

### Course Form for PKU Summer School International 2026

<b>Course Title</b>	<b>Classical Chinese Poetry</b>
	中国古典诗词
<b>Teacher</b>	MEI Shenyong
<b>First day of classes</b>	July 6, 2026
<b>Last day of classes</b>	July 31, 2026
<b>Course Credit</b>	2 credits
<b>Course Description</b>	
<b>Objective:</b>	
<p>As a time-honored genre, poetry enjoyed an unrivalled status in classical Chinese literature. This course offers a survey of classical Chinese poetry by studying its evolution from about the 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C to the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD, when poetry had almost passed the zenith of its development. We shall study its two major forms — <i>Shi</i> poetry &amp; <i>Ci</i> poetry (song lyrics) — and examine their various modes by focusing on the most representative works in history, particularly by ten major poets, with due attention to their distinctive life experience and the cultural context of each poem. By the end of the term, students will be enabled to cultivate their capacity for independent appreciation and to catch a glimpse of the breadth, depth and wealth of classical Chinese poetry.</p>	
<b>Pre-requisites</b>	
Some basic knowledge of Chinese is preferable, but not mandatory.	
<b>Proceeding of the Course</b>	
<p>This is a lecture/seminar-combined class. On class days, when a new genre or poet is being introduced, I will introduce at the very beginning some relevant historical and cultural background information, followed by students' discussion. Generally, we focus on one genre/poet for each session. All the study materials will be in English. I shall find the best translations available, sometimes along with the Chinese original and relevant audio readings. We shall also read some poems by non-Chinese poets, such as Shakespeare, Donne, Marvell, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Browning, Hardy, Charlotte Mew, Edward Thomas, Yeats; Poe, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, Bishop; Baudelaire, Akhmatova, Milosz, and Szymborska, etc. We believe such comparative lens will lead us to see better both the merits and the weaknesses of Chinese poetry. Students are required to read the assignments (including poems and essays) in advance and come to class fully prepared for discussion.</p>	

### **Class Policy**

Punctual attendance is compulsory. 1 hour late or leaving early will result in a “half” absence. 1.5 hour late will result in a total absence. Claims for extenuating circumstances should only be made in exceptional situations, with supporting evidence. More than 5 absences (excused or unexcused) will result in a failing grade.

### **Assignments**

Every student has to make a 5-min-presentation by comparing a Chinese poem with a foreign poem (both can be found in the textbook). A paper, about 2,000 words, is to be submitted within 10 days after the course ends. You should plan ahead and submit it before the deadline. There will be 3 points (out of 100) deducted per day beyond the deadline. After 5 days, you will not be able to receive any credit. For your paper I most cherish its original idea, rigorous reasoning, and good writing skills.

### **Grading**

1. Punctual Attendance (10%)
2. Class Presentation (10%)
3. Class Discussion (20%)
3. Final Essay (60%)

### **Texts**

#### **Textbook:**

Mei, Shenyou, ed. *Classical Chinese Poetry*. (not published, distributed in the first session)

#### **Suggested Readings:**

The following is a list of books which I find the most readable, composed mainly of poetry anthologies and monographs on the art of poetry. No need to purchase. I will excerpt, as needed, some sections or chapters as our study materials.

Cai, Zong-qi. *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*. Columbia University Press, 2008.

Chang, Kang-i Sun. *The evolution of Chinese tz'u poetry: from late T'ang to Northern Sung*. Princeton University Press, c1980.

Liu, James J. Y. *The Art of Chinese Poetry*. University of Chicago Press, 1962.

Minford, John & Joseph S.M.Lau, eds. *Classical Chinese Literature: Volume I: From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty*. Columbia University Press, 2000.

Owen, Stephen, tr. *An Anthology of Chinese literature: beginnings to 1911*. W.W. Norton, 1996.

Watson, Burton. *Chinese lyricism: Shih poetry from the second to the twelfth century*. Columbia University Press, 1971.

