

## **Part 3: Cosmopolitan Tang: Aristocratic Culture**

### **12: The Unified Empire: Cosmopolitan Tang**

#### **Historical Overview**

Year	Event	
589	Reunification	<p>The Sui defeat of the Southern Dynasties ended the north/south split and the split between the ethnically Han and non-Han dynasties.</p> <p>Like the Qin in its time, this period of reunification, into the first years of the seventh century, sowed the seeds for the cultural and socio-political trends that would come to fruition in the Tang:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strengthening of central control over civil and military authorities.</li><li>• Economic links between N and S that led to the building of the canal.</li><li>• Expansion of the empire into SE and NE Asia</li><li>• Flourishing of Sinicized state Buddhism</li></ul>
630	<a href="#">Tang</a> begins	<p>Amid the military overextension and environmental pressures that fomented the Sui civil war, the NE military became a dominant force. By 630, if I understood the lecture correctly, this force had achieved hegemony.</p> <p>The first century-and-a-half saw a new centralized aristocratic empire. Taxes were reorganized around the equal-field system, centralizing control over land and taxes. Non-Chinese people were integrated into the empire.</p>
755-763	An Lushan rebellion	<p>Expansion into new areas taxed the Tang militia, requiring professional armies to staff the frontier posts. The An Lushan rebellion of 755-763, a frontier military rebellion, wreaked havoc on the dynasty and ushered in the developments we associate with Later Tang (but <i>not</i> the <a href="#">Later Tang Dynasty</a> of 923).</p>
760-918	Later Tang	<p>In this period, the tax system broke down along with relationships with the frontier kingdoms. The government retreated from commerce, opening the way for private enterprise. Among the aristocracy there was a resurgent search in poetry and philosophy for self, state, society, and universe.</p>
874-884	Huang Chao rebellion	<p>A salt merchant who had failed the civil service exams led a bandit army in revolt, executing aristocratic families and collapsing the dynasty. Society devolved into shifting warlords and domains known as the <a href="#">Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms</a>.</p>
907-960	Five Dynasties	<p>China remained fragmented until the Song dynasty reunited the people.</p>

## A Great Tang, A Troubled Tang, A Cosmopolitan Tang



As the Han followed the Qin - a short-lived dynasty that did most of the work of re-unification - so did the Tang follow the Sui to solidify the re-unification of north and south.

Although the Tang is seen as one of the great Chinese dynasties, it was not untroubled. Empress Wu usurped the throne in the late 7th century, the only female ruler in Chinese history. One hundred years later, in 755, the An Lushan rebellion threw the dynasty into chaos.

So why is it considered one of the greatest periods in Chinese history?

- The territorial expansion, making China the hegemon of East Asia?
- The centralized hierarchy?
- The cosmopolitan atmosphere that both gave to and took from the world at large?

What was the Tang system that was so admired?

## The Social-Political Order



Li  
李  
imperial family  
of Tang  
唐



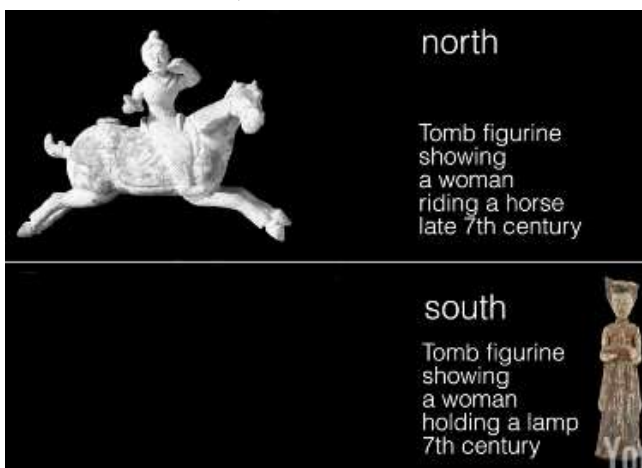
## The Turks

The imperial family was one of the great clans of the northwest, having set themselves apart through intermarriage with tribal peoples. The Li family, the imperial family of Tang, had intermarried with the Turks.



The son of the founder of the dynasty, Li Shimin, lived in the palace grounds in a yurt, trying to speak Turkish. The wife of the Sui founder had the Turkish surname Dugu. There was no sense of xenophobia. What was foreign was simply that which was outside the boundaries, without stigma. Many foreign peoples served within the Tang administration.

## The role of women, North vs. South



Further, women played a larger role in the north and northwest. This was not the case in the south where they were expected to stay at home.



The wife of the Sui founder (she of the Turkish surname Dugu) insisted that the Emperor not have children with any other woman and that she rule alongside him.

Later, Empress Wu, wife of the Tang Emperor Gaozong, held the throne successfully for many years, temporarily renaming the dynasty to the Zhou, harking back to Confucian times (shown in the timeline above).

## Reducing the role of the great clans

The Tang deliberately brought the great clans into government, buying their loyalty by giving them hereditary rights and letting them keep their descendants in power as well. To cut the tie between the clans and their geographical homes, places where whole counties were dominated by a single clan, they changed the administrative rules:

- Reorganized prefectures and counties to divide the lands of the great clans.
- Created the **Rule of Avoidance**, which remains in place today: you may not administer a place where you have relatives. This gave local government independence from the great clans.
- Placed the government in charge of appointment and promotions. The male children of great clans were merely eligible. They couldn't choose their role, nor could they pass office between generations.
- Created a path to office through education.

Still, the prestige of the great clans threatened the prestige of the Emperor's house. In answer, the government ranked the clans by what they done for the dynasty. The higher you served, the higher your ranking, which made the clans dependent upon the dynasty for social prestige.

Lastly, they tried to forbid the top-ranked clans from marrying each other and thus combining their power. Not clear if they succeeded.

The effect was to make the Emperor a *primus inter pares*, a first among equals.

## Discussion: Great Clans of the Modern World

North Thread.

Kudos to RogerJames, NinKenDo, imelve, Keth, Dougma, IgorSv, Mila1969, KipFlur and others. Thank you for generating a lively discussion.

# The Cultural Order

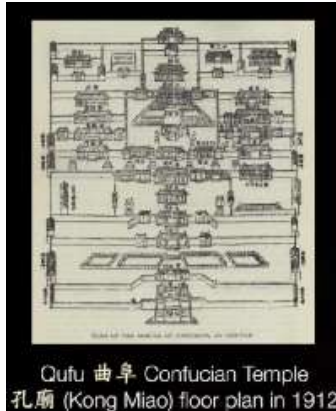
## The Three Teachings

Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism

Think of each one in terms of:

- People and their institutions
- Textual traditions
- Emperor's patronage

### Confucians



These were the scholar-officials with temples in all the counties and prefectures. Some of the temples had schools. They had an imperial academy in the capital. They had religious duties: sacrifices and prayers.

They served in the political, cultural and religious domains.

