

Poetry and Ethics Amidst Imperial Collapse

Prof. Luke Bender

Course Description:

How can we live well in periods of instability, when the founding ideas of our civilization come under threat? What does it mean to be ethical in a situation you cannot control? Can bewilderment be a virtue? What role might poetry play in living a good life?

We will explore these questions through the work of Du Fu (712–770), long considered China’s greatest poet. Born into the richest and most powerful empire the world had ever known, Du Fu witnessed the sudden collapse both of the Tang state and of the ideals that had oriented the lives of its elite. In his poetry, he grapples with the problem of how to live a good, ethical life—and what a good, ethical life looks like—when conventional ideas about ethics and politics break down.

Prerequisites:

None. All readings are in English, and no knowledge of Chinese literature or Chinese history is assumed.

Course Objectives:

This course has several goals. First, it invites students to think critically about the genres in which they do their ethical reflection. Second, it develops students’ understanding of the art of Chinese poetry, awareness of the differences between this kind of poetry and the forms with which they may be more familiar, and appreciation of the ways that different kinds of literary texts may reflect and instill different kinds of ethical orientations. And third, it introduces students to Chinese political, ethical, and poetic thought.

The class will also encourage students to practice close-reading. Participants who write poetry may also find in Du Fu inspiration for poetics different from most available in English, and will be given the opportunity to practice hybrid styles and imitations of Du Fu’s work. Students will also gain practice and training in careful analytic writing.

Readings:

Readings will total less than 150 pages per week.

For each week, we will read four different kinds of texts. First, we will read a small selection of Du Fu’s poetry. Second, we will read translations of precedent Chinese philosophy or poetry that sets the terms and genres in which Du Fu’s verse functions. Third, we will read brief selections of William Hung’s biography of the poet. And fourth, we will read one historical or literary critical essay.

The main reading of the course is Du Fu's poetry, so please give particular care to reading the poems selected for each week (and especially those highlighted with an underline). William Hung's biography of Du Fu can be skimmed, and please skip his translations of Du Fu's poems, which are often very loose. Some of the secondary articles are difficult; I will provide introductions that should help you to focus on the theoretical questions developed by these scholars, and to think about how they might apply to Du Fu.

All of the readings for this course, with the exception of William Hung's biography, will be available on the course website. The main text for the course is *The Poetry of Du Fu*, trans. Stephen Owen (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), which is available both as an expensive hardcover and as a free, open access e-book that can be downloaded from <http://www.degruyter.com/viewbooktoc/product/246946>. Supplementary readings will be uploaded to the website. William Hung's biography of Du Fu has recently been reissued in e-book form; you can purchase it at <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674183506>. We will also discuss other ways of accessing this book on the first day of class.

Over the course of the semester, students are welcome to read the entirety of Du Fu's collection, but in class we will only discuss the poems numbered below. Poem numbers that are underlined denote poems we will discuss closely in seminar, so please read these with extra care. I will often provide my own translations of these poems as well, with fuller annotations; please read these alongside (or in preference to) Owen's versions.

Students who have some background in Chinese are invited to purchase David Hawkes' *Little Primer of Tu Fu* (New York: New York Review Books, 2016), which we can set up extra meetings to work through. A student who desires to do so should easily be able to pick up the basics of reading classical Chinese poetry over the course of the semester.

Papers:

For undergraduates, this class will require three papers. The first two will be very short: 4 pages max, and will respond to prompts set by the instructor (if you want to write on another topic, please consult me first). The final paper will be 8 to 10 pages in length, and will be on a subject of your choice.

Graduate students will write one final research paper, of 18–25 pages in length. Please consult me to discuss your topic before Thanksgiving.

Weekly responses:

Besides these essays, students will be asked to submit a *very brief* (one-paragraph) response every week. You can discuss either one of Du Fu's poems or the secondary article for the week. The class will be divided into two halves, with alternating responsibilities: one half will post a new comment (due Tuesday at 5pm), and the other half will post a response (due Wednesday by 11am). We will switch every week.

Students who are interested in writing poetry may choose instead of these responses to compose an

original poem that imitates some aspect of the poetry that we will be reading that week. You can email me these poems directly, or post them on the website if you prefer.

Criteria for Evaluation:

class participation: 25%
weekly writing: 15%
two midterm papers: 15% each
final paper: 30%

Statement to Students on their Academic Integrity

None of the writing you will be asked to do for this course will require you to do research beyond the texts we read in class, and there is thus no need for you to consult texts beyond those mentioned on the syllabus. If you do consult extraneous texts, however, and you find their ideas or words useful for your written assignments, you must cite them appropriately. You may not under any circumstances present anyone else's work, words, or ideas as your own. Please be sure to review Yale's Academic Integrity Policy (<http://yalecollege.yale.edu/new-students/class-2019/academic-information/intro-undergrad-education/academic-honesty>) and the resources for understanding and avoiding plagiarism available at the Center for Teaching and Learning (<http://ctl.yale.edu/writing/using-sources>). If you are ever unsure as to whether a particular example does or does not constitute plagiarism, please consult the instructor first.