Watson, Burton, tr. *The Columbia book of Chinese poetry: from early times to the thirteenth century*. Columbia University Press, 1984.

Weinberger, Eliot, ed. *The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry*. New Directions, 2004.

Xu, Yuan-chong, trans. *Song of the immortals: an anthology of classical Chinese poetry*. New World Press, 1994.

Yip, Wai-lim. *Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres*. Duke University Press, 2004.

### Academic Integrity

Any explicit indebtedness to the words or ideas of other than yours should be mentioned during your presentation & acknowledged in your essay using in-text references.

## CLASS SCHEDULE

(Tentative)

**Session 1: Introduction; *Shi Jing*, the Fountainhead**

Date:

**【Description】** After a brief introduction to this course and syllabus, we will begin with the reading of *Shijing* (*The Classic of Poetry*) — the oldest extant anthology of Chinese poetry. It is said to be compiled by Confucius (551-479BC), comprising 305 poems and songs dating from the 11th to 7th centuries BC. We will learn how it came into being, its stylistic features and its enormous influence on later literature.

### 【Questions】

- How many categories does *Shijing* contain? Illustrate the features of each category.
- How many basic modes of presentation are used in *Shijing*? Cite examples.
- Compare the two different renditions of *Boat of Cypress* and discuss which version is more faithful to the original?
- Read the medieval English ballad *Lord Randal* and consider whether a poem about this topic could be included in *Shijing*? Why?

### 【Additional Readings】

Kern, Martin. “The Classic of Poetry.” *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*. Volume 1. Cambridge UP, 2010, pp.17-49.

Xu, Yuanchong, tr. *Selections from the Book of Poetry*. Hebei People’s Press, 2004.

Waley, Arthur, tr. *The Book of Songs*. Grove Press, 1996.

**Session 2: Qu Yuan — the Father of Chinese Poetry**

Date:

### 【Description】

Chinese poetry has long been regarded as having dual ancestry, a Northern one and a Southern one, represented by the *Shijing* and the *Chuci*. The latter, literally meaning “words

of Chu”, refers to the poetry of Qu Yuan — arguably, China’s first poet — and his immediate successors. We will study Qu Yuan’s masterpiece “*On Encountering Sorrow*” and two poems from “*Nine Songs*”.

**【Questions】**

- How does *Chuci* differ from *Shijing*, both in form and in content?
- Why impact does *On Encountering Sorrow* generate on later writers?
- In *The Fisherman*, Qu Yuan and the Fisherman have different views on life. Who do you agree more with?
- Read Ezra Pound’s *After Ch’u Yuan* and discuss whether Pound can be called Qu Yuan’s spiritual disciple?

**【Additional Readings】**

Hawkes, David, tr. *The songs of the south: an ancient Chinese anthology of poems*. Penguin Books, 1985.

Kern, Martin. “The Classic of Poetry”, in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*. Volume 1. Cambridge UP, 2010, pp.76-86.

Owen, Stephen. *An Anthology of Chinese literature: beginnings to 1911*. W.W. Norton, 1996, pp.162-175.

Sukhu, Gopal. *The Shaman and the Heresiarch: a new interpretation of the Li Sao*. Albany: State University of New York press, 2012.

**Session 3: Yuefu — Folk Songs and Ballads**

Date:

**【Description】**

*Yuefu*, conventionally refers to all the poems reputedly collected by a government office called Music Bureau, set up around 120 B. C. by Emperor Wu(156-87 BC) of Han Dynasty. Many of the poems are intended as pleasant accompaniments to the banquets and drinking bouts of the upper-class, but others seem to be genuine folk songs and, following the footsteps of *Shijing*, reflect the lives and hardship of common people. We will disregard those ritual hymns and focus instead on those popular folk poems, such as “*O Heavens*”, “*Southeast the Peacock Flies*”, “*Song of Mulan*”, and “*At Fifteen I went to the Army*”.