### Buddhists

Buddhists were not converts from another religion in the Christian sense, where people born into Christian families were baptized and treated as fellow Christians from birth.

Although you could patronize Buddhist temples or monasteries and make donations, the real Buddhists were the monks and nuns, two million of whom were registered according to a government estimate in 589, when the Sui unified the north and south. Most of them lived in the north, in monasteries and nunneries.

They owned land given by the government and local families. Households that belonged to monasteries paid rent to the monasteries but did not pay taxes. There were more Buddhist clergy than there were government officials.

### Daoists



By the sixth century, Daoism had fashioned itself as a religion, with temples and with officiants who could perform ceremonies like Buddhist priests.

Though only one-tenth the numbers of the Buddhists, they laid claim to the surname Li, of the imperial house, as descending from Laozi, the progenitor of Daoism.

## Difference in the Texts

**Confucians** had the Five Classics with commentaries, books of ritual, legal codes. They wrote literary works.

**Buddhists** had scriptures like the Sutra that were translated from Sanskrit<sup>66</sup> to Chinese. They also had Apocrypha, texts purporting to be sutras that had originated in China.

**Daoists** had immortals rather than a founding figure (like Confucius or Buddha). The immortals had given revelations to Daoist masters. These revelations were their text.

<sup>66</sup> The Sanskrit term *sutra* means a line of thread and is related to the English word *suture*.

## Patronage

The Sui had ended pogroms against the Buddhists, allowing them to go their own way. This was balanced with support for the Daoists and with great support for the Confucians.

Confucian scholars wrote histories of previous dynasties, worked on ritual codes, collected literary writings of the past, and wrote commentaries on the classics.

The Tang were patrons to all and beholden to none.

- They set limits on the number of ordained Buddhist monks.
- They urged centralizing temple networks.
- They regulated entrance of Confucian scholars into government.

The emperor presented himself as a Daoist master, Confucian sage, and Buddhist (Chakravartin) King. The three teachings debated in the palace, with the Daoists as the official winners.

They sought unification:

- Confucians unified the commentary of the classics from the north and south.
- Tiantai Buddhism grouped and ranked and unified the different Buddhist sects.
- The Daoist canon collected all the Daoist texts.

## Chang'an, the cosmopolitan capital



In addition to the Confucians, Buddhists and Daoists, the capital city of Chang'an had Manicheans, Nestorian Christians, and Mazdaists (aka Zoroastrians), all shown by the red triangles.

Within its walls, six kilometers to a side, the city held a million people. It was the greatest city in the world and truly cosmopolitan.



## The Economic Order

During the period of division, the economy had become one of barter. Except for the elite, people were barely subsisting. Many farmers were tied to the great estates and monasteries.

### Equitable Field System (Juntianfa)<sup>67</sup>

#### For the Common Man

At the age of 18 medieval Chinese years (17 Gregorian years), the government granted about 23 acres of land to a man, half of which was to be returned at age 60, the rest at death.

The man, who was now essentially the holder of a lifetime, non-transferrable lease, had to pay annual taxes of three bushels of grain and twenty feet of textile, preferably silk, plus 30 days of Corvee labor. Since twenty feet is a lot of silk, the villages would band together to produce large rolls.

#### For the Great Clans

The government granted large pieces of land to the clans as part of their salary while serving in office. But they also gave large estates of as much as 1500 acres to very high officials, estates that included the farmers who tended the land. Since this land could be passed on, a family with a high official was well-off for years.

#### Religious Institutions

Institutions were tax exempt like the lands of the great clans.

### Linking the Southeast Breadbasket with the Northwest Capital



The Sui Dynasty built a canal from Yangzhou to the northwest.<sup>68</sup> (#TravelNote)

A famous scroll, Prosperous Suzhou, ordered by Emperor Qianlong in the Qing dynasty, depicted the path of the Grand Canal through Suzhou. See page 234. To learn how the canal benefitted the South, see page 137.

## The Tang Vision

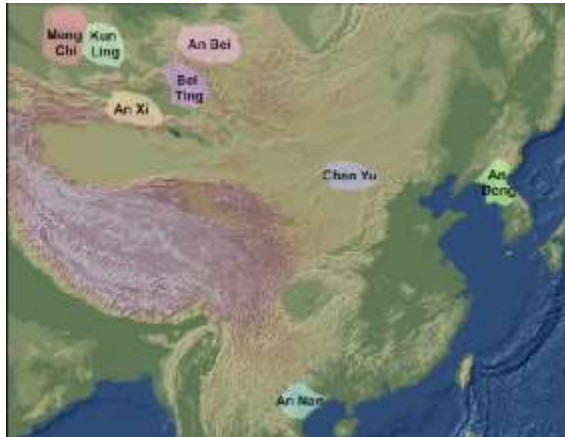
The Tang vision of empire was a unified hierarchy from the top down, of social, political, cultural, and economic power, with the surplus wealth accruing to the government.

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<sup>67</sup> Also known as the Equal Field System, it began in the Northern Wei dynasty in 485 CE and enforced country-wide by the Tang.

<sup>68</sup> From [Wikipedia](#): The Grand Canal (also known as the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal), a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the longest canal or artificial river in the world and a famous tourist destination. Starting at Beijing, it passes through Tianjin and the provinces of Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu and Zhejiang to the city of Hangzhou, linking the Yellow River and Yangtze River. The oldest parts of the canal date back to the 5th century BC, although the various sections were finally combined during the Sui dynasty (581–618 AD).

## The Military Order



**During the Period of Division, military power had become decentralized**, falling under the control of the commander, to the extent that in some northern armies **soldiers were expected to take the commander's surname**, becoming in effect part of his family.<sup>69</sup> These armies did not readily yield to civil authority.

**The Tang responded by creating a militia system** in the strategically important frontier areas, shown at left. A percentage of farmers were relieved of taxes so they could receive military training and then be held in reserve.



As revenue came in, the Tang expanded to the northwest along the Silk Route, establishing hegemony in new territories. To defend its borders it **scrapped the militia system in favor of a standing army**.

The Tang appointed military governors for the frontier armies. Over time as the Empire weakened at its center, these military governors gained independence and increased their power, which would come back to haunt the central beaurocracy.

## Tang as a Luxury Market



Tang was a market for luxury goods to serve the interests of the aristocrats. To dye clothes, they imported indigo from Central Asia, yellow from the Cambodian gamboge tree, red from sappan wood in Java. They chewed cloves from Java, cleaned silks with sandalwood incense from SE Asia, ate pistachios from Iran. The styled their hair in the Persian posi. Dancers from Indochina and Tashkent entertained them.

Though all came to Chang'an, some also came to Canton, a seaport in the south, in Yangzhou at the terminus of the Grand Canal.

**Tang was a market that attracted ambassadors and merchants from around the world.**

<sup>69</sup> Not unlike how the Buddhists used Shi as the surname for monks, page 94.



