through the An Lushan Rebellion, when in fact the capital fell, the emperor was driven into exile, a new emperor replaced him-- a catastrophe for the dynasty. He joined up with a faction which was not favored by the new emperor. He was sent off to a miserable post in between Chang'an and Luoyang, the two capitals. And at one moment, he decided that he had had it. And for reasons we cannot even imagine, he took his family-- his children, his wife-- off to a place called Qinzhou, which was poor, not very green, on the boundary between the Tibetan peoples and the Han peoples.

Professor Bol: As far away as you could go.

Professor Owen: About as far away as you could go on the military routes toward Central Asia. And his poetry style changed then, and I'm going to give you one of the poems he wrote in that period, which is called, "Standing Alone." Now, if the Book of Odes poet talked in a normative voice about the situation, if Tao Yuanming created his own reality, if Wang Wei represents a large body of Tang poetry in which you're writing to others, here's Du Fu very much in a private world-- more private, even, than Tao Yuanming. And it's about a bird of prey and some gulls.

"Beyond the sky, a single bird of prey. Between the riverbanks, a pair of white gulls. Drifting in the wind, ready for the strike, they go back and forth at their ease. And the dew is so heavy on the plants, the threads of spiders still not drawn in. Nature's workings, so close to human affairs. In thousands of sources of care, I stand alone." It's called "Standing Alone."

Now, this scarcely looks like a poem. But if you think of Du Fu's eyes, he sees a bird up there-- bird of prey. It's hovering. The eyes wonder why the bird of prey is hovering. They imagine it's looking down. He looks down and he sees the second line-- "Between river banks, a pair of white gulls." Everybody knows the relationship between the hawk and the gulls-- he never has to say it. What are the gulls doing flying over the river? They're looking down. What are they looking down for? They're looking down to catch fish.

And then his eyes go back up, drifting in the wind, ready for the strike. There's that pause. If you've ever seen a bird of prey strike, there's a moment before it dives. And then he looks down again. They go back and forth at their ease. They're totally oblivious to what's standing behind them.

And then Du Fu's eyes suddenly go down. And they probably go down at the very moment the hawk is going to strike. He sees the dew on the plants. And what else does he see? He sees the threads of spiders-- the spider web-- no doubt with something about to be eaten; not yet drawn in. And then he reflects on this-- nature's workings are close to human affairs. This is what's happening in the human world. If I were Du Fu, I'd turn around and look behind me at this point. "In thousands of sources of care, I stand alone."

Professor Bol: This all of a sudden has become a very frightening poem.

Professor Owen: Oh, yes. It is a very frightening poem. But you have to develop that skill of looking at a Tang poem in a certain way to see how frightening it is.

Professor Bol: So the learners will have a chance to read a number of Du Fu poems and to do more with them and comment on them and try to see into them the way you've been showing us how we could read a poem. But what I liked particularly when you did this was how you went really line by line. So each line creates a theme and builds on top of the other, and so it becomes more complicated as we go on.

Professor Owen: Indeed. And the things you learn to notice, the way a couplet is put together. In a trivial way, a line high is often matched by a line low. But in this case, it's looking up and looking down. And in this case the looking up and looking down takes on meaning, takes on weight.

Professor Bol: Let's turn to Li Bai.

Professor Owen: Oh, Li Bai.

Professor Bol: So who is Li Bai?

Professor Owen: Li Bai. It is suspected that Li Bai might have been partially Turkish.

Professor Bol: Really?

Professor Owen: Yes. But we don't know that.

Professor Bol: Turks in the sense of Central Asian Turks--

Professor Owen: Central Asian Turks, yes, yes. And his father was named Li Ke, which means Li the visitor from somewhere else. I can't imagine--

Professor Bol: Li the guest.

Professor Owen: Li the guest, yeah. I can't imagine any Chinese parent naming their child Ke-- Guest. And this is what's called a Yuefu-- once upon a time a song, but no longer a song, called "Bring in the Ale." This is the kind of poem for which Li Bai was perhaps best known-- these wild drinking songs.

And it begins, "Haven't you seen how the waters of the Yellow River come down from Heaven, rushing in their flow to the sea, never turning back again? Haven't you seen how in bright mirrors of mighty halls they grieve over whitened hair? At dawn, like strands of blue black silk, by twilight turned to snow. For satisfaction in this life, taste pleasure to the limit and never let a Goblet of gold face the bright moon empty. Heaven bred in me talents-- they must be put to use. I toss away a thousand gold, it comes right back to me.

