

Culture and Text in Teaching Chinese Literature

By Yanfang Tang

Gaining knowledge about Chinese culture has long been considered an important goal of teaching Chinese literature in the West.¹ However, are we teaching Chinese literature effectively to achieve such a goal? What is “culture”? What is “literature”? Is, particularly, our attention to text sufficient in helping our students understand the important cultural issues that underlie it? I raise this last question because it seems that, regardless of the objectives we set for our course, we often consciously or unconsciously take studying Chinese literature as understanding the meanings of a given number of representative texts. While identifying and analyzing the meanings of a text is what we do mostly in the classroom, in our preoccupation with the text and, particularly, in our habitual emphasis on close reading, we may sometimes make the interpretative process an objective in itself.²

To rethink our goals for teaching Chinese literature, or to reassess our instructional methodology in light of this reflection, it is necessary that we first consider the meaning of the term “culture.” A concept that has been defined and redefined for many decades in many disciplinary fields, culture has a wide array of meanings, and there is probably no single definition that would satisfy everyone. However, the following conception of culture, advanced in recent years in foreign language pedagogy, seems to be the most insightful, comprehensive, and useful:³

According to this conceptual model, culture is composed of three parts, each part interacting with the others in ways indicated by the arrows in the diagram. Literature falls under the category of “cultural products.” This suggests that literature is only a derivative, in the sense that it is not self-generated, but is created and determined by something else called “cultural perspectives.” Clifford Geertz has formerly defined culture as “a web of significances” that human beings have spun around themselves.⁴ Culture, in other words, is a system of meanings by which, as Wimal Dissanayake has put it, “human beings externalize and communicate the significances that they attach to their own actions as well as those of others and to the environment that they inhabit.”⁵ Literature is one mode of such externalization, which is to say that it is one of the many symbols in a mean-

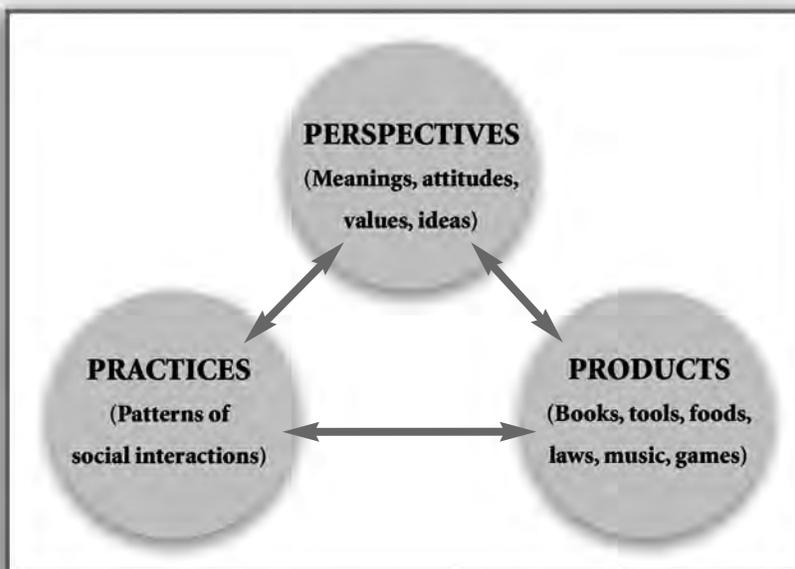
ing system. Text speaks to us only symbolically, and to fully understand the messages it conveys, we must go beyond the words to tackle the meaning system, that is, the values, beliefs, or, simply, cultural perspectives of the people who have produced it.

As a set of values and beliefs shared by the members of a given ethnic group, cultural perspectives change from society to society, and therefore for the individuals of one society to understand those of another, they must relinquish their own cultural perspectives temporarily or imaginarily so that they will not look at the customs, behaviors, and thought patterns of a second culture from the angles of their own cultural norms and paradigms. Applied to studying Chinese culture through Chinese literary products, this means that as we direct the study, we must make sure that students approach the text from a proper viewpoint, because, obviously, viewpoints being different, the same text may generate different interpretations. While all interpretations may be valid to a varying degree, when it comes to understanding another culture, the most appropriate approach seems to be adopting native perspectives, looking at things through the lenses of native sensibilities and preferences.

