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ARTICLE

Teaching Classical Chinese Poetry through Reception Studies

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This paper discusses the contribution reception studies can make to the pedagogy of Chinese poetry. It introduces the major theoretical concepts of reception studies, and then demonstrates how those concepts can be applied in and incorporated into courses on Chinese poetry, using examples of “poetry of fields and garden” and “poems on history” drawn from the author’s own experience teaching courses in Chinese poetry in the U.S. and Canada. Finally, it provides a selected bibliography of works on reception studies, translations of Chinese poetry, and scholarship which uses reception studies to research Chinese poetry and culture. Teaching classical Chinese poetry through reception studies helps students better understand the way the significance of Chinese poetry changes over time. It also aids students to further develop their critical thinking and analytical writing skills as they work to compare the reception of certain poems or poets in different periods.

Keywords: Chinese poetry; pedagogy; reception studies; poetry of fields and gardens; poems on history

Students who take courses in Chinese literature in the United States do so for an eclectic assortment of reasons. They might be required to take such a course in order to major in Chinese and/or East Asian Studies; or (as is the case at the liberal arts college where I teach) to fulfill a humanities or cultural diversity requirement; or they might simply be students of modern China seeking to broaden their understanding of Chinese culture. Catering to the needs and interests of these different groups in a single course can be challenging. The most popular approach to teaching such courses is to move chronologically from the pre-modern period into the contemporary era, but my approach, influenced by reception studies, has been instead to focus on the reception of key pieces and stories over the course of Chinese literature's long and continuous tradition. This approach has been particularly useful for teaching classical Chinese poetry, which was practiced and appreciated, both publicly and privately, by scholar-officials in pre-modern China. This article begins with a basic introduction to reception studies and its application to Chinese poetry. It then describes courses I have taught and course materials I have used that incorporate reception studies. Finally, I provide specific examples of my pedagogical approach: my methods for teaching the poetic subgenre of "poetry of fields and gardens" (*tianyuan shi* 田園詩), as epitomized by Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365–427) and the poetic subgenre of "poems on history" (*yongshi shi* 詠史詩) through poems about the figure of Jing Ke 荊軻 (d. 227 BCE).¹

Hans Robert Jauss's Reception Studies and Its Application to Chinese Poetry

My pedagogical approach is mainly informed by "Rezeptionsästhetik," a critical lens pioneered by Hans Robert Jauss and his colleagues at the University of Konstanz, Wolfgang Iser and Jurij Striedter. "Rezeptionsästhetik"—usually rendered in English as "aesthetics of reception" or occasionally as "reader-response criticism" or "affective

¹ I would like to thank the journal editors Marsha Smith and Hong Zhang, the two anonymous reviewers, and Dylan Suher and Amanda S. Robb for their comments. I am also grateful for the Visiting Scholar Fellowship I received from the International Center for Studies of Chinese Civilization at Fudan University and for the Young Scholars' Visiting Fellowship I received from the Asia-Pacific Center for Chinese Studies at Chinese University of Hong Kong, which enabled me to complete this research. Part of this article is based on my Ph.D. dissertation completed at the University of Toronto.

stylistics”—challenges conventional author-centered hermeneutics and methods for writing literary history. The approaches of Jauss, Iser, Stredter, and others connected with the “aesthetics of reception” school all differ from one another in subtle ways. I find Jauss’s approach most useful for the classroom, because, as the literary critic and theorist Terry Eagleton points out:

Iser is aware of the social dimension of reading, but chooses to concentrate largely on its aesthetic aspects; a more historically-minded member of the school of Constance is Hans Robert Jauss, who seeks in Gadamerian fashion to situate a literary work within its historical horizon, the context of cultural meanings within which it was produced, and then explores the shifting relations between this and the changing horizon of its historical readers (Eagleton 2008, 72).