So boil a sheep, butcher an ox, make merry for the while. In one sitting, you must down three hundred cups.

Hey, Master Cen; ho, Danqiu. Bring in the ale and do not stop and I'll sing you a song. I pray you, bend your ears and heed. Bells and cauldrons, fine foods and jade, it's not these that I prize. All I want is to stay dead drunk-- no use to sober up. The sages and worthies of ancient days now all lie silent, and only the greatest drinkers have a fame that lingers on. Once, long ago, the Prince of Chen held a party in Pingle Lodge. A gallon of ale cost ten thousand cash, all the joy and laughter they please. So you, my host, how can you tell me you're short on cash? Go right out, buy us some ale, and I'll do the pouring for you. Then take the dappled horse, take the furs worth a fortune, just call for the boy to take them, and trade them for fine ale. And here, together, we'll melt the sorrows of all eternity."

This is not, even though it's all about enjoy the moment and everything else, it's not Du Fu's darkness.

Professor Bol: No, not at all. But perhaps you could tell us how you want us to read it-- or how you read it.

Professor Owen: I think if you look at the end, that's where you find it. So you, my host, how can you tell me you're short on cash? And this is all a persuasion to have his host go out and spend all his money to get Li Bai drunk. I always like to think of parties as special spaces in society, where all the normal rules of behavior-- they have their own rules, parties have their own rules-- but the usual rules are suspended. And we enjoy that suspension for a brief interval. And Li Bai celebrates that unconventional, telling us, don't worry about this, don't worry about that.

Professor Bol: The ancients are gone, the philosophers aren't speaking.

Professor Owen: They're all dead.

Professor Bol: Right, so in a sense, then, he's almost put himself outside of culture at this moment and outside of history.

Professor Owen: And outside of a certain kind of decorous behavior which was expected. And he can play that role and he was immensely seductive in creating that role. So people loved that space he was creating of freedom, wildness, and rejection of all the usual considerations we're supposed to have.

Professor Bol: So this may not be fair, but with Du Fu, I have a sense that you have to read deeply. Right? And here I have much more sense that it's all on the surface.

Professor Owen: It's really all on the surface. But great poetry can be all on the surface. Yes.

Professor Bol: And the sort of expansive, and going out and touching all these things--

Professor Owen: These moments and--

Professor Bol: Creating these moments and spaces.

Professor Owen: Yeah, and breaking free. If Du Fu is always constrained, Li Bai is always trying to break free. And in some ways creating himself as a sort of eccentric figure, inviting him brings that promise of freedom. So it teaches attention, it teaches relationships, gives you all sorts of fine models. And people not only have written classical poetry throughout the imperial period, they still write it. They still write it a great deal today. It's on the web all over the place.

Professor Bol: We've actually pointed people towards various websites. Although I don't think that automatic translation will--

Professor Owen: No.

Professor Bol: Doesn't get the flavor across?

Professor Owen: No.

Professor Bol: This may be too much of my background intellectual history speaking at this point, but Mencius says, when you read the words, you want to think of the person. To what extent, when we read a poet like a Li Bai or a Du Fu, are we also seeing the world through his eyes at that moment? Is that one of the things that Chinese readers, in the past or present, would've expected, that, oh, now I'm sort of one with Du Fu, one with Li Bai, and I'm seeing the world as he saw it?

Professor Owen: I think very much so, but one of the pleasures of earlier poetry-- and this is true in China and elsewhere-- is you're immensely close, but you can't get there. It's a peculiar pleasure of an immediacy of a different world, but you can never reach across and really belong to it. So it's both closeness and distance at the same time. There're two ways to work with China-- one is to be interested in China, and then be interested in Chinese poetry because you're interested in China. The other way is to be interested in Chinese poetry and be interested in China in order to learn about reading Chinese poetry. That is, I think, one of the interesting issues in literature and the arts in general-- does the general contain the particular or does the particular justify the general?

Professor Bol: I want to extend that further and say, in reading Chinese poetry we're also learning something about reading poetry and thinking about culture.

Professor Owen: Yes.