Take *Li sao* (Encountering Sorrows) by Qu Yuan (340–278 BCE)⁶ for an example. The poem, in an autobiographical form,

recounts the poet’s ideals, struggles, and disappointments in a highly symbolic and emotionally charged manner. It is one of the most frequently read poems by Chinese readers. For over two thousand years, it has inspired and comforted countless individuals in their times of difficulty and disappointment.⁷ Chinese readers are particularly fond of *Li sao* because of their “insider’s” awareness, or because of their ability to empathize with the poet, which transforms the poem into a powerful tool

of self-expression, voicing the thoughts and feelings of all who read it. However, my teaching experience in the American classroom indicates that such a highly regarded poem in its own culture does not seem to fare well in the Western world. It fails to produce the same emotional resonances among Western readers, and probably worse still, the response of many American students to this poem is sometimes purely negative. These students think of Qu Yuan, or the



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speaker in the poem, as arrogant and extremely boastful. They also describe him as a “complainer”: “nothing seems to be good enough for him,” as one of my students put it.

Such reactions toward Qu Yuan or his poem should not be entirely surprising considering that our students mostly come from a Western background and, more importantly, form their opinions based on the convenient, if not the only, tool available to them: textual analysis. However, if the goal of teaching Chinese literature is to establish understanding of Chinese culture among American students, it is imperative that we do something so that our students will understand the underlying cultural perspectives that account for the poem’s everlasting appeal to Chinese readers. In fact, *Li sao* offers a great opportunity to teach about the general spirit of Chinese literature, and about Chinese views of life rooted in the culture’s most fundamental meaning systems. Textual analysis is not sufficient, and neither is the historical information concerning Qu Yuan’s life and the political circumstances in which the poet found himself. Class discussions must extend to cover such fundamental cultural issues as Chinese views of literature and, most importantly, the widely held beliefs regarding the meanings of life in traditional China.

Li sao indeed has the potential to prompt a culturally uninformed reader to think of the poet as being boastful and prone to complaints. The poem begins with a proud announcement, unusual in Western eyes, informing the reader of the speaker’s honorable ancestral lineage and of an auspicious birth that sets him apart from all others:

*Scion of the high lord of Gao Yang,
Bo Yong was my father’s name.
When She Ti pointed to the first month of the year,
On the day geng-yin I passed from the womb.
My father, seeing the aspect of my nativity,
Took omens to give me an auspicious name.
The name he gave me was True Exemplar;
The title he gave me was Divine Balance.⁸*

Following this proud and unreserved statement about the poet’s inborn qualities associated with a distinguished birth are a series of observations on how the poet added to what he was granted by birth by seeking self-cultivation, resulting in a man of great virtue who can “show the way” for the King as the latter governs the world:

*The days and months hurried on, never delaying;
Springs and autumns sped by in endless alternation:
And I thought how the trees and flowers were fading
and falling,
And feared that my Fairest’s beauty would fade too.
‘Gather the flowers of youth and cast out the impure!
Why will you not change the error of your ways?
I have harnessed brave coursers for you to gallop forth with:
Come, let me go before and show you the way!’*

The speaker uses the recurrent images of fragrant flowers to symbolize his virtues, setting a sharp contrast to the images of impure and foul weeds used to refer to the incompetent and morally corrupted ministers. The poet stands away from them, spiritually if not physically, as he believes he is pure and noble, refusing to be contaminated by their immoral influence. The rest of the poem is filled with the speaker’s sharp criticisms of these unprincipled and unscrupulous courtiers and his recurring complaint that, outstanding as he is, he is unfairly perceived and treated by the King. After his repeated failures in courting a female, who symbolizes a wise and single-minded king, the speaker decides to kill himself because he realizes that there is after all no king in the world worthy of his distinguished service.