**【Questions】**

- What are the causes for Lanzhi’s death in *Southeast the Peacock Flies*? Is her husband to be blamed?
- Read the excerpts from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and compare the two protagonists with those in *Southeast the Peacock Flies*.
- In the 50-odd lines of *Song of Mulan*, there are only few lines about the woman warrior’s military deeds. Why?
- Compare *Song of the Northern Beauty* with Christopher Marlowe’s description of Helen in his *Doctor Faustus* and consider the similarities between the two texts.

**【Additional Readings】**

Birrell, Anne, tr. *Popular Songs and Ballads of Han China*. University of Hawaii Press, 1993.

Frankel, Hans H. “The Chinese Ballad “Southeast Fly The Peacocks”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*. Vol. 34 (1974), pp. 248-271.

Xu, Yuanchong, tr. *Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry in Han, Wei and Six Dynasties*. Chinese Foreign Translation Press, 2009.

**Session 4: Three Caos — the Literary Clan**

Date:

**【Description】**

Cao Cao(the Father), Cao Pi(the elder son) and Cao Zhi(the younger son) were the most preeminent poets in *Jian'an* era(196-220). As an ambitious warlord and an accomplished poet, Cao Cao was keen to cultivate poetic talent in his children, among whom, the most talented was Cao Zhi. Considered then and now as a genius of his time, Cao Zhi incurred the jealousy and resentment of his elder brother Cao Pi, also a poet, though arguably less great than Cao Zhi. When Cao Pi became the emperor, he forbade Cao Zhi to participate in politics and sent him away from capital, despite the latter's many petitions to seek employment with his brother. However, Cao Zhi's works have been greatly revered throughout the centuries. Among his 90-odd poems, the most important are his pentasyllabic ones (*Wuyan Shi*).

**【Questions】**

- How do you define Jian'an style? Cite Cao Cao's poems about mountains and rivers to illustrate.
- How important is Cao Pi's *Discourse on Literature* in the history of literary criticism?
- How do you understand Zhong Rong's comment, “Prince Chensi(Cao Zhi) is to literature as Duke Zhou and Confucius are to mankind” ?
- Compare Cao Zhi's *The Goddess of the Luo* with Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130*. Discuss the features of Fu.

**【Additional Readings】**

Fusheng, Wu & Graham Hartill, trs. *Selected Poems of Cao Zhi*. Beijing: Commercial Press, 2013.

Knechtges, David R.. “The literary salon in Ye”, “Cao Zhi and Cao Pi”, in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, eds. Kang-i Sun Chang & Stephen Owen. Vol. 1. Cambridge UP, 2010, pp.170-176.

Roy, David T. “The Theme of the Neglected Wife in the Poetry of Ts'ao Chih”, in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Nov., 1959), pp. 25-31.

Xu, Yuanchong, tr. *Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry in Han, Wei and Six Dynasties*. Chinese Foreign Translation Press, 2009.

**Session 5: Tao Qian — the Voluntary Hermit**

Date:

**【Description】**

Indisputably regarded as one of the finest poets in Chinese history, Tao Qian, also known as Tao Yuanming, was born during the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 AD), a time of military

uncertainty and political infighting. He held several minor posts before his final decision to renounce public life and return to his garden and fields. As a consequence, the recurring themes in his poem are the peace and contentment one can find in the countryside by living a peaceful life of wine and poetry, far away from the maddening crowd. At a time when contemporary poetry was cluttered with ornate diction and elaborate rhetorical devices, Tao chose to write in a deliberately plain and simple style, appealing to readers throughout the centuries.

**【Questions】**

- Tao Qian was influenced by many philosophical ideas. Can you identify the strands of Confucianism, Taoism, even Buddhism in his poetry?
- Read the preface to *The Peach Blossom Spring* and consider why the poet mentions that “high-minded gentleman” toward the end.
- Compare Tao Yuanming’s rural poems with Thoreau’s *Walden* and discuss their similarities/dissimilarities.