Professor Bol: Thank you.

Professor Owen: OK.

Section 6: Professor Owen Discussing Poetry with Students

1. A Close Reading of "Stopping by the Temple of Incense Massed"

Professor Owen: We're going, I guess, to look at a Wang Wei poem called "Stopping By the Temple of Incense Massed." And I see some questions you have. One of them is, "Why is the poem called 'Stopping by the Temple'?" And we'll try to get to that question.

Much of the poem you could read on your own. But there are a few things I can add. One is that the function of Buddhism-- Buddhism is both a religion and an institution. And people will go visiting temples constantly. That was what you did when you traveled. That was the local hotel. And it also was what you

did on your day off is you go off to a temple. And you had to say nice things to the monks, and tell them what a beautiful temple they had.

So this poem was written in the context of hundreds and hundreds of other surviving poems, which were written earlier, on visiting temples, and perhaps, having to do with the title. They usually don't call it stopping by.

But the question here is, where is the temple. Because one of these you're supposed to say when you go visiting a temple is, what a wonderful temple you have, praise the buildings, praise the way the buildings lead you to enlightenment, praise, even, the garden, the monk's cell-- all the things you're supposed to say. And of course, the one thing it's missing here is that Wang Wei doesn't mention the temple, except in one small moment which happens at the middle of the poem. But we'll get to that.

Stopping by-- literally, passing by-- it's a standard word-- informal word-- for dropping by. But strangely literal here. Because he seems to have just passed by it without noticing it.

And one other thing I can tell you is there is a real temple. There was a real temple on Mt. Zhongnan, out of the Qinling range, south of Chang'an. And he starts off by saying-- and I tried to find some way around this problem-- in Chinese, [bu zhi xiang ji si]. You can't tell whether, in fact, he didn't know that there was a temple or he didn't know where the temple was.

When he finds the temple's name, of course-- Incense Massed, heaps of incense-- which is when you have-- in a temple-- of course, you have all the incense burners going. And you can imagine-- do you know the most common form for a Chinese incense burner in this period? Have you ever seen them in the museum? It's a mountain--

Ren Wei: Mountain, yeah.

Professor Owen: --with little slits in the side so that you have clouds of incense rising out over the mountain.

And my goodness, for several miles, or li, I went into the cloudy peaks so that the landscape, which contains the temple whose location he doesn't know, it also strangely echoes the name of the temple itself. So not knowing where it is, he goes off into the mountains, climbing, going up. But he doesn't find any temple. You have ancient trees.

And then, people are asking about the difference between the Chinese and the English. Here's something you can do in Chinese you can't do in English. No person path-- you don't know if there are no paths for people, but there are paths for animals, or there are paths with no one on them. All of this sort of hangs ambiguously in the Chinese.

And then, all of a sudden, what comes next?

Meghan: A bell.

Professor Owen: A bell. And the bell tells you, there is a temple here. So he's climbing into the landscape. All of a sudden, he hears a bell. But if you've ever heard sounds like this in mountains, because of the nature of the mountain, you don't know where it's coming from. So there's this presence of the Buddhist temple somewhere in the mountain. But you don't know where. You can't find the temple.

And temple bells were often used as figures of Buddhist truth, or the transience of sensuous experience. Because the bell sound starts, but you never quite know when it ends. It's literally, in Chinese, "kong"-- "void." It has no substance, no boundaries. It just attenuates.

Now I've been starting you off. But what happens in the third couplet? In Chinese, the third couplet is often called a "zhuan"-- a turn-- where the poem turns. What's changing here?

Xiaodi: I feel that he was no longer looking for a temple. He started to enjoy the moment.

Professor Owen: That's basic-- when you hear the bell, something changes and happens. Which way has he been going up to this point?

Meghan: Going up the mountain.

Professor Owen: And what direction are things going here?

Meghan: Downstream.

Professor Owen: Down, yeah. And Wang Wei would never miss an up-down, right. So the poem turns, and quite literally seems to-- when you hit that sound of the bell-- seems to start going downhill, in a good sense, following things.

So you have the stream-- rushing water going down with stones in the middle. And someone asked about the next line. The Sun's color is probably made cold by green pines. So all the things that were struggling upward, suddenly, are moving downward. All things that were hot-- summer sun-- all of a sudden become made cold in this place. So there may no building here, but the things that are associated with Buddhism are beginning to happen in the landscape itself.