## Tang as a World Power



The 3,250 miles between Baghdad and Chang'an was contested territory, with Tang the most successful power until the middle of the eighth century.

North: Turkic tribes, led by Khan, broken into Eastern and Western Turks. (yellow oval)

West: The Sassanid Empire of the Persians. (present day Iran, south and east of Baghdad) Worshippers of Ahura Mazda, beginning to adopt Nestorian Christianity.

Also West: Arabs and Islam spreading out of Baghdad, ruled by a Caliph who was supposed to be the successor to the Prophet Muhammad.

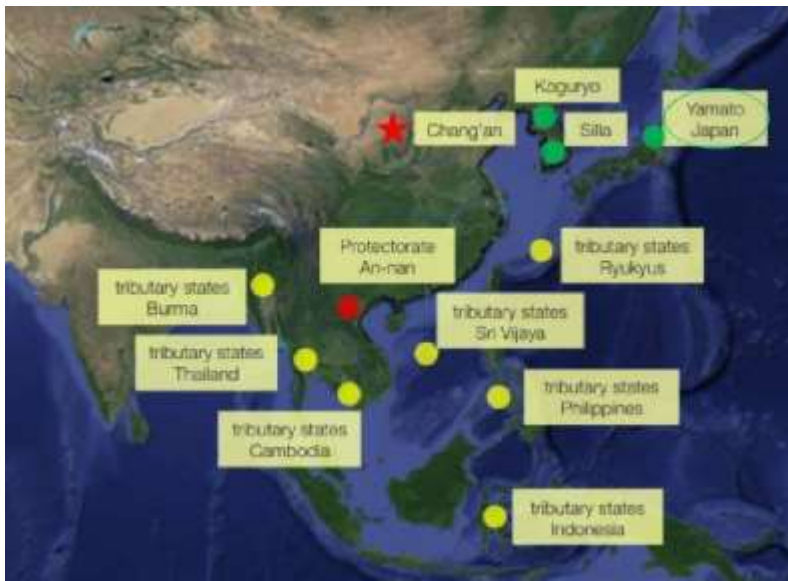
All of these competing for space and control of the trade routes. The Tang was the most successful, its armies establishing garrisons to control large segments of the trade routes.



The Tang forced local rulers to accept their hegemony, establishing protectorates on the eastern end of the Tarim Basin: Anxi, Sogdiana, Turkestan.



In 753, the Tang and Arab armies meet at the Talas River and the Tang was defeated. Though it was more of a symbolic defeat, the armies were pulled back because of domestic issues and the northern peoples increased power at Tang's expense.



Tang was in East Asia as well:

- The Philippines
- Indonesia
- Ryukyu Islands<sup>70</sup>
- Sri Vijaya (now Singapore)
- An-nan (now northern Vietnam)

The Sui had tried three times to conquer Koguryo in Korea. The succeeded once they allied with Shilla, helping Shilla establish a unified kingdom in Korea.

Tang did not invade Japan, where the Yamato State was ruled by an emperor who traced his lineage to the sun god (a practice that continues today).

**Tang brought order to the world it knew.**

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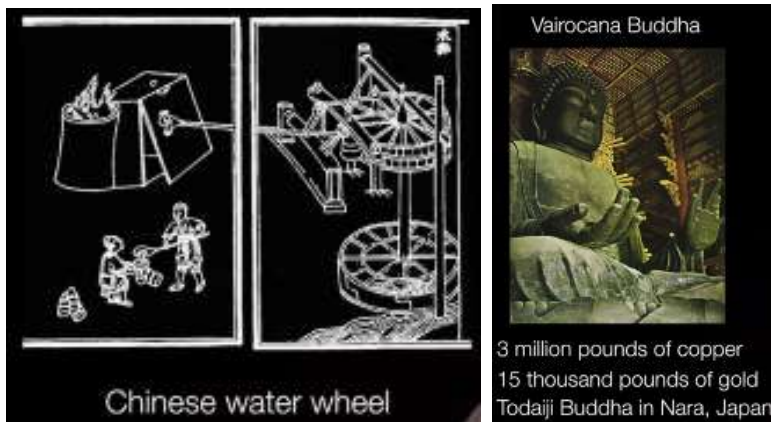
<sup>70</sup> The Ryukyu Islands include Okinawa and are part of modern day Japan. Like the Senkaku Islands, modern day China has been [disputing Japanese sovereignty](#).

## Tang as a Model



People from Korea, Japan, and Vietnam traveled to Tang to find out what modern civilization meant. In contrast, the people of Central and Inner Asia considered Tang a model of power and state-building.

Japan and Korea sent embassies of students, monks, and officials to learn the government and the language, to read the classics and histories, and to learn the technology.



Tang became the foundations of East Asian civilization, crossing the barrier of spoken language. Mahayana Buddhism became the Buddhism of Korea and Japan.

Between 747 and 752 (the mid-eighth century) Japan built the Vairocana Buddha, the largest ever built, of three million pounds of copper and 15,000 pounds of gold.

## Government by Law

Some of the travelers to Tang stayed. Others returned, bringing back the concept of government by law.

The legal system had two parts.

### Tang code

A criminal code defining the crimes and punishments applied everywhere equally.

### Tang statutes

The rules by which government functioned: taxes, rights and responsibilities of the people and the governments.

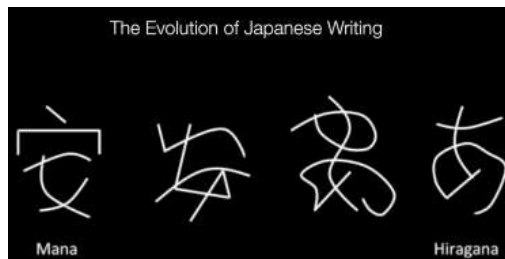
## Government Bureaucracy

The bureaucracy defined:

- the functional divisions of government for revenue, military, public works.
- the meritocracy, of promotion for accomplishment.
- the delegation of power from the top down to the localities
- the hierarchy of prefectures and counties.
- the relationship between state and society, where the aristocracy depended upon the government for land and status.
- the relationship between church and state, where Buddhism was subordinate to the state, even as it was independent, falling outside of taxes.

This tension between subordination and independence came to the fore in the 830's, when the government in its need for revenue demanded that monks and nuns return to lay life and dismantled their temples and melted their statues. Ten years later, the government rebuilt the temples and allowed the monks to return to them.<sup>71</sup>

## Common Written Language



The travelers from Japan and Korea also learned Chinese writing, using it to sound out their own languages. Eventually, they'd create their own syllabaries: the Kana system in Japan and the Hangul system in Korea.<sup>72</sup> But to this day, Chinese characters remain part of written Japanese and Korean.