Class 1: Introduction

Class 2: Lyric in the Chinese Tradition

Owen: 1.2, 1.11, 1.13, 2.3, 3.12

Background: The "Great Preface" to the *Classic of Odes*

Hung: Introduction, pp. 1–7 and Chapter One, pp. 16–24

Secondary: Stephen Owen, "Transparencies," from *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 54–78

Class 3: The Confucian Background

Owen: 1.35, 2.8, 2.9, 2.13, 2.25, 2.43, 3.26, 3.29–31, 4.1

Background: Selections from the *Analects of Confucius*

Hung: Chapter Two, pp. 25–8, and Chapter Three, pp. 41–53 (as always, skip Hung's translations)

Secondary: Peter K. Bol, "Scholarship and Literary Composition at the Early Tang Court," from *This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 76–107.

Class 4: The Idea of Reclusion

Owen: 1.27, 1.33, 2.1, 3.10, 3.13, 3.39, 3.40, 4.6

Background: Selections from *The Zhuangzi* and *The Laozi*

Hung: Chapter Four and Chapter Five, pp. 54–87 (skip all the poems!)

Secondary: Robert Ashmore, “Reading Hermits” from *The Transport of Reading: Text and Understanding in the World of Tao Qian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010), pp. 56–101

Class 5: The Rebellion

Owen: 4.16, 4.17, 4.18, 4.19, 4.20, 4.21, 4.23, 4.25, 4.32, 4.38, 5.3-5

Background: Denis Twitchett, “Hsüan-tsung,” from *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3, pp. 409–430 and 443–63

Hung: Chapter Six, pp. 90–111

Secondary: Jonathan Lear, “After This, Nothing Happened” from *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 1–54

Class 6: The State in Crisis

Owen: 5.8, 5.9, 5.23, 5.24–6, 5.27, 5.30, 5.31, 5.36, 5.37, 6.5, 6.11, 6.20, 6.23, 6.41, 7.1–6

Background: “Poems on Warfare and Violence from the Earlier Tradition” and “Other Poetry on the Rebellion”

Hung: Chapter Seven, pp. 119–24 and 129–35

Secondary: Cathy Carruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996): 91-112

Class 7: Flight, Wandering, Story

Owen: 7.31–50, 7.58, 8.1, 8.14–6, 8.27–38, 8.39–45, 9.1–12

Background: Mark Edward Lewis, “The Geography of Empire,” from *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press, 2009), pp. 5–29

Hung: Chapter Nine, pp. 138–46 and 153–5

Secondary: Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 3–36

Class 8: A Life in Poetry

Owen: 9.14, 9.16–21, 9.22, 9.25, 9.28, 9.30–9.32, 9.72, 10.3, 10.5, 10.8, 10.16, 10.23, 10.24–30, 10.42, 10.49

Background: Poetry and prose of Tao Qian

Hung: Chapter Nine, pp. 160–88 (skip the poems!)

Secondary: Martha C. Nussbaum, “Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature,” from *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 3–53)

Class 9: Art, Fragility, Reality

Owen: 11.41, 11.58–59, 11.62, 12.40, 12.56, 12.82, 13.11–5, 13.39, 13.42, 13.43, 13.56–61, 13.68, 13.69

Background: C.A. Peterson, “Court and Province in Mid- and Late T’ang,” from *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3, pp. 464–86

Hung: Chapter Ten, pp. 189–218 (skip the poems)

Secondary: C. K. Williams, “Poetry and Consciousness” and “Admiration of Form: Reflections on Poetry and the Novel” from *Poetry and Consciousness* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), pp. 1-13 and 109-37

Class 10: Humble Topics, Unexpected Communities

Owen: 15.5, 15.6, 15.18–9, 15.42, 15.43, 15.47–50, 15.52–5, 15.58–60, 15.65, 18.18, 19.5, 19.7, 19.9, 20.85–6

Background: Stephen Owen, *The End of the Chinese Middle Ages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 83–99

Hung: Chapter Eleven, pp. 219–23 and 226–31

Secondary: Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 50th anniversary ed., trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 24–49

Class 11: Archetypes of Bewilderment

Owen: 14.63, 15.12–13, 15.70, 17.34–38, 17.60–67, 18.15, 20.76, 20.103–4

Background: “The Biography of Qu Yuan,” from Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, trans. Burton Watson and “The Nine Changes (Jiubian)” by Song Yu, trans. David Hawkes

Hung: Chapter Eleven, pp. 239–43

Secondary: Lee H. Yearley, “Ethics of Bewilderment,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 38.3 (2010): 436–60

Class 12: Retrospections, Repetitions, Reconfigurations

Owen: 16.15–17, 17.3–5, 17.26–33, 17.40–51, 18.1, 18.34, 18.35–36, 19.40 (and accompanying poem by Yuan Jie), 20.4–8, 20.53, 20.102, 23.11, 23.32

Background: Eva Shan Chou, *Reconsidering Tu Fu: Literary Greatness and Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 11–42

Hung: Chapter Twelve, pp. 255–80 (skip the poems)

Secondary: Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller” from *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 83–111

Class 13: Transformations

Owen: 21.43, 21.55, 21.64, 21.65, 22.22, 22.28, 22.30, 22.36, 22.37–38, 22.39–48, 22.55, 22.57, 22.62, 23.14, 23.19, 23.33, 23.49

Background: “The Nine Songs” and “Summons of the Soul,” from the *Chuci*, trans. David Hawkes

Hung: None

Secondary: Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 1–15