And just to finish going over the poem in a beginning way, where does the poem end up?

Meghan: Some sort of pool of water.

Professor Owen: Uh-huh. When you just see you've had these scenes of water going anywhere before. So all of a sudden, as the water rushes down the hill, it comes to a pooling. And it's the end of the day. Somehow, he's been doing this all day long, struggling up, then following the way down, coming at last to a pool, which is empty.

Strong Buddhist associations. But it's not just that. Really, there's no water plants clogging it up. It's, of course, a reflective surface.

And then, someone asked about Chan Buddhism. Yes, Chan Buddhism had started now. But it wasn't really a fully developed sect. When you say "Chan," you usually mean meditation. Dhyana-- Chan is basically the school of Dhyana.

So he's sitting in the [anchan], the fixed, meditative pose. And what's he doing? He's controlling the dragon of the passions, the poison dragon that Buddhism speaks of, that lives in all of us. But he hasn't banished them. He hasn't gotten rid of them. He's controlling them.

So you have to imagine that image at the end of, in the growing darkness, the poet sitting cross-legged, perhaps, beside the pool, reflected in the flat surface of the pool. And of course, where do dragons live?

Xiaodi: In his heart.

Professor Owen: Hmm?

Xiaodi: In his heart.

Professor Owen: That's one place they live. But where do the other dragons live?

Chris: In the water.

Professor Owen: In the water. So you have this strange image of this absolutely flat, still surface, of the poet sitting in the growing darkness beside a pool. Underneath the water, of course, they may be a dragon. And inside the heart-- mirrored heart-- is also a dragon, which is being held in absolute stillness. And this is not the Buddhism you expect. Because usually, the Buddhism you'd expect would be to have an absence of passions.

But this is a second kind of stillness. There're two kinds of stillness. There's one where nothing is happening. And there's the two forces, going equal, held absolutely still. And that's what he's doing. He's controlling the dragon.

So you asked if-- I think there were several interesting questions. "Is this just a descriptive poem?"

Well, it is a descriptive poem. But it's a descriptive poem which does what poems of visiting temples often do. They describe the process of the way in which being there leads you from illusions about religion to enlightenment. And so the physical temple is not there. But the landscape does exactly the same thing a temple is supposed to do.

Now I could say more. But I should open questions to you.

2. Professor Owen Exploring the Visual Aspects of Chinese Poetry

Jason: Is there a reason why they never reveal the temple instead of revealing the physical temple using landscape to bring out that gruesome idea?

Professor Owen: It's very clear that's why it looks like a landscape poem, because landscape replaces the temple. Nature replaces the physical, the artifice of the buildings. Even though the temple space, these are probably the temple grounds, right? It does exactly the same thing the temple should do.

Ren Wei: It's kind of like a landscape painting, where you have all these mountains and then you have these finial, a little bit of finial hidden behind the bushes and the high mountains in the landscape painting. You sort of knew. You see the steps going up, going somewhere. But you don't actually see the architecture of the building.

Professor Owen: Yeah. And here the architecture's all hidden. You know it's supposed to be there, so you're going to--

Ren Wei: And here's the bell, because you can--

Professor Owen: It's a bell. The one thing is the sound.

Ren Wei: Yeah.

Professor Owen: And a sound which has resonance. Every time you cast a bell, you'd have to have a bell inscription. And every bell inscription will not say exactly the same thing, but it has to make that point. This is to teach you the emptiness of things.

Xiaodi: This reminds me of Tao Yuanming's poem like, [xin yuan di zi pian]. Right? If you have the Buddhism thought in heart, no matter where you are, that's the temple.

Professor Owen: Well, probably for Tao Yuanming it wouldn't be Buddhism, but certainly there's the way, right? That's missing. I guess that's a really good association, because, of course, if you remember how that poem opens, it opens with "I built my cottage in the realm of men, but heard no sound of--" And so then he picks a chrysanthemum and then looks up to the mountain.

But what doesn't he see? He hides the village. He tells us the village is there, but he doesn't see it, right? And then quite literally after that in this Tao Yuanming poem, he looks down and he looks up, but he misses the whole world in between. And here Wang Wei probably did see the physical temple, but is not seeing it, right? He is, you know, erasing it somehow from his vision.