**【Additional Readings】**

Hightower, James Robert, tr. *The Poetry of T’AO CH’IEN*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970.  
Tian, Xiaofei. *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture: The Records of a Dusty Table*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013.  
Xu, Yuancong, tr. *Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry in Han, Wei and Six Dynasties*. Chinese Foreign Translation Press, 2009.

**Session 6: Wang Wei — the Poet and Painter**

Date:

**【Description】**

Wang Wei was one of the most versatile men of letters: a consummate musician, a superb painter, and a poet of the first rank in the golden age of Chinese poetry, known as the High Tang Period (713-765). Born into a distinguished family, he entertained great political ambitions and, fortunately enough, from early in his early life moved with ease in the upper class. However, there was an otherworldly strain in him. Brought up as a devout Buddhist by his mother, he couldn’t resist the charm of Buddhism, which pervaded his thinking and his poetry. Like Tao Yuanming, Wang Wei excelled at using simple language for a vision of the world that was unique his own. He is a master of quatrains (*Jueju*).

**【Questions】**

- How do you understand Sushi’s comment on Wang Wei’s poetry, “there is poetry in his painting, and there is painting in his poetry”?
- Both Tao Qian and Wang Wei wrote a poem entitled *Peach Blossom Spring*. How different are they from each other?
- Describe the Buddhist element in Wang Wei’s poetry. Use one poem as an example.
- Compare Wang Wei’s *Magnolia Bank* with Wallace Stevens’ *The Snow Man* and consider their similarities/dissimilarities.

**【Additional Readings】**

Owen, Stephen. "Wang Wei: The Artifice of Simplicity." In *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981.

Tony Barnstone, Willis Barnstone, Haixin Xu, tr. *Laughing lost in the mountains: poems of Wang Wei*. Hanover, N.H. : University Press of New England, 1991.

Weinberger, Eliot, ed. *Nineteen ways of looking at Wang Wei*. Moyer Bell Limited, 1987.

Yip, Wai-lim. "Wang Wei and the Aesthetic of Pure Experience", in *Tamkang Review* 2.2 (1971): 199-208.

**Session 7: Li Bai — the Banished Immortal**

Date:

**【Description】**

From his own day to the present, Li Bai has been hailed a genius and romantic poet, who along with Du Fu, helped to raise Chinese poetry to the highest level of accomplishment. Despite his brief period of imperial favor from Emperor Xuanzong, he disliked, or rather, scorned court service. Averse to fawning and hypocrisy prevalent in the upper class, he was drawn to a carefree life of drinking and wandering. Though no innovator in form, his poems are characterized by an extraordinary degree of ease and grace, playfulness and hyperbole, sometimes outright fantasy.

**【Questions】**

- As a foremost poet of Romanticism, Li Bai's poetry is unrivalled. How do you define his poetic features?
- Li Bai was believed to be a Taoist initiate. Can you detect the Taoist strain in his poetry?
- Read Baudelaire's and discuss how his attitude to drinking differs from Li Bai's?
- Compare Li Bai's *Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream* with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* and consider the function of dream in both texts.

**【Readings】**

Cooper, Arthur , *Li Po and Tu Fu: Poems Selected and Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, Penguin Classics, 1973.

Owen, Stephen. "Li Po: a new concept of genius," in *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry : The High T'ang*. New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981, pp. 109-143

Xu, Yuanchong, tr. *Selected Poems of Li Bai*. Hebei People's Press, 2004.

**Session 8: Du Fu — the Sage of Poetry**

Date:

**【Description】**

Eleven years Li Bai's junior, Du Fu is equally revered as a superb poet. Despite his soaring political ambitions and exceptional literary talent, Du Fu's many efforts to secure a governmental position proved to be in vain. Not until in his 40s, did he gain a petty post, only to be demoted soon afterwards. As a result, sorrow and frustration informed much of

his poetry, which is largely autobiographical and historical. A glimpse of his poems can shed light on his tortured life and tumultuous time. Unlike Li Bai, Du Fu willingly embraced the formidable technical demands made by the “Recent Style” or Heptasyllabic Regulated Poetry (*Qiyán Lvshì*).