Thus, Jauss’s method, with its greater awareness of the function of history, is most relevant to a course on literary history. Jauss saw literary history as a way to draw the reader into the work of interpretation. As Jauss commented in his 1967 speech “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” “The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees” (Jauss 1982, 19). Jauss’s goal in promoting the aesthetics of reception was to establish a new model for literary theory and criticism, centered on an aesthetics of reception and influence that accounted for readers’ active participation in understanding and interpreting literary works. According to Jauss, readers do not passively accept the meaning of a literary work, but rather, their interpretations enrich and diversify its intended connotations.

Furthermore, Jauss felt that the meaning of a literary work can only be fully appreciated by those readers who are familiar with the author’s other works or with similar authors’ works. For this reason, literary history was a central and complex component of Jauss’s hermeneutic framework: “The historicity of literature rests not on an organization of ‘literary facts’ that is established *post festum*, but rather on the preceding experience of the literary work by its readers” (Jauss 1982, 20). Jauss felt that the extent to which a reader understands a literary work is determined by

that reader's "horizon of expectation," a baseline of knowledge formed by familiarity with similar works, shared diction, figures of speech, allusions, and other aspects of a literary tradition. Paul H. Fry explains that Jauss's "horizon of expectation" is an effort to apply a dynamic, diachronic understanding of Hans-Georg Gadamer's "merger of horizons" to literary studies:

What Jauss has to say about horizons of expectation is a way of thinking through the conditions in which Gadamer's "merger of horizons" is possible. But for Jauss it's not just one reader's horizon and the horizon of the text that need to meet halfway in mutual illumination. Such mergers take place or fail to do so along a succession of horizons that change as modes of aesthetic and interpretive response to texts are mediated by historical circumstances (Fry 2012, 216–217).

It is, in other words, a multidimensional process, in which the meaning of the text and the reader's horizon of expectation transform in response to each other and to a changing historical context. Even if a reader cannot readily assimilate a text into a familiar interpretive framework, that very aesthetic distance can expand that readers' horizon of expectations either "through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness" (Jauss 1982, 25). In this way, readers can transform texts, texts can transform readers, and both are transformed over time.

Some scholars, most notably Wendy Swartz, have already applied reception studies to Chinese literature.² The approach Swartz adopts in her monograph *Reading Tao Yuanming* is directly influenced by Jauss's assertion that a reader's active participation plays a crucial role in better understanding a literary work.³ According to Swartz, her book is:

² See the review provided in Wendy Swartz's Ph.D. dissertation, "Reclusion, Personality and Poetry-Tao Yuanming's Reception in the Chinese Literary Tradition" (UCLA 2003), and her book *Reading Tao Yuanming: Shifting Paradigms of Historical Reception (427–1900)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008).

³ For more detailed discussions of *Reading Tao Yuanming*, see Xiaoshan Yang, "Reading Tao Yuanming: Shifting Paradigms of Historical Reception (427–1900) (review)," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*,

an examination of the processes behind the making of a model poet and cultural icon. A study of the construction of the posthumous reputation of a central figure in Chinese literary history, the mechanisms at work in the reception of his works, and the canonization both of Tao Yuanming himself and of particular readings of his works can shed light on the transformation of the literary field and cultural sphere in pre-modern China (Swartz 2008, 2).

The last two chapters of the monograph focus entirely on the reception of Tao's poetry from the Six Dynasties period (220–589) to the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Swartz's book joins the efforts within Chinese language scholarship to apply reception theory to Chinese literature. Chen Wenzhong 陳文忠, surveying such efforts, divides them into three main categories: researching the reception of a single literary work, investigating the reception of a writer's entire *oeuvre*, and using reception theory to rewrite Chinese literary history as a whole. In his own research, Chen seeks to lay a foundation for future Chinese poetic frameworks rooted in reception studies.⁴ In designing my course, I have drawn on the work of Chen and Swartz among others.

Course Materials

Students in my course access the insights of reception studies by viewing a wide variety of materials: primary and secondary sources in print, film (both fictional and documentary), television drama, and animation. To specifically understand how reception studies might illuminate Chinese poetry, my class reads different English translations of Chinese poetry and essays in conjunction with chapters from Jauss's "Toward an Aesthetic of Reception" and Robert Holub's "Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction."⁵ I select the translated primary sources from a number of anthologies and textbooks, including Michael Fuller's *An Introduction to Chinese*

69.2 (2009): 498–503, and Yue Zhang, "Gaoshang yinshi, tianyuan shizhe, jingdian wenren—Jieshou meixue shiyu nei de Tao Yuanming xingxiang sanchongzou 高尚隱士, 田園詩者, 經典文人—接受美學視域內的陶淵明形象三重奏", *Mingzuo xinshang* 名作欣賞 22 (2012), 138–141.