Ren Wei: You have to see it to not see it.

Professor Owen: Yeah, that's the truth of the line. And here he has to name the temple to sort of hide it.

Chris: I feel like with the Tao Yuanming poem, it's a form of escape. He's trying to get way from the realm of men. Whereas here, it's not an escape. You're replacing it.

Professor Owen: Replacing it. Very much so. Your temple grounds do the same service that the building was, and very successfully so.

Chris: I guess what I wanted to ask then is, as a reader of this poem, are we supposed to be participating in the poem as Wang Wei is participating in the landscape? Is this supposed to be inspiring passions in us? Are we--

Professor Owen: Well, certainly It shouldn't be inspiring passions in you.

Chris: Are we supposed to be controlling those passions in the same way he does? If this landscape is supposed to be a temple, should we, as the reader, be walking through that temple and going through the same religious experience?

Professor Owen: When you read it, you're not going through the same religious experience, but you are following his religious experience. It sort of becomes a template for learning to pay attention, right? And part of the way the poetry is transmitted is you read the poem, you're moved by it, you're touched by it, but you learn to pay attention in the same way the poet pays attention.

You learn to think of things, the sequence of things, as meaningful. Otherwise, I walked into the mountains, I heard a bell, I went down the mountain, and I sat by a pool. And that is what it says, but of course it doesn't just say that. It's not heavily symbolic or anything, but it's a process.

Jason: Is there a reason why this discrepancy between using a bell sound and the title of the poem, "Incense?" Like, maybe he could have used smell to--

Professor Owen: Well, when you think of incense here, there's no way around it in English. But incense also resembles smoke, even more than the smell.

Jason: OK.

Professor Owen: So, what you have do have the space of cloudy peaks, right? And so visually it's hard. You can only see close up. And then in that sort of hidden landscape, you hear the bell. Which, I believe, no it's not.

There's one more sound. That's the choking the water over the... You often can see how things are organized so you have the sound and color as a standard. So you have sound and sight.

Xiaodi: It's also making me think about the literati culture in China, because it's really competitive, not many people can get into official positions. But then there's the alternative literati culture, right?

Professor Owen: And in case of Wang Wei, of course, it's quite special because he was a Taiyuan Wang, one of the great clans. This is maybe before literati culture in our common sense, right? This is a world of aristocratic culture. You have Wang Wei from the great family.

His brother was chief minister later on. And he was part of the courts early on. He wrote for the emperor, he wrote for the princes. But he turned away from that world and was fascinated by a quiet world, or the landscape.

Xiaodi: Professor, I was thinking, maybe in later years when the educated men read this poem, it would kind of resonate with them.

Professor Owen: Oh yeah. It would resonate with them. In a very different way, though. You know, Chinese poetry was very enduring. And as it also shaped sensibility, it survived vast changes going on in Chinese society.

And I think I've mentioned to some of you-- one question I received was what is missed from the Chinese-to-English translation. And I think I mentioned the ambiguity of the first line. Chinese can be very ambiguous. And, of course, you notice there's no pronouns here. You don't expect to find pronouns.

But when you say, "Stopping by the Temple of Incense Massed", you often-- unless you indicate otherwise-- mean I stopped by. And then you would read this as a first-person subject going through the experience. But that absence of the pronoun or the absence of certain things makes it easy to reuse lines. So that if you were in the mountains, you might say, and heard a bell, you could recite this line. It would be the same thing.

3. Professor Owen on How to Appreciate and Understand Chinese Poetry

Xiaodi: How do we know if we fully understand a poem or is it, you don't--

Professor Owen: You don't know, I know that you should. But at least when things start to come together. If you look at something and say, my goodness, this poem is one of the Three Hundred Tang Poems. It's taught to every schoolchild-- not every schoolchild, but eventually you'd probably read the Three Hundred Tang Poems. What's so good about it? And then you'd try to realize why it mattered. And you start and you find out new things. Every once in a while I come back to these poems, I learn new things about it that I didn't know. So reading, as in English, is not a, I've got it, that's it, I can now dispose of the poem because I understand it. It's a constant return.

Xiaodi: I think in your previous conversation with Professor Bol, you mentioned poetry creates a moment. And I really see this in this poem. I feel once you are really worried or anxious, then you read this poem you feel it provides a shelter for you.