## Cultural Influence of Tang

Examples of cultural influence:

- Planned cities with streets in a square grid
- Eating with chopsticks
- Drinking tea
- Dressing in silk
- Writing with a brush with ink made of ground pigment
- Paying with coins
- Reading and writing poetry

## Tibet



In the eighth century, Tibet chose to identify with the Buddhism based on the Sanskrit cultural order, separating itself from the Mahayana Buddhism now accepted by China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

<sup>71</sup> For a chronology of the tortuous relationship between church and state, see page 185.

<sup>72</sup> From [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syllabary): A syllabary is a set of written symbols that represent the syllables or (more frequently) moras which make up words. A symbol in a syllabary, called a syllabogram, typically represents an (optional) consonant sound (simple onset) followed by a vowel sound (nucleus)—that is, a CV or V syllable—but other phonographic mappings such as CVC and CV-tone are also found in syllabaries.



# Tang Artifacts

## Lute Player



**Why this subject?** To me (and I'm usually wrong) this seems like an artistic choice, a figure symbolizing music, which has been important and in itself symbolic throughout Chinese history. Confucius makes constant mention of music in the Analects as I believe do many of the Warring States philosophers.

What is the symbolism of the lute player? Here's an essay on the [Lute of the Chinese Lute](#) that I think concerns the Qin dynasty.

**Why this pose?** She looks relaxed, calm and welcoming. An informal pose.

There's a few [other sculptures](#) from the 7th century, also in the Sackler Museum, of female lute players, groups of four, as funerary sculptures (*mingqi*). They're recorded as court musicians.

## Court Lady



*Standing, plump court lady with elaborate coiffure, upturned pointed shoes, hands clasped at waist and concealed in long sleeves.*

**Why this subject?** As a symbol of the Tang court like the male court attendant below?

**Why this pose?** She looks haughty and formal.

Great post from [jerrved](#):

*I have loved the Tang court ladies since first seeing them in the National Palace Museum (#TravelNote) in Taiwan. These well fed ladies represent the wealth of the empire and appear self satisfied standing up so tall in flowing robes and pointed shoes.*

*I particularly love the figures of horses which is appropriate since this is the year of the horse in China. Each figure seems life-like and of individuals. The coloring on the earliest viewed figures is mostly lost, but the later ones show reds and greens that we are told are colors produced by pigments brought from afar through trade.*

*The foreign figures indeed seem foreign in their dress, but the colors with stripes and bright reds and greens are preserved wonderfully. We are told that these people came from foreign lands to learn, to entertain, and perhaps to stay.*

*I have been back to the National Palace Museum again and each time viewing the Tang ladies is a treat. These days a crush of mainland Chinese visitors surrounds the display cases viewing their national treasure, now housed in Taiwan.*

*The technique of producing the Figurines appears to be amazing, and I wonder how they did it. The figurines are hollow for the most part which must have been produced by an elaborate process (see below). Each figurine is beautifully done, demonstrating an artistic ability in 3D that is amazing. As said earlier individuals appear to be depicted suggesting that they posed for the artist and perhaps a system of producing such images that involved the court as well as the artist and craftsmen who made the figurines. I found a reference*

*for the production of Tomb figures.*

[Discussion of Tang Camel and Rider from the Art Institute of Chicago](#) indicates that the figures are made by pressing thin sheets of clay to the inside of a mold, and then when the figure is dry enough to stand on their own removed and details such as facial details and a base added. Further details of glazing and firing are in the reference.



## Equestrian Female



*From the tomb sculpture set: two equestrian figures, one male with a tall elaborately embellished hat, one female with her hair in a topknot, both with pointed boots and hands positioned to hold the reins of their standing, saddled horses. From the first half of the 8th century (~750).*

My thoughts: note the white coloring that remains of the base pigments. These figures were brightly painted. Can still see the red of the lips. The pointed shoes and hairstyle indicate an aristocrat.

Construction looks hollow, from separate castings, assembled. Or hammered. I don't know enough about bronze casting, but I think the expensive techniques of the Shang dynasty are no longer in use.

**Why this subject?** Perhaps she was a special personage, or wife of a high-ranking aristocrat. In ancient China, she might have been killed and buried with her husband. In modern Tang, perhaps the figurine suffices.

## Court Attendant



*Standing, plump male court attendant with pointed shoes and informal headgear, his clenched left hand raised to his chest, his clenched right hand at his side, mid 8th century (~750).*

Why the clenched hands? Is the left hand merely holding the robe?

## Groom



*Standing, bearded, foreign groom wearing boots, pointed hat, tiger-skin trousers. 7th Century.*

**Why this subject?** As a symbol of foreign embassies in the Tang capital? Fancy clothing symbolic of the importance of the foreign visitor, of the styles of the country of origin.

**Why this pose?** His hand is poised as if to hold the reins of a horse and lead it. Perhaps this figure was paired with a horse at one time.

The figure is bearded with bushy eyebrows.

I copied this from a post by **CTaylorPdx**:

*The vivacity of this clay figure caught my eye. I learned that this "Bearded Foreign Groom", about 17" high, is an example of a Mingqi, a ceramic figurine intended for use in the tomb, one of several kinds of tools and objects meant to provide comfort for the deceased.*

*The use of Mingqi became popular during the Han Dynasty. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the figurines became more elaborate, and incorporated influences from outside of China. This Sackler Museum figure has sancai, a three color glaze applied before firing - a technology that was transmitted along the Silk Road. The glaze was hard to control, so some portions of the figure were left unglazed, and were then painted after firing - particularly the lively tiger striped trousers and the top of the hat.*

*Tang Mingqi often depicted foreigners, hence our exotic foreign groom. I learned that this reflects a cosmopolitan society that embraced exchanges with other groups and cultures.*

**BaiFeng** says the prominent nose is much admired by younger Chinese even today.

## Standing Male Foreigner



*Tomb figurine in the form of a standing male foreigner with a falcon perched atop his wrist, first half 8th century (700-750).*

This might have been artwork owned by the deceased, symbolic of his role as ambassador or of the fealty of foreign nations during a time of Tang dominance.

What's the symbolism of the falcon? Perhaps a symbol of foreign aristocrats, of wealth?

## 13: Poetry

### Structure

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



This section will discuss the structure of *A Guest Comes* by Du Fu.

Two questions arise:

1. How many characters comprise a line?
2. How are the lines organized?

The second question is quite a bit tougher than the first.

### 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 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 to him over the hedge, and we'll finish the last of the cups.*

### Structure of Regulated Verse

There are either five or seven Chinese characters to a line in **regulated verse**. Seven, in this case, as can be seen by counting in the image above. The lines are organized two-by-two, in couplets. Eight lines, four couplets.

## Sound Effects<sup>73</sup>



In Chinese, there are four tones, classed into four groups.

**Deflected Tone (ze)** Tones which rise and fall (ma, ma, ma)

**Level Tone (ping)** Doesn't rise and fall?

Every character is either level or deflected and the second line in a couplet should be exactly opposite as shown in the diagram.