⁴ Chen Wenzhong, *Zhongguo gudian shige jieshou shi yanjiu* 中國古典詩歌接受史研究 (Hefei: Anhui daxue chubanshe, 1998).

⁵ Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984).

Poetry, Zong-qi Cai's *How to Read Chinese Poetry*, and Stephen Owen's *Anthology of Chinese Literature*.⁶ I supplement the primary sources and readings in reception studies with selected chapters from recent works of Anglophone scholarship such as Paula Varsano's *Tracking the Banished Immortal: The Poetry of Li Bo and Its Critical Reception* and Ronald C. Egan's *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China* which apply the methodology to Chinese poetry.⁷ I also assign relevant journal articles from such publications as *CLEAR (Chinese Literature, Essays, Articles, and Reviews)*, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, *Early Medieval China*, and *Journal of Oriental Studies*.

To help them visualize the class materials, I also have my students watch videos which relate to the primary sources we examine, either in class or as assigned homework. These videos—feature-length fiction and documentary films, television drama, short sketches, animations, and news programs—are all either originally in English or subtitled in English, and are available in the library or online. For the unit on Jing Ke, students watch the films *The Emperor and the Assassin* and *Hero*; for *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, they watch the film *Red Cliff*; and to understand the reception of Tao Yuanming they watch the documentary *Lushan, Sacred Mountain*. Students are provided with the assigned readings and videos before the discussion-based lecture,⁸ to ensure that they have enough time to process the materials fully,

⁶ Michael A. Fuller, *An Introduction to Chinese Poetry: From the Canon of Poetry to the Lyrics of the Song Dynasty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018); Zong-qi Cai ed., *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Stephen Owen ed., *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911 (Revised Edition)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997). Other major anthologies of Chinese literature include: John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau, eds., *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations, Volume 1: From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Wm. Theodore de Bary, Wing-tsit Chan, and Burton Watson, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); Cyril Birch, ed., *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965), and Victor H. Mair, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁷ Ronald C. Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014). Paula Varsano, *Tracking the Banished Immortal: The Poetry of Li Bo and Its Critical Reception* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

⁸ The lecture slides and notes are posted on Blackboard after each lecture. Additional electronic links and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources are also made available on Blackboard.

understand the content, and apply what they have learned to their own readings. Although the audiovisual materials are a useful supplement for readings which can sometimes be dense or alien, reading the primary sources is still essential, so I explicitly emphasize the importance of reading the primary sources, and during lectures I lead discussions based on questions for both the written and audiovisual materials.

Case Studies: “Poetry of Fields and Gardens” and “Poems on History”

The course I offer on Chinese poetry begins with a broad introduction to reception studies, centering on Jauss’s theoretical framework, and the ways in which scholars apply reception theory to the study of Chinese poetry. The course then focuses on some of the major genres of premodern Chinese poetry. In this section, I will briefly describe how I use reception studies to help students understand the poetic subgenres of “poetry of fields and gardens” and “poems on history”.

Poetry of Fields and Gardens

The premodern Chinese genre of “poetry of fields and gardens” is a rough analogue for the Western pastoral. In my discussion-based lecture, I focus on the “poetry of fields and gardens” of Tao Yuanming, a poet of the Six Dynasties (220–589). Before the lecture, students are asked to gather information about Tao and his poetry, with the expectation that, as is often the case with the current generation of college students, they will first turn to Google. The information they find through Google or Wikipedia is, of course (and as I am careful to remind them), not reliable and can be edited or altered by anyone at any time. It does, however, give my students some sense of how Tao is popularly understood today. The current Wikipedia entry for Tao Yuanming reads: “Tao is often regarded as the greatest poet during the centuries of Six Dynasties poetry between the Han and Tang dynasties.”⁹ Another top search result is the *Cultural China* website for Tao Yuanming, which states: “Tao Yuanming, also called Tao Qian, was named ‘Mr. Jingjie’ by other people, and he called himself

⁹ “Tao Yuanming,” Wikipedia, accessed June 13, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao_Yuanming.