Professor Owen: It provides an imaginary space, yeah. And if there's a moment, it's the moment of the end. But then of course the end only matters because you've been through what went before. So like water, it starts up what water doesn't do, which is going uphill, but it eventually comes to stillness.

Ren Wei: Later on, Wang Wei especially in the Song was celebrated as sort of the ultimate literati because he also painted, he wrote poetry-- they romanticize his life. And I don't know, it's-- even reading this poem this is a person. This is a person-- Wang Wei. We can get some sense from--

Professor Owen: I think you do get something of that. But remember that all the questions about literati and everything all come through the later reading of Wang Wei and the way the world had changed. So that when they anthologize Wang Wei, they never anthologize the court poems-- hardly ever, maybe one or two, of which he was a master. Most of his poems were lost in the An Lushan Rebellion, so his brother, who was chief minister, gathered together what he could find.

Xiaodi: How can you tell a good poem from a bad poem?

Professor Owen: Oh, that's an interesting question. Sometimes there are poems that other people haven't noticed that you realize are major poems. That happens. And sometimes there are poems that are supposed to be major poems, and I just can't see it. So you develop your own form of judgment, I think. It has to be an educated judgment. You should enjoy the poems you enjoy, and not enjoy the ones you don't enjoy. But you try to hone that judgment. Again, one of the things that provokes you is what has survived in the canon. And also, sometimes, I think, what's been excluded by the canon-- what it was upsetting.

So when I did my dissertation, I wrote on the poet Meng Jiao, who was an extremely ugly poet. You don't find many ugly poets really writing about awful things in China. But I also found out that he was incredibly popular in the Tang. But in the Song, they didn't like him anymore. One critic commented, [shi ren bu huan] he makes people unhappy. So you suddenly realize that in the Tang, poetry wasn't supposed to make you happy. But the Song wanted poetry to make you calm and teach you to behave yourself and be cheerful, make the best of things. So that it's not just the poems that have survived but also the things that have been lost in the history and the development of Chinese civilization.

Meghan: And what did you think Wang Wei did for readers? What did he, convey or express?

Professor Owen: Wang Wei is not a calm poet. The last line of this poem is pure Wang Wei, as Wang Wei achieves stillness and simplicity with great effort. And so there's an energy in Wang Wei which is missing in all the people who wrote, on the surface, very similar poems. And you read those poems and you find they're boring. And you read Wang Wei, you say, for some reason, this is very interesting. And it is, it's that sort of active repression.

Meghan: It almost feels intentional, but almost effortlessly, though--

Professor Owen: Effortlessly intentional, that's--

Meghan: --in its simplicity.

Professor Owen: Yeah. Its simplicity. I think when I wrote a book on high Tang poetry, I entitled a chapter "Wang Wei-- The Artifice of Simplicity." Because it's a simplicity that's hard-won. It's a simplicity that rejects, that refuses to do certain things. And for someone who was from the highest echelons of society, with the best education. So that there's this basic negative aspect of Wang Wei.

Xiaodi: Almost makes it more, like, authentic?

Professor Owen: Yeah, makes it more authentic. Because it's very easy to turn out a very bland poem and say, this is the way. That doesn't work as poetry. It's winning that.

4. Professor Owen Discussing Wang Wei and His Poetry in Historical Context

Jason: Could you tell us more about his personality as a person?

Professor Owen: His personality survives through his poetry. We don't know much about it except that he speaks as a poet. And that's, of course, one of the paradoxes of poetry, that it's not artificial.

But somehow you play certain roles. And that's also the person you want to be. And you become that role. So sometimes he's much more easygoing than this poem, I think. This is a very intense poem in certain ways. But he's trying to create that equanimity, that calm.

Xiaodi: Does his style change over his lifetime?

Professor Owen: Well, it's very hard. I want to try to answer that question with some thoughtfulness here. People say it does. At the same time, when they say it does, they often are dating the poems.

Because that's how he should be writing when he's a young man. And that's how he should be writing into middle age. And that's how he should be writing in old age. So he talks about his development, his transformation.

There's a poem that begins, in my middle years I loved only the Way. Now late in life, I make my home by South Mountains. Well, depending on how you read that, it means I learned to love the way when I was in middle age. But I didn't do anything about it.