Tones and poems can rhyme, but what constitutes a rhyme? To find out, examine the phonetic spelling of the character to discover the rhyme scheme.

## Transliteration of A Guest Comes



This is what I hear when analyzing the sounds:

Last character of every couplet? Yes.

Pronunciation is different today, but Cantonese still maintains the final sounds of final consonants, called *glottal stops*.

<sup>73</sup> This will be a tad difficult to translate into written form. You have to hear the lecture.

## The Structure of Language and Parallelism

One rule gives that words should not be repeated in a poem, a rule that's almost impossible to satisfy in English, but much easier in Chinese.

A more important rule is parallelism. Yin and yang. Different words that are semantically parallel.

*The mountain is high, the valley is low.*

Mountain parallels valley. High parallels low.<sup>74</sup> The notion that everything divides into parallel pairs runs through painting, poetry, and literature, that everything has a yin and a yang. In reading a poem, look immediately for the yin and yang within each couplet.

*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 to him over the hedge, and we'll finish the last of the cups.*

I got the question wrong, but here's my take on why:

*I had felt that north/south and waters (below) and flocks (above) were parallel.*

*Given the answer, it's clear that "never been swept" and "first time stands open" are parallels. Never been swept is discouraging to visitors, like a yard with knee-high grass. Gate stands open is welcoming. Yin and yang.*

*In the second parallelism, "wide range of tastes" is the yang to the narrowness of only having an older vintage*

**The rule is that middle couplets, 2 and 3, are parallel, while the first and last are free.**

蓬	花
(wicker)	(flower)
門	徑
(gate)	(path)
今	不
(today)	(not)
始	曾
(first)	(ever)
為	緣
(on behalf)	(due to)
君	客
(you)	(guest)
開	掃
(open)	(swept)

Parallel means that words are in the same position in the two halves of the couplet and must be syntactically or semantically parallel. Sometimes similar - birds and beasts - and sometimes opposite - mountains and valleys. Or mountains and rivers.

<sup>74</sup> My thought: This example is too simple to be profound, but subtle yet significant metaphors that are semantically parallel, yielding insight or evoking emotion, would be poetic.



## Progression of Couplets

From the first word, the poet constrains and focuses our attention.

*North of my cottage, south of my cottage, spring waters everywhere*

This locates us in space and time.

*Flocks of gulls coming here day after day.*

The gulls are migrating. We're in his cottage. Now we're focused on time, space, movement, season. Once the poet has set up the scene, he responds to the scene, giving the couplet a sense of containment as an independent entity, the scene and the response. My thought: in music this might be the dominant and the tonic within the couplet.

### Discussion of Progression of Couplets in *A Guest Arrives*

*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.*

*It's spring, I'm in my cottage. The gulls are moving, the season is blooming.*

*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.*

*Yet here I stay immobile. Along my path, the flowers are in bloom, yet the path is awry and unready for visitors. I've opened the gate. I'm readying myself for change, for the world to come to me and not to pass me by.*

*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.*

*But I haven't much to offer a visitor. So much in the world. So little here.*

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

*Will you help this old man and his friend finish the last of what I have? Bring something of this wide world with all its change to the unswept confines of my cottage. Before my days are over.*

## Professor Bol's Analysis of Progression

### By Couplets

- |                                     |
|-------------------------------------|
| 1 introduces images and themes 起    |
| 2 elaborates 承                      |
| 3 the "turn" 轉 (zhuan)              |
| 4 a response, solution, or answer 合 |

1. **Introduces Themes and Images.** The first couplet introduces what we can see, where we are, the theme of isolation.

2. **Elaborates.**

3. **The Turn (zhuan).** Change in the direction. Perhaps it muddies the waters.

4. **The response or answer.** There's a man next door. I'm not so lonely after all.

### By Lines

First couplet: line 1 is one theme, line 2 is another.

Second couplet: elaborates on theme 1

Third couplet: elaborates on theme 2

Fourth couplet: ties it all together

### **Moonlit Night by Du Fu**

*Tonight this same moon rises on Fuzhou,  
where she, alone, will watch it with me gone.  
While far away, I think lovingly on daughters and sons,  
too young to know about Chang'an  
In scented fog, her cloudlike hairdo moist,  
In its beams, her jade-white arms are cold.  
When shall we lean in the empty window,  
together in moonlight drying traces of tears.*

Parallelism in middle couplets:

- He remembers a sweet thing; his children don't know how to remember an ugly thing. Parallels the thoughts while contrasting their content.
- She's in fog, her hair in a damp cloud; the moon is clear, her arms sharply white. Parallels the sharpness of the images, contrasting the present is clear, the future is murky?

## Professor Stephen Owen

Professor Bol reiterates several notions concerning Chinese culture:

- *wen*, patterns in the world that translate into human affairs.
- *classics*, a series of texts that accumulate over time.
- *scholar-officials*, people schooled in culture who can write, who know the texts, who can be entrusted with government.

This is the historian's view of why literature is important. But why is poetry important?

Professor Owen replies:



It's one thing to know history, it's another to hear it in the moment and make that moment last. Cao Pi says that:

*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 brush.*

*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.*

The first paragraph makes a political claim and the second paragraph says it doesn't depend on politics.

The Book of Odes says that poetry articulates what's on the mind (*shi yan zhi*), that you hear the moment in the poem. Prof. Owen distinguishes between interpreting the world and responding to it, and that you can't do the first without the second.

## Tao Yuanming (Tao Qian), Drinking Wine #5



Tao Qian, one of the great early poets:

*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.*

Tao Yuanming served in the government and wasn't happy, so he turned to farming. Much of his poetry is about justifying this hard choice. He built a cottage in the realm of man and turned his mind away from the noise and his eyes toward the mountains and the birds, sensing the truth of them, a truth he cannot put in words.

*My thought: this is lovely, to hear something said so many hundreds of years ago that is still a poignant truth today and will probably be true for as long as people build their lives between their own world and the bustling world of humanity.*

### Wang Wei, Sending Mr. Yuan On His Way on a Mission to Anxi

Anxi is way beyond Xinjiang, on the edge of Afghanistan. This poem became like Auld Lang Syne, a popular farewell song.



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.

The poem creates the welcoming space of Wei City, the rain at dawn, the willows, the cup of wine, against the backdrop of the harsh Yang Pass.

### Poetry in the Court

The Tang was a cosmopolitan moment with an aristocratic court. They established the civil service exam<sup>75</sup> as a way for the literate to thrive in government. Poetry was tested in the exam in the last part of the seventh century under Empress Wu. This created a community of people writing poetry, which was different than the poetry of the court, making the court irrelevant in the world of poetry by the eighth and ninth centuries.

The exam was testing talent through poetry. The community was about poetry as a way of unveiling the individual.