'Mr. Wuliu.' He was a renowned anchorite and outstanding poet in the Eastern Jin Period and commonly labeled 'pastoral poet.'"¹⁰

These entries represent (if clumsily) Tao's current position within the Chinese tradition, but obscure the history of how Tao and his poetry came to occupy that position. In fact, Tao was not considered a major poet during the Six Dynasties period, and his works only came to be included in the canon much later. The search results above, as I point out during the lecture, only testify to the power historical shifts in aesthetics have to change the way we understand writers and their works. If I were to teach Tao Yuanming in the traditional manner, placing his famous poems of fields and gardens primarily in the context of his biography and the essay "Peach Blossom Spring," my students would not receive this historical perspective. Viewing his works through a reception theory lens, however, reveals the complexity and nuance of the development of the figure of Tao over time.

This historical perspective is invaluable for making clear to students *why* Tao is so important to read. Instructors who teach Tao tend to focus on two poems, "Returning to Live in the Country" and "Drinking Wine," which I have provided below:

Returning to Live in the Country

...

The confined bird longs for its old forest;
 The fish in the pond thinks of its former depths.
 I have opened up waste land at the edge of the south wild;
 I have kept rusticity, returned to garden and fields.
 Elms and willows give shade to the rear eaves;
 Peaches and plums are arrayed before the hall.
 Faint are the villages of distant men;
 Thick is the smoke from their houses.
 Dogs bark in the depths of the lanes;
 Cocks crow at the tops of mulberries (Davis 1983, 45–46).

¹⁰ "Tao Yuanming – Pastoral Poet," The Cultural China, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://history.cultural-china.com/en/59History585.html>.

Drinking Wine

As I pluck chrysanthemums beneath the eastern fence,
 I distantly see the southern mountains.
 The mountains' aspect is fair at close of day;
 The flying birds return in flocks.
 In this there is a true idea,
 But when I would express it, I forget the words (Davis 1983, 96).

These poems are richly resonant and are ideal for practicing close reading; students tend to appreciate them without much context. I have found, however, that although students like the poems, they struggle to understand why they have played such an important role in Chinese literary history. Students (especially those who themselves come from rural areas) can quickly discern how the straightforwardness of his style fits his material, but they often cannot understand the broader cultural significance of these poems. Introducing some of the concepts of Daoism that were current in the Six Dynasties and which likely influenced Tao can give them a synchronic context, but not a diachronic one.

I complicate the popular image of Tao in part through the English translations of Tao's poems I provide. I assign A. R. Davis's translation because Davis translated Tao's entire extant corpus, so students can read the selected poems in the context of the rest of Tao's work, and because Davis provides detailed notes and commentaries on each poem. For students who are interested in comparing different English translations, I also recommend the translations provided by James Hightower in his *Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien*.¹¹

¹¹ James Hightower, *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). Tao's poems are frequently included in Anglophone anthologies of Chinese literature, including the translation Stephen Owen produced for his *Anthology of Chinese Literature*. Other major English translations of Tao Yuanming's works can be found in William Acker, *T'ao the Hermit: Sixty Poems by T'ao Ch'ien* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1952); James R. Hightower, *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); H.C. Chang ed., *Chinese Literature, Vol. 2: Nature Poetry* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1977); and A. R. Davis, *T'ao Yüan-ming: His Works and Their Meaning*. 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1983).