I just kept up because I had business to do and take care of. But now, late in life, I finally get to realize that. The poet's personality is more often than not realized through the poem.

Jason: But is that the personality that they want to picture themselves as? Or is it the real personality that's come along? I guess there's no way to--

Professor Owen: People are not born with personalities. Maybe dispositions to personalities. But they develop personalities by playing roles in society.

And the poet is one way to play to it, gradually build a role, which you feel comfortable with. And it can go, for example, I think, when Du Fu was in his last years, he did have contact with people. But he really wasn't writing to other people.

So without the social world around you to stabilize your role, he got very strange. And his poetry got very strange. Because he stopped hearing his poems as other people would hear them. So in some ways, the way you write poetry and send it out to your friends and community fits you into the world.

And, of course, his life was saved because of a poem, Wang Wei's. I didn't tell the story. An Lushan, you may have heard of the An Lushan Rebellion. And when he took Chang'an unexpectedly, to most people, the upper fled by night, and the rebel army was in the capital the next day. And people couldn't escape.

They rounded up all the officials, and they made them go to Luoyang, which was An Lushan's capital, and serve in the government of An Lushan. And many of them were reluctant, but they were forced to do it.

Then the Tang was restored. And all the people of Luoyang were retaken. And all those officials who had been carried off to Luoyang were now back in Tang hands. Some were executed. Some were exiled.

And there was Wang Wei. And it was a poem he'd written. His brother, of course, was chief minister at the time and said, my brother wrote that. We don't know if he really did write the poem, but probably he did, which expressed sadness at being trapped there and his sense of loyalty to the Tang. And, because of that poem and no doubt because he was the brother of the chief minister and Taiyuan Wang, he was forgiven. So literally the poem saved his life.

Xiaodi: The way you tell stories about Du Fu and Wang Wei you can almost do psychoanalysis through the poems to understand who they are?

Professor Owen: I wouldn't want to do psychoanalysis, but I do think that you can say that you can see a lot of the ways in which poetry and society work together. And the world in which you circulate poems is a social act, too. Even poems that look very private are part of circulating in the social world.

People read them, and they think they always want to know you by the poem. The question you were asking. So that it's sort of self-fashioning, I think is the word they often use. But you can't psychoanalyze self-fashioning.

Xiaodi: That's not the right word, but understanding their psychological states?

Professor Owen: Or understanding the person that they see themselves as. And also sometimes the things they reveal while not wanting to reveal. And if you read The Analects, there's a nice thing about look to how it is. That's what they do. Look to what it comes from, what the motives are in doing something.

And the last one, look to that situation in which the person would be comfortable, at peace. And that's not quite a psychological way, but it's a way of thinking of a person's acts and statements and language in terms of not just motives, because motives can hide other things. But knowing the person, what they really want.

Meghan: What I like about the poems that we've read by Wang Wei is that it does feel very private and you don't have other subjects in it. Or you don't feel like it's being given to anyone. But I feel like nature is a way to bring Wang Wei, the identity, to surface. Whenever it's compared with a sound or a smell or against nature, it brings Wang Wei to the subject, to the reader.

Professor Owen: Being a recluse, or leaving the world, is also a social act as defined by society. So it's not that Wang Wei tried to hide his poems. But his image to the world, and also probably his real feelings. I'm not saying this is not a man. But he is the person who is real, touches nature, is at peace in nature. Or at least finds enough peace where he can control the dragon.

Chris: Do we know anything about the composition or the circulation of this particular poem? Because it seems like a very private poem. And yet, here it is. We have it.

Professor Owen: I'm trying to think if this is in any of the Tang anthologies. I might be. I just haven't checked it out. But his collection circulated and was seen to be very popular. And in many ways, he was even more than Li Bai and Du Fu for a long time, the major poet.

Chris: And he had say in terms of that.

Professor Owen: No. No, I think it's usually that they would collect a poet's work after they die. Later on, people start collecting their own works to control their output, what they show the world. But this was after he passed away that his brother both gathered the collection and presented it to the throne.

Xiaodi: Why did Li Bai and Du Fu become so famous? Was it something political?

Professor Owen: No, no. They had a talent that waited. They had unmistakable talent. But they had very different kinds of talent than Wang Wei.