**【Questions】**

- Why is Du Fu called “the Sage of Poetry”? Compare Du Fu’s poetry with Li Bai’s in both content and form.
- Technically speaking, Du Fu is the most revered poet in Chinese history. Discuss his poetic accomplishment, particularly in regulated verse.
- Compare Du Fu’s *Stand Alone* with *Elizabeth Bishop’s Sandpiper* and consider how the bird relates to each poet’s mood and worldview.

**【Additional Readings】**

Owen, Stephen. “Tu Fu,” in *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry : The High T'ang*. New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981, pp. 183-224.  
 Xu, Yuanchong, tr. *Selected Poems of Du Fu*. Hebei People’s Press, 2004.  
 Young, David, tr. *Du Fu: A Life in Poetry*. Random House, 2008.

**Session 9: Bai Juyi — the Empathetic Campaigner**

Date:

**【Description】**

Unlike Du Fu, Bai Juyi had a long and successful political career, holding important positions in his life, although his blunt comments on social problems led to his demotion several times. His view of poetry is moralistic and allegorical. Like Confucius, he took art as a method of conveying instruction, although his best poetry conveyed no moral or didactic whatsoever. He restored the popularity of *Yuefu* and advocated the use of simple language in poetry so that even an old peasant granny could understand it.

**【Questions】**

- Bai Juyi advocated that “poetry should be written in tandem with the events that occurred”. Is such idea still valid today?
- Apart from Confucianism, was Bai Juyi influenced by other strands of thought? Cite poems to illustrate.
- Read Bai Juyi’s *The Everlasting Regret* and discuss what/who led to Consort Yang’s death.
- Compare Bai Juyi’s *The White-haired Palace Maid* with William Carlos Williams’s *To a Poor Old Woman* and discuss why the two poets’ attitudes to the old woman differ.

**【Additional Readings】**

Xu, Yuanchong, tr. *Selected Poems of Bai Juyi*. Hebei People’s Press, 2004.  
 Owen, Stephen. “Bai Juyi”, in *The late Tang: Chinese poetry of the mid-ninth century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 45-67.



Waley, Arthur, tr. *Waiting for the moon: poems of Bo Juyi*. Mount Jackson, VA: Axios Press, 2012.

**Session 10: *Li Yu* — the Exiled King**

Date:

**【Description】**

Shi poetry was believed to reach its peak in the Tang Dynasty. There were still many practitioners afterwards, but as a form, its fame gradually gave way to its sibling form — *Ci* poetry (song lyrics) The first great master of the latter kind is Li Yu, literally “the Last King of the Li Family” of the Southern Tang (937-975 AD), one of the several regional states into which China was divided after the breakup of the Tang. Although an incompetent ruler, he was the most representative lyric poet during his era, credited with broadening the thematic range of *Ci* poetry and made it more personal, and in his case, more universally poignant.

**【Questions】**

- Wang Guowei once rated Li Yu as an unparalleled master of song lyrics. Do you agree?
- Discuss the change of the thematic concerns in Li Yu’s works, together with the poet’s changed social status.
- Compare Li Yu’s *Tune to the Beautiful Lady Yu* with Czeslaw Milosz’s *Gift* and consider how the speakers’ attitudes to their unfortunate past differ.

**【Additional Readings】**

Bryant, Daniel, tr. *Lyric Poets of the Southern T'ang: Feng Yen-ssu, 903–960, and Li Yü, 937–978*. Vancouver [B.C.] : University of British Columbia Press, 1982.

Kang-i Sun Chang. “Li Yu and the Full Flowering of the Hsiao-ling Form.” *The evolution of Chinese tz'u poetry from late T'ang to Northern Sung*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 63-106.