In addition to Davis's translation, students are also required to read pieces of criticism, which shaped the initial reception of Tao Yuanming during the Six Dynasties and the Tang dynasty (618–907). These include Yan Yanzhi's 顏延之 (384–456) eulogy of Tao, Xiao Tong's 蕭統 (501–531) preface to the selection of Tao's poems in the *Wen xuan* 文選 anthology, Zhong Rong's 鍾嶸 (ca. 468-ca. 518) evaluation of his pentasyllabic poems, and several poems which imitate Tao's style. This early reception of Tao and his works is markedly different than the simple image they have found online. I guide students through these readings with a series of study questions:

- What did Tao's contemporaries think of his writings and character?
- Did they see Tao as a major poet? Why or why not?
- What characteristics of Tao Yuanming did they praise?
- How and why does the image of Tao we find in the Six Dynasties sources differ from the one we find in the standard narrative of literary history?

At the beginning of class, I usually start with Zhong Rong's comments on Tao. According to Zhong, "[Tao's] poetic form is spare and placid, with almost no excess of words. His earnest thought is sincere and classical. His verbalized inspirations are congenial and appropriate. Each time I look at his writings, I think of the virtuousness of his character" (Swartz 2008, 110). I note how Zhong seems more interested in Tao as a character than in Tao's poems, and point out how that emphasis was typical for Six Dynasties critics of Tao.

I then bring Xiao Tong's preface to his selection of Tao Yuanming's poetry into the conversation. The preface begins:

I am an enthusiast of his writing,
 And cannot stop reading him;
 I admire his virtue,
 And wish that I had been born in his age.
 Therefore, I have collected his writings;
 I have made a rough categorization (Wang 2010, 213).¹²

¹² The translation I quote here can be found, along with a fuller discussion of the preface, in Wang Ping, "Between Reluctant Revelation and Disinterested Disclosure: Reading Xiao Tong's Preface to 'Tao Yuanming Ji,'" *Asia Major*, Third Series, 23, no. 1 (2010): 201–22.

Xiao was an enthusiast for Tao's writings because he felt they reflected Tao's moral values. Tao's poetry was the most effective way to connect with the man himself. In the preface, Xiao attributes an almost magical effect to reading Tao's poetry:

It is said that,
 People who are able to read Yuanming's writings
 Become free of their competitive nature;
 Dispelled of ignoble intention.
 The greedy can be made abstinent;
 The cowardly can be made courageous.
 Not only will one be able to tread the realm of benevolence and propriety;
 He can also relinquish his position and salary.
 It is not necessary that
 One travels to Taihua Mountain,
 Or spans great distances to consult the Pillar Scribe.
 This is, for its part, conducive to moral teaching (Wang 2010, 214).

The significance of Tao's poetry for Xiao is that reading it has a practical effect—namely, his writings can be used to cultivate moral character. Additionally, by using the phrase “It is said” in the first line, Xiao indicates that the opinion expressed in the preface was widely shared by contemporary literati.

By reading Zhong Rong and Xiao Tong's comments, students gain an understanding of what intellectuals in the Six Dynasties felt was important about Tao and about literature as a whole. Neither Zhong nor Xiao considered Tao a major poet. His simple language and straightforward style was an outlier in a time when most well-received literature was characterized by ornate language and parallelism. Six Dynasties critics often enjoyed his poetry, but did not think it was particularly remarkable; Xiao Tong only included a very limited selection of Tao's poetry in his *Wen xuan*. Instead of celebrating Tao for his poetry, Zhong and Xiao celebrated him as a virtuous hermit who abandoned the official life for his lofty ideas, and simply happened to enjoy writing poetry.

To try to understand how Tao was eventually placed in such a lofty position within the canon, we then spend time on the reception of Tao's writings during the Tang dynasty, when they were far more appreciated than they were in Tao's own time. Tang poets borrowed and alluded to many of the archetypal images found in his poetry. Students are asked to read the translation of Tao's poems, along with a chapter from Wendy Swartz's *Reading Tao Yuanming*. To go along with these readings, I provide the following study questions:

What factors contributed to Tao's poems becoming more popular during the Tang?

Did this reflect any social and intellectual changes in the Tang?

After reading the Tang poems, what images, styles or approaches did Tang poets adopt from Tao's poetry?