### Du Fu - Standing Alone

Du Fu documented his life. He lived through the An Lushan rebellion and joined a faction that was not favored by the new emperor. He took his family to a poor outback place called Qinzhou, near Tibet. His poetry style changed.

If you think of the Book of Odes in its normative voice telling you how to live, of Tao Qian retreating into his own reality, and of Wang Wei representing the large body of self-revealing Tang poetry, now you have Du Fu with his own voice even more private and darker than Tao Qian. (I couldn't find the translation that Prof. Owen was reading, this translation was the [most common on the internet](#)):

A falcon hovers at the edge of the sky.  
Two gulls drift slowly up the river.  
Vulnerable while they ride the wind,  
they coast and glide with ease.  
Dew is heavy on the grass below,  
the spider's web is ready.  
Heaven's ways include the human:  
among a thousand sorrows, I stand alone

Du Fu sees a bird of prey looking down at two gulls while the gulls look down at the fish, while the spider lurks in his web. Each line creates a scene that build on the previous scene. For each couplet, a line high is matched by a line low. Looking up and looking down.

<sup>75</sup> For more on the civil service exam, see page 149. For more on the State vs. the Individual, see page 168.

## Li Bai - Bring in the Ale

Li Bai might have been Central Asian Turkish.



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

Li Bai, an eccentric figure, brings the promise of freedom in poetic expression, telling us not to worry about dead philosophers or culture or history, just buy me a beer and drink.



# 14: Calligraphy

## Introduction - Professor Bai Qianshen



Every literate person wrote every day. That meant grinding ink with water on an ink stone and writing with a brush. So the act of writing engaged literate people in art every day.

The way a person writes, the shape of their brush strokes reveals something of their character. And you can only write in calligraphy after you've studied other people's styles, which means you're studying their character.

In Chinese calligraphy there are different scripts and some calligraphers write in more than one script at a time.

Before the Yuan Dynasty, a calligrapher would master one style in one script, e.g. Su Shi wrote in running script. After the Yuan Dynasty, calligraphers mastered several styles learned from other masters.

## Tools for Writing

### Brush Strokes and Tip Work

When the brush is dry, the hairs are separate and soft. Once dipped, the brush becomes conical. More pressure thickens the stroke. As the brush moves, the tip, or tuft, can become twisted, ruining the stroke. Good calligraphers are constantly adjusting the brush to keep the hairs from twisting.

### Four Treasures of the Study



#### Brush

Stiff tuft made of weasel or rabbit hair and soft tuft of sheep's hair. Smaller characters are written with stiff tufts.

#### Paper

Treated paper is glossy and less absorbent, for writing quickly. Before the Ming dynasty, most papers were treated. After the Ming, untreated papers were used with different results. Papers are made of rattan, bamboo, and straw. The best is sandalwood from Anhui Province.

#### Ink Cake

In ancient times, the literati used ink cake. Grinding ink takes much time. By the 19th century, ready-made ink was available. Ink is made from pine tree soot, placed in a mold, and pounded thousands of times. This creates a dense, hard ink that dissolves without bubbles or noticeable particles.

#### Ink Stone

These come from two places: Guangdon and Shexian in Anhui Province.

## Different Scripts



### Small Regular Script

Used for writing government documents, diaries, letters, and sometimes exams. Formal and careful. Slow and painstaking.



### Tang Poem in Cursive Script

Shorthand, simplified character structure, with many strokes joined together. Smooth, quick, and gracefully artistic, but you can see Professor Bai's precise control of the brush.

## The Character *Heaven* and *Wood* in Different Scripts



The professor wrote these from right to left.

- Seal Script
- Clerical Script
- Regular Script
- Running Script
- Cursive Script

# Creating a Cultural and Political Model Through Calligraphy

## *The Legend of Wang Xizhi - Lecture given by Ren Wei*



In 353, a group of friends held a poetry contest at the Orchid Pavilion. Cups of wine were floated on leaves downstream, and when a cup passed by a reveler, he had to finish the wine and write a poem. If he failed to write, he would drink three more cups.

The Ming dynasty painting by Qian Gu, from 1560, depicts the famous contest.

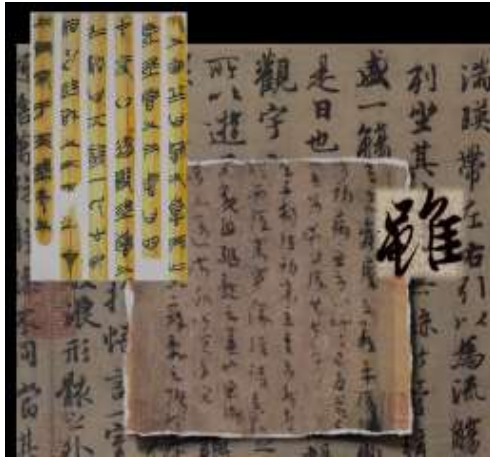


Wang Xizhi wrote the preface for the 37 poems written that day, displaying spontaneity and expressiveness in the composition and brushwork of what is now known as the **Preface of the Orchid Pavilion**, and which children today are still required to memorize.

The calligraphy became so famous that it was covered by seals of emperors and well-known connoisseurs throughout subsequent dynasties. **It is the most famous artwork in Chinese history.**

What makes this work so memorable?

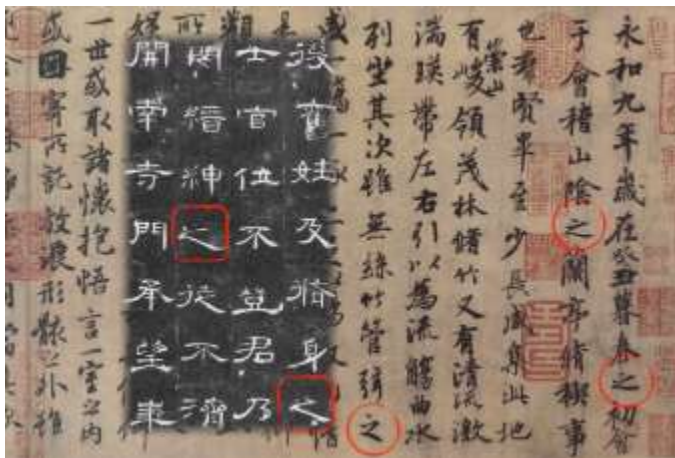
## The Preface Compared to Earlier Writing



The Preface is written in xingshu, the running script, also known as semi-cursive, which became popular in the mid-fourth century. Prior to Wang Xizhi's time, calligraphy still bore the forms imposed by earlier writing on bamboo strips: the compressed harshness of brushstrokes and unsystematic tilting of the characters. Wang Xizhi displayed an expansive style, with systematic mild tilting to the left.

Note that the writing is written and read from top to bottom, right to left.

## The Preface Compared to Clerical Script



Clerical script was the most popular before Wang's time. It was rigid with exaggerated proportions.

The zhi character in clerical script (dark overlay) has the last stroke elongated consistently.