So if you look at the Tang anthologies, either Wang Wei or one of Wang Wei's disciples tends to head several of them. But the last version of a certain kind of anthology up here is in the year 900, right at the end of the Tang. And there the poet Wei Zhuang puts Du Fu first, Li Bai second, and Wang Wei third. Li Bai and Du Fu had been fully accepted as major figures. And Wang Wei, who had always been the first, had been moved down to number three.

Chris: Why did you choose this particular poem?

Professor Owen: I chose this particular poem because it's, one, I wanted to have one with the text and glosses. And, two, I think it's a very good example of a poem that is almost boring in English without going through it and looking at it carefully. So I wanted to use this as my example of teaching regulated first. And a lot of the energy-- and I noticed that's one of the questions, what is the poison dragon doing there? But, of course, if you read the poem, you should know why the poison dragon is there. OK.

5. The Universality of Classical Chinese Poetry

Xiaodi: I want to ask, how does it feel for someone who does not know Chinese to read this poem? What's their impression?

Professor Owen: Well, people can learn to read poetry. So if you come us for training only in English poetry, it's going to sound very flat, like a descriptive poem-- I climbed about, and I went down the mountain, and I sat by a pool. But if you learn to read the Chinese script, or even translation, you can put the pieces together. People learn how to read. So reading is a skill that you develop over time, a way of paying attention, just as reading English poetry is a way of paying attention. It's just a different process of paying attention, noticing different things.

As I was mentioning earlier, you have, of course, the phenomenon that Chinese poetry didn't just belong in China, but was throughout East Asia in people whose language was a radically different language family. English grammar is much closer to Chinese grammar than Japanese or Korean grammar.

Ren Wei: So is it common to have a title for every poem? Or sometimes the titles are added after?

Professor Owen: I think we've used the word title in maybe the wrong way. Sometimes titles are added later. But it's just the occasion, the context, for reading this poem. And of course when you write a scroll, or do a book, you have to have a title to divide one poem from the other. Otherwise you're just reading, since there's no punctuation, no line division, like we have in the English translation.

Ren Wei: And I imagine when he first wrote this poem, he would have written it down in a scroll, or a sheet of paper?

Professor Owen: Probably on a sheet of paper, more likely. Or maybe what they call a strip. But he might have composed it then, he might have composed it later. But he might have composed it in his mind, and then wrote it down.

Xiaodi: This poem sounds really pictoric, like lots of images.

Professor Owen: It's a lot of images, but each of those images is a percept. That's the proper term, right? Something meaning the object of the senses. So if you stop reading them just as images, and read them as a way of seeing, noticing, movement of attention, and body actually, then that changes the poem. It ceases to be just a purely visual thing. It's like one of those horizontal landscape scrolls, which basically walk you through a space. And you go on the scroll, and you roll up one side, and unroll the other. But what seems to be static when you read it in English-- you learn to read it. It's not static. As we did in the early poem we talked about earlier, you saw that.

Xiaodi: How do we learn to read this?

Professor Owen: You learn to read, I think, by sitting around like this, going over poems with somebody that's been reading Chinese poetry a lot, that's read a lot about Chinese poetics. And then the more you do it, you gradually learn to do it, the same way you learn to read English poetry. You don't even need to be a native English speaker. No one is born with the ability to read English poetry. It takes time.

Jason: Would you mind reading it in Chinese for us?

Professor Owen: Yeah, I wish I could. I used to bring the middle Chinese and try to do the reconstruction because what you don't-- for example "ru," to enter, in the second line, is "nip." So I should ideally read it in Cantonese. There's no Cantonese speaker here? OK. Oh my gosh, I can't--

[SPEAKING MANDARIN]

That's reading it in Mandarin. And of course, middle Chinese sounded very, very different from Mandarin. So you often find people expressing how moved they are by the sounds of the poem, and they're Mandarin speakers. And you realize that you can be moved by the sounds. But it's partially the association of sounds developed from a history of reading.

I had some Korean students who were trained in traditional Korean. And Korean pronunciation of Chinese characters is nothing like Chinese or even-- and they would read it with great emotion because they were very familiar with the Chinese poetry. And they learned traditional Korean reading techniques. And so what they did was, it was just very moving, to where they were almost ready to burst into tears.