Prior to our in-class discussion about Tang appropriations of Tao's work, I give a short lecture on the history of borrowing images in Chinese poetry. This lecture is based on James Liu's book, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, which provides a comprehensive account of Chinese poetic traditions and styles.¹³ Liu outlined three basic modes of borrowing in Chinese poetry: "First of all, a poet can use a conventional compound image but develop the comparison further, or add subtle variations to the central analogy.... Next, a borrowed image can be given a twist in a new context.... Furthermore, one can use two conventional images in antithesis so as to give them some fresh force" (Liu 1962, 115–117). With this background, students discuss several Tang poems which allude to Tao. I usually teach, for example, "Stopping by the Homestead of an Old Friend," a poem by the early Tang poet Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689–740):

An old friend prepared some chicken and millet,
And invited me to his rustic home.
Green trees merge at the village's edge;
The azure mountain slants beyond the town.

¹³ James Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

We unroll our mats and face the yard and garden,
Holding our wine cups, we chat of mulberry and hemp.
I'll wait for the Double Ninth,
And return for the chrysanthemum blossoms! (Swartz 2008, 167)

In this well-known poem, Meng uses images and themes borrowed from Tao—wine, a rustic home, mulberries, chrysanthemums—to develop his own style of writing about “fields and gardens.” Readers familiar with Tao will have a deeper gesture of the persona Meng is trying to construct through this poem. The secondary scholarship on the reception of Tao, which students have already read at this point, argues that Meng borrowed from Tao to distinguish his poetry from the then-dominant style of palace poems, which were famous for their ornate diction and parallel structures. Through these discussions, students gradually develop an image of Tao much more complex than the conventional images they might find on the web and in popular media. My hope is that my lessons on Tao will help them to understand the utility of reception studies, and, more generally, will train them to think critically about popular conventional narratives.

Finally, to enliven the lectures on Tao Yuanming, I always show a CCTV (China Central Television) documentary on Mount Lu, where Tao and other famous literati, such as Li Bai 李白 (701–762) and Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), spent time living in reclusion. In the documentary, students can see the scenic area, the “fields and gardens,” described in the poetry they just read, and come to grasp the role of geographical landmarks in shaping literary and cultural connections.

Poems on History

While a reception-studies-informed approach is useful for teaching the poetry of a complex figure like Tao Yuanming, it is practically essential for teaching an inherently trans-genre form like the “poems on history.” I focus two class sections on poems about Jing Ke. Not only is Jing Ke’s story itself worth discussing, its circulation and reinterpretation in poetry from the Warring States period onward provides a vivid illustration of shifting horizons of expectation. The first extant accounts we have of the story of Jing Ke can be found in the *The Strategies of The Warring States*

(*Zhanguo ce* 戰國策) and the *The Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記). It is unclear whether the *Records* account was based off of the *Strategies* version or vice versa; the only difference between the two versions is that the *Records* provides a more complete biography of Jing Ke, recording his youth, his travels from his home state of Wei to the state of Yan, and his defeat by the swordsman Gai Nie 蓋聶.¹⁴

The gist of the story is as follows: Jing Ke, a native of the state of Wei in the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE), travelled to the state of Yan as a young man. As the state of Qin expanded, it began to threaten Yan, prompting a senior official to mention Jing Ke as someone who might be willing to assassinate the Qin king, and so Jing Ke was eventually invited to meet the Prince of Yan. Initially, he was hesitant to undertake this mission. However, after several conversations with (and many gifts from) the prince, Jing Ke finally agreed to the task of assassination. Jing Ke nevertheless continued to drag his feet, claiming that he was waiting for a friend to assist him in the journey. The prince gradually lost patience and demanded that Jing Ke assassinate the Qin king immediately. Jing Ke finally assented and asked for two items which would be gifts so substantial that his request for a personal audience with the king of Qin might be granted: the head of General Fan Wuqi 樊於期 (d. 227 BCE), a Qin traitor, and a map of Dukang, a region of Yan, a gesture that would signify that Yan was ceding the territory to Qin. In addition to these two items, he requested a poisonous dagger, which he hid by rolling it up inside the map. With the map and the head of General Fan, Jing Ke was granted permission to enter the king's presence. However, as Jing Ke entered the hall for his audience with the king, his assistant Qin Wuyang 秦舞陽 (d. ca. 227 BCE) became overwhelmed with terror, raising suspicions among the Qin court. The king therefore allowed only Jing Ke to step forward. Jing Ke then unrolled the map, grabbed the hidden dagger, and tried to capture the king