In Wang's *Preface*, the last stroke of the zhi varies with artistic freedom.

## Cultural Divergence - North and South



Although the Tang (and the Sui) unified China, cultural divergence lingered between north and south. In the north, the militant rulers portrayed themselves formally with male attendants at either side. In a painting of the southern Emperor Taizong (bottom), he's shown in public with female attendants. The south was the land of the great clans, with strong cultural ties within a civil government.

The calligraphy reflects these differences as well. Stele was used in northern calligraphy; paper and silk was used in the south, as exemplified by Wang Xizhi (bottom). Wang shows more fluid, graceful and artistic brushstrokes than the formal regularity of the northern rubbing.

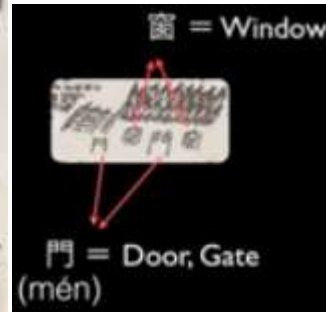




To show his southern allegiance, Emperor Taizong collected over 2000 pieces of Wang's calligraphy and personally composed his biographical entry in the official history of the Jin Dynasty.

Throughout Chinese history, there's a strong relationship between leadership and cultural authority. One of Chairman Mao's poems, in his own calligraphy, is engraved in rock in Hunan.

## Xu Bing and Tradition in a Global World



To reach a worldwide audience, Chinese artists have transformed calligraphy. In *Landscape*, Xu Bing uses Chinese characters as pictorial elements.



His signature is in English, written to look like Chinese characters.

There was a discussion after this, in which I wrote my opinion that *Landscape* is art and not calligraphy. In my opinion, calligraphy has been used as a means of discourse as well as a display of art; it is one of the finest combinations of form and function. Art devoid of literate meaning, however beautiful or clever, does not fit this well-wrought definition.



## 15: Yingying's Story



### An Introduction to Yingying's Story



This is the autobiography of Yingying Zhuan, which takes place during the Tang Dynasty. It's a love story.

The previous module on poetry is important to understanding this story because the love affair is entangled with the way people write to one another. These are members of the highest elite in Tang.

Yingying's family, the Cui family, is one of the great aristocratic clans, the bolding Cuis. They had to flee because of rebellion. Zhang Sheng is an official.

The story becomes famous in Chinese history, attributed to Yuan Zhen, one of the great poets and writers of the 8th century. It's adopted into a play, the Xixiang Ji, *The Romance of the Western Chamber*.

Xixiang Ji is a classic love story: boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, they part, they rejoin, they're married, and it ends happily.

The original Tang story is quite different, but may have had a happy ending from a Tang point of view.



Questions to consider:

- Was Yingying wronged?
- Was Zhang made to suffer? Was he seduced?

Or:

- Did he take advantage of her and dump her in the end?

The fact that its ending unsettled people 100 or 200 years later tells us that it's also a story of an age that was changing.

## First, a synopsis

Zhang was restrained, both with women, as he was a virgin, and with men, as he was composed and temperate. He explained that he felt passion but hadn't met his object of desire. Those who knew him, knew the former to be true.

He took a room at the Temple of Universal Salvation in Pu-zhou and met a widow, Madam Cui. She was a Zheng as was Zhang's mother. They were distantly related.

In the year 800 the troops around the monastery pillaged Pu-zhou, but Zhang arranged for guards to protect Madam Cui. To thank him, she prepared a feast in his honor and ordered her son, Huang-lang, and her daughter, Yingying, to pay their respects. Yingying, a beautiful 17-year-old woman, did so reluctantly and disrespectfully.

Zhang fell in love and told one of the Cui maids, Hong-niang. Later, Hong-niang suggested Zhang ask to marry Yingying. Zhang knew a formal matchmaking would take months which he could not abide. The maid allowed that Yingying loved poetry and could be seduced with well-wrought phrases.

Zhang wrote her a poem, to which she replied with this piece, *The Bright Moon of the Fifteenth*:

*I await the moon on the western porch,  
my door half ajar, facing the breeze.  
Flower shadows stir, brushing the wall-  
I wonder if this is my lover coming.*

Zhang understood the message and on the full moon of April 15th climbed into her quarter and awoke Hong-niang, who brought Yingying. Yingying was stern and reproachful, explaining that she was using their rendezvous to dissuade him from further advances and chided him for misusing her mother's gratitude, even saying that he was as bad as the pillaging troops of Pu-zhou. Zhang left chastened and miserable.

A few nights later, Hong-niang woke him in his room, placed bedding on the floor beside him and left him with Yingying. Yingying was shy but amorous. At daybreak she wept and clung to him until she was finally dragged off by Hong-niang, having not uttered a word all night. After that night, Yingying allowed Zhang to come to her secretly at her "western porch." (hence the title of the play by Xixiang Ji)

Zhang had to leave for Chang-an, visiting Pu-zhou a few months later. Yingying was a skilled writer and stylist, but would not show him her writing, despite Zhang's prompting and his own writing which he freely gave to her. She was as coy with her music. He sneaked in to listen to her playing the harp at night in beautiful melancholy tones, which he knew would stop if she found him listening.

Zhang departed again for Chang-an for the literary exam. She protested primly that he'd seduced her and was now abandoning her. She played the harp for him, but was so distraught that she left abruptly for her mother's house.

Zhang failed the literary exam, but stayed in the capital. A year went by. He wrote to Yingying and sent gifts. She replied that she'd been used and left forlorn while he pursued his studies. She implied that his interest in her is of the moment, amid a life full with the enchantments of the city, while she was abandoned in a tiny village. Having given herself as a maiden, she was no longer fit to marry, but pleaded with him to take her hand.

She sent a jade ring for him to wear as a token of her unending love and begged that he not pine for her. Zhang showed her letter to his friends, callously publicizing their love. A friend, Yang Ju-yuan, wrote a poem, *Miss Cui*.

Yuan Zhen of He-nan, the author of the biography, took up the story with a sixty-line poem, to complete Zhang's *Meeting the Holy One*. He said that Zhang had decided to ignore Yingying's plea, that beauties like her were an irresistible curse and a destroyer of men through history.

A year later, after she and Zhang had both married others, he stopped in her village and asked to see her. She refused, writing instead a poem of her shame to show herself, that her beauty had faded because of her lost love for Zhang. Later she wrote again that she was rejected by him despite her love.

Yuan Zhen ended with a note that Zhang was one to amend his errors, that he knew better but was wrongly carried away by his love.

## What's this story about?

[much of the following are my own thoughts which were posted to the discussion forum.]

I chose *morality*. The story is about normatives, about what Zhang should have done, about how Yingying should have presented herself. About whether they should have shown restraint, whether Yingying should have responded to Zhang's approach and whether he should have approached her at all, through the maid, instead of approaching her mother. It's about patience on behalf of virtue. It's about how Zhang went away and didn't marry Yingying. All of this spells a series of moral choices.