Whitaker, K. P. K. “Some Notes on the Tsy,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 14 (1952), pp. 115-138.

Xu, Yuanhong, tr. *Selected Poems of Li Yu*. Hebei People’s Press, 2004.

**Session 11: *Su Shi* — the Founder of Heroic Abandon**

Date:

**【Description】**

Su Shi was the greatest writer of the Northern Song (960-1125). As a man of versatile talents, he was an acclaimed painter, calligrapher, pharmacologist, gastronome, a statesman, an essayist, and above all, a poet in both *Shi* and *Ci* forms. His poems, though lacking the intensity of the Tang poetry at its best, boasted of broader scope with more nuanced tone and philosophical depth. His song lyrics abandoned the conventional topics of parties and lost love, and by drawing on the themes of classical poetry, helped expand the subject matter of song lyrics. He is a master of Long Song Lyrics (*Manci*), often imbued with a reflective sense of cheerfulness and equanimity.

**【Questions】**

- Song Poetry is said to differ markedly from Tang Poetry. Cite Su Shi's poems to illustrate.
- Su Shi is widely acclaimed as a *Ci* poet of Heroic Abandon. What are the features of his *Ci* poetry?
- Some critics hold the view that Sushi's song lyrics are poems in disguise. Do you agree?
- Compare Su Shi's *Poem on the Lute* with Wislawa Szymborska's *Three Oddest Words* and discuss the appeal of philosophical poetry.

**【Additional Readings】**

Egan, Ronald. "Su Shi"& "Su Shi and the turn away from the feminine." in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, eds. Kang-i Sun Chang & Stephen Owen. Vol. 1. Cambridge UP, 2010, pp.410-418& pp. 444-447.

Kang-i Sun Chang. "Su Shih and the Elevation of the Tz'u Genre." in *The evolution of Chinese tz'u poetry from late T'ang to Northern Sung*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980, pp.158-206.

Lin, Yutang. *The Gay Genius: The Life and Times of Su Tungpo*. J. Day Co., 1947.

Watson, Burton, tr. *Selected Poems of Su Tung-P'o*. Copper Canyon Press, 1993.

Xu, Yuanhong, tr. *Selected Poems of Su Shi*. Hebei People's Press, 2004.

**Session 12: Li Qingzhao — the Master of Delicate Restraint; Summary**

Date:

**【Description】**

Li Qingzhao is probably the best known woman poet before modern times. Born into an affluent literary family, her early life was full of carefree joys and conjugal bliss. But the fall of Northern Song in 1126 compelled her to move south, concomitant with the onset of the South Song Dynasty (1127-1279 AD). The content and mood of her works changed accordingly. Contrary to Su Shi's heroic abandon, she was an acknowledged master of delicate restraint — the "feminine" style. Her sensitive heart, keen eye and musical ear lend her works an unusual psychological depth. She is also one of the earliest theorists of the song lyric, insisting that the form is different from its sibling form, *Shi* poetry.

**【Questions】**

- Li Qingzhao is an acclaimed master of Delicate Restraint in *Ci* writing. Cite some of her poems to illustrate.
- Li Qingzhao is not only a practitioner of *Ci*, but also a critic. What are her principles of *Ci* writing?
- Compare Li Qingzhao's *Tune to Slow, Slow Song* with Emily Dickinson's 372(*After great pain, a formal feeling comes—*) and discuss how the poets express their grief differently.

**【Additional Readings】**

Chung, Ling. "Li Ch'ing-chao: Another Side of Her Complex Personality", in *Journal of*

*Chinese Language Teachers Association* 10.3 (Oct. 1975), pp.126-136.

Rexroth, Kenneth & Chong Ling, trs. *Li-Ching-Chao Complete Poems*. New Directions. 1980.

Xu, Yuanchong, tr. *Selected Poems of Li Qingzhao*. Hebei People's Press, 2004.