¹⁴ If I have time, although it is not directly related to the story of Jing Ke I also try to discuss "The Letter to Ren An." In this letter, Sima Qian explains his purpose and motivations in writing the *Records*. The English translation of the letter can be found in Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginning to 1911* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 136–142. A detailed analysis of the letter and of the figure of Sima Qian can be found in Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, Michael Nylan, and Hans van Ess, eds. *The Letter to Ren An and Sima Qian's Legacy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).

alive. After a panicked struggle in the hall, the king stabbed Jing Ke to death, ending his failed assassination attempt.

For the Jing Ke unit, I have students first complete an assignment in which they paraphrase the story, focusing on major figures and plot points and important details. I then select two students to present their version of the story in class. The students are expected to use illustrations, photos, or a short video to explain their major arguments. After the student presentations, I provide examples of how popular the story of Jing Ke has remained throughout pre-modern and contemporary China in a short PowerPoint-accompanied lecture. I show the students posters of modern film adaptations, the book cover of Nobel laureate Mo Yan's 莫言 (1955–) *Our Jing Ke* (*Wo men de Jing Ke* 我們的荊軻), the biography of Jing Ke in a contemporary Chinese language and literature textbook, depictions of Jing Ke in television series and video games, and even a comic sketch from the 2012 Chinese Spring Festival Gala, “Jing Ke Assassinates the King of Qin” (*Jing Ke ci Qinwang* 荊軻刺秦王). These images are meant to pique student interest into why and how the figure of Jing Ke has endured for over two millennia.

I frame this problem with two key questions: If it is true that “winners write history,” why have so many Chinese poets and scholars written about Jing Ke, a failed assassin? What magic and power does his story possess? Students then read Yuri Pine's article, “A Hero Terrorist: Adoration of Jing Ke Revisited,” which includes several translations of poems on Jing Ke into English, along with other English translations of Chinese poems on Jing Ke. Below are selections from some of the poems that I use in class:

Poems on History VI, Zuo Si¹⁵

Jing Ke drank in the Yan market,
Intoxicated, his vigor became ever greater.
He sang sadly to accompany Jianli's playing,

¹⁵ For more information about Zuo Si, see Yue Zhang, “Zuo Si ji (The Collection of Zuo Si)” in *Early Medieval Chinese Texts*, edited by Cynthia L. Chennault, Keith N. Knapp, Alan J. Berkowitz, and Albert E. Dien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 514–518.

As if there were no people around.

...

Although superiors regarded themselves valuable,

He saw them as dust and dirt.

Although inferiors regarded themselves lowly,

He treated them as if they were worth their weight in gold (Zhang 2017, 96).

Poem on Jing Ke, Tao Yuanming

[Prince] Dan of Yan was good at raising *shi*,

He aspired to revenge on powerful Ying,

He gathered the best men in a hundred,

And by the year's end he attained Jing Qing.

...

Alas, his [Jing Ke's] swordsmanship was deficient,

And the miraculous achievement was therefore not attained.

Yet although this man has perished,

His sentiments will linger throughout the ages (Pine 2008, 10–11).

Matching a Poem on Jing Ke, Su Shi

Prince Dan could not wait any longer,

His retainer did not stand out from the many

...

Until now, the people in All under Heaven,

Are sorry for [the state of] Yan and would like it to succeed.

I am putting the book aside and sigh deeply,

One can see the sentiments lingering throughout the ages (Pine 2008, 14).¹⁶

Students must apply the knowledge they have developed over the course thus far to detect the subtleties of how poets framed the story of Jing Ke's biography. The

¹⁶ The first two lines in the quote are my translation, and the rest follows Yuri Pine's article, "A Hero Terrorist: Adoration of Jing Ke Revisited", *Asia Major*, 21.2 (2008), 14.

literary appropriation and reception of the Jing Ke story is a vivid illustration of how a narrative becomes part of a cultural repertoire used by innumerable poets.