## How is Zhang different from his friends?

Zhang was restrained, both with women, as he was a virgin, and with men, as he was composed and temperate. He explained that he felt passion but hadn't met his object of desire. Those who knew him, knew the former to be true.

As someone said in the discussion, he's always in control.

## What kind of girl is Yingying?

She's unrestrained and disrespectful, alternately coy and resentful; one moment she's direct, the next demur, neither prim nor proper.

## Why does she refuse to talk to Zhang?

She refused to be drawn into conversation specifically because her mother had requested it. She disliked the social debt to her 'elder brother' Zhang, and that this debt had been used to demand her courtesies.

She's disrespectful of authority, particularly of parental authority, which in Chinese society is the height of poor behavior.

### Class Discussion

Prof. Bol says: we need to have the opposite point of view, not that she's resisting her mother. Confucius talks about ritual and ren.

## What is the role of Hong-niang?



She's a facilitator and in a way, Yingying's proxy for impropriety. She's experiencing the romance vicariously, thrilling to the scandal, to her mistress' desire and to the pursuit of Yingying. First she suggests a proper proposal but when that doesn't work for Zhang, which is the first and most important sign of Zhang's immoral behavior, Hong-niang returns with a suggestion that Zhang use poetry to communicate.

She says "you should try to seduce her" and we wonder who is really saying those words. Remember that this is a biography written by a friend of Zhang.

Later, when Yingying refuses to speak except to chide, Hong-niang speaks to encourage, presumably at Yingying's request, something Yingying cannot herself do.

### Did Yingying only write to draw Zhang in to scold him?

Of course not. If you want to properly scold, you do it in daylight without leaving written evidence of improper enticement. The child in Yingying is deliberately shaming Zhang. She accuses her maid of wickedness and Zhang of verbal molestation. Zhang will eventually become angry over this. .

But again, we must remember that it's a story told by a friend of Zhang, so we have an inherently unreliable narrator.

### Class Discussion

*Niang* means girl, but *hong* means people who specialize in bringing people together. The meaning of *hong* likely originated from this story.

Why did she cry that night that she came to him? Because of what she had done, that now, irrevocably, her life as a maiden seeking proper marriage with Zhang was over.

## Why does Yingying's attitude towards Zhang change?

The story tells us that Yingying implores him to "conduct yourself properly and not ... molest people." Some days later she appears in her bedroom "charming in her shyness and melting with desire" with none of the "prim severity she had shown previously."

What are we to take from this? Simply that she wanted Zhang to propose. He would not. So she had no choice but to cease communication or to give herself to him.

Once she had done so, he wrote poetry for her, sixty lines extolling her as the Holy One., a month of their youthful tryst. She wanted to make an honest man of him, but he refused. Fluent with her others, she was stilted in her communication with Zhang.

She fell in love and didn't have the maturity to refuse her feelings to protect herself.

### **Class Discussion: the role of poetry**

- A way to be truthful
- A way to deceive
- Communication of the elite

Writing as mediation. Poetry is regulated verse. A lens by which others can see the world through the eyes of the author.

My thoughts: By withholding her own poetry and music, she withheld the one thing she had not yet given.

### **What kind of person is Zhang now?**

#### **Do you think his views of propriety and passionate desire have changed?**

He shows the letter to his friends to boost their opinion of him, that he has tamed the siren.

*though I receive such exceptional fondness from you, for whom will I now make myself beautiful?*

She is saying they are distant lovers, he will not marry her and has left her behind, so what is the point of all these gifts? She is distraught with love for him a vow she will not relinquish. She admits her youthful error in giving herself to him too soon and begs him to marry her.

*My own virtue is inadequate to triumph over such cursed wickedness, and for this reason I hardened my heart against her."*

Zhang harbors resentment over her ability to entrance him when he wants to retain control over himself. She has the unique ability to steal his self-control, so he steels himself against her. That is his statement.

In truth, perhaps, he cannot marry a sullied woman so he casts her aside and accuses her of wicked sexuality to assuage his conscience and excuse himself in the eyes of others.

He now sees passionate desire as a weapon used against him, a weapon he must fight to keep his propriety.

### **Class Discussion**

Passion is the enemy of ritual. Zhang must abandon his passion in order to serve his country.

*A scholar is the first to suffer the sufferings of the world and the last to take pleasure in its pleasures.*

### **Which ending do you prefer? Why?**

I like the original Tang ending because of Prof. Kirby's quote at the end of the class discussion, that:

*A scholar is the first to suffer the sufferings of the world and the last to take pleasure in its pleasures.*

I'm not sure where the quote originates, but it's emblematic of Confucian restraint and adherence to ritual, a restraint that Zhang and Yingying abandoned in their youth and regained as they grew older.

Whether we think Zhang was self-centered in his pursuit of study, immoral in his abandonment of a woman who loved him and had given herself to him, is irrelevant to the conclusions drawn by Zhang's contemporaries. Even as we might prefer Zhang to pursue romance and 'make an honest woman' of Yingying, that is not how it was seen at the time, and the story is of *that* time and not *our* time.

As much as any part of the story, the justification of the ending as morally correct tells the character of the aristocrats. That's why we must keep it.

### **Who seduced whom?**

Zhang was initially attracted to Yingying. He liked the way she looked and he may have liked her resistance to authority, her flouting of ritual as an antidote to his chaste propriety. He scandalously offered a tryst. She properly refused but at the advice of her maid he pursued her until she gave in to a night of passion. He wrote a poem and pursued her again until she was back in his arms for a month of passion.

And then he left for Chang-an. She may have played coy and enticed him, but ultimately she didn't get what she wanted, which was marriage. If she seduced him, how come he got pleasure without consequence and she ended up alone in Pu-Zhou?

### **How did Tang culture, art and literature influence society at the time?**

My thoughts: I'm going to infer how the premium that Tang society placed on culture and beauty affected the lower classes.

The requirement that officials be literate and well-read in the classics forces them to learn the ethics of the masters. This has a restraining effect on the emperor, as we've seen in prior modules, which benefits the peasant classes.

Tolerance of religion affects the masses, allowing them to practice the religion of their choice.

The equitable field system affected those without the resources to buy land and diminished the power of those who didn't rise in government, despite their aristocratic heritage. Diminishing the power of the clans increased the (however limited) power of the peasants.

The cosmopolitan nature of the Tang encouraged military strength and expansion along the trade routes, which likely contributed to some extent to the standard of living of the peasants.

In the north, women took stronger roles in the aristocracy. We have the statue of the equestrian woman as evidence. While we don't know for a fact how this may have trickled down, a greater tolerance for aristocratic women in more powerful roles will inevitably affect the treatment of peasant women in the villages.

It's all speculation, so I'm interested in what others think.