Students tend to notice the focus of poets on the motivations and efficacy of Jing Ke's assassination attempt. Zuo Si, Tao Yuanming, and Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) all express pity for Jing Ke and appreciation for his spirit; all three poets assert that his lofty ideals deserve to be remembered. These poets connect to Jing Ke spiritually by using his story to reflect on their own personal experiences. The experience they have had so far in the course using reception theory leads them to notice these common threads in the reception and appropriation of the Jing Ke story. Through analyzing the Zuo, Tao, and Su poems, students are able to further develop their ability to critically evaluate how historical figures are commemorated in Chinese poetry.

At the same time that I want students to note what draws these poems, I also want them to notice what distinguishes each poem from the others. For example, Zuo Si focuses on Jing Ke as a maverick, using his figure to pose a challenge to the hierarchical and aristocratic social system of the Western Jin dynasty (265–316) in which Zuo lived. Tao Yuanming, on the other hand, highlights Jing Ke's loyalty to Prince Dan, and his heroic attack on a tyrant. Su Shi holds a more complex and ambivalent attitude towards Jing Ke than either of the earlier two poets, believing that the assassination was shortsighted and ill-planned, but nevertheless moved by Jing Ke's courage and grieved by the story's conclusion. As Pine explains, "Rationally, the plot to assassinate the king of Qin was a miserable failure, and its performers do not deserve laudations. Nonetheless, one cannot help but admire Jing Ke's integrity and commitment, which are hinted at through the reference to Tao Qian [Tao Yuanming] and to the *Shiji* narrative." (Pine 2008, 15)

Many of these differences can be attributed to the different life experiences and historical backgrounds of the three poets, who lived during the Western Jin dynasty, the Eastern Jin (317–420)/Liu Song (420–479) dynasties, and the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) respectively. Students have read some background materials on

these historical periods and so they naturally link the socio-political history of each era with the poets' different readings on the same historical figure. By studying the various interpretations of the Jing Ke story, students gain an awareness of the moral debates surrounding this well-known assassination. They also learn something about literary appropriation by seeing how each poet has adopted a different approach for using historical lore—changing a historical figure's image, adding a new plot to the existing one, or offering a new interpretation of an old story.

To supplement these literary reinterpretations of the Jing Ke story, if time allows, I show parts of two very popular and influential film adaptations of the story: Chen Kaige's 陳凱歌 (1952–) *The Emperor and the Assassin* and Zhang Yimou's 張藝謀 (1950–) *Hero*. The first hews relatively closely to the version provided by the *Records* and *Strategies*, while the second alters that narrative significantly. These adaptations render the poems the students have read into concrete filmic images, making these historical topics more approachable.

Teaching poems on history through the lens of reception studies reveals the intricacy and complexity of how poems use and disseminate historical lore. These lectures hopefully train students not only to critically examine the representations of history they read in poetry, but also the representations of history they find throughout the media they encounter in their daily lives. Chinese writers have adapted stories, events, and figures from history throughout the long Chinese literary tradition, right up to the present day. Such stories continue to shape national identity and character.

Conclusion

Reception studies traces developments in how readers understand poems. It is a perspective which illustrates how social, political, and intellectual environments outside of the text influence reception. This methodology reveals the complexities of how readers inherit, appropriate, or edit earlier sources, and how aesthetic tastes can change over the course of time.

This article has offered a method for using reception studies to teach classical Chinese poetry. It describes the theoretical background for such a course, the

materials used in the course, and concrete examples from my experience teaching two major poetic subgenres: “poetry of fields and gardens” and “poems on history.” Beyond the two examples given in this paper, the reception approach can also be used to teach other prominent Chinese poets, such as Li Bai, Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), and Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084–1155). As more and more English translations and secondary scholarship on the reception of these poets have been produced in recent years, a reception-studies-informed pedagogy has become increasingly viable. For the convenience of interested instructors, I have attached a short bibliography of sources that would be useful for such an approach.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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