This textual examination of *Li sao* yields an image of the poet as disillusioned, whining, and critical. On the other hand, Qu Yuan’s life stories, though informative, are inadequate to make clear why the poet writes in such a self-righteous, self-affirming, and yet in the meantime self-pitying and complaining tone. To explain this phenomenon, we must briefly review the traditional Chinese attitudes toward poetry, and to follow this review with a discussion of the general outlook on life in traditional Chinese society. Taking form long before Qu Yuan appeared on the political and literary scenes, Chinese cultural tradition regarding poetry began with viewing it as an expression of one’s emotions and moral inclinations. The anthology *Shi jing* (*Book of Poetry*), composed between the eleventh and sixth centuries BCE, already indicated that in ancient China, poetry was used to “express one’s intent” (*shi yan zhi*). As expressed in its preface (*Shi daxu*), concerning the origin of the poems, “Poetry is where the intent of the heart [or mind] goes. Lying in the heart [or mind], it is ‘intent,’ when uttered in words, it is ‘poetry’.”⁹ Later in the Eastern Zhou period (771–256 BCE), it became a common phenomenon that, instead of expressing one’s thoughts and feelings in statements, scholar-officials simply used poems from *Shi jing* to achieve their purposes, be they political, diplomatic, or literary. This practice established an intimate relationship between poetry and politics, an assumption firmly maintained by the Chinese that “literature is a vehicle for conveying Dao (the moral way) (*wen yi zai dao*).” It also reinforced the Chinese belief that, when it comes to the expression of feelings, poetry represents a most powerful and effective tool. According to recorded history, Qu Yuan was the first individual to express himself by writing his own poems. Some scholars have attributed Qu Yuan’s unrestrained poetic style to the highly outgoing and free disposition of the Chu people.¹⁰ Whether or not this was the case, poetry undoubtedly provided Qu Yuan a most intimate and articulate means to express his *zhi* or intent.

What is *zhi*? Or what is Qu Yuan’s personal intent that seems to have determined not only what he expressed but also how he expressed it in his poetry? Traditionally, *zhi* has been interpreted as “where the mind or heart goes” and taken to mean, in general, the

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heart's wish or the mind's intent of an individual.¹¹ Such emotional or moral inclinations appear to be self-imposed, but in reality they reflect the values, beliefs, and aspirations that society has instilled in the mind of the individual. In traditional Chinese society, the primary concerns of the gentry, who ruled the country, were social peace and stability, and the life of a scholar acquired its value from the contributions he made in helping the ruler to achieve these sacred objectives. Beginning with *shi* (gentleman or scholar) in the Spring and Autumn period (722–481 BCE), members of the literati dedicated their life to the quest for order in society. They engaged themselves in theoretical debates, and took it upon themselves to advise the ruler with their best intentions and visions. In other words, they had a sense of mission, which was to secure the fate of the nation and see to it that the society was peaceful, prosperous, and stable. To best fulfill this mission, a literatus must seek an official career, a phenomenon succinctly described by the Confucian saying as *xue er you ze shi* (Officialdom is a natural outlet for good scholars). Although *shi*, seeking an official appointment, turned out to be extremely lucrative, serving the state or, for that matter, the ruler, by holding a bureaucratic position was first and foremost a barometer of one's sense of social obligation, because the societal expectations of a scholar were such that he must "cultivate himself, regulate the family, run the country, and govern the world" (*xiu shen, qi jia, zhi guo, ping tianxia*). A life without political service was believed to be of little significance and would be soon forgotten by posterity. In fact, one of the chief concerns of traditional Chinese scholars was how to leave behind a name through their performance in the three areas of service, speech, and virtue. Called *san baxiu* (three immortalities) or *li gong, li yan, and li de* (established service, speech, and virtue), leaving behind a name would be impossible unless one sought and succeeded in officialdom. As Qu Yuan, after being banished from court, anxiously told us in *Li sao*, "For old age comes creeping and soon will be upon me, / And I fear I shall not leave behind an enduring name."

Hence, politics comprised a fundamental part of a poet's life in traditional China, so much so that the central concern of a typical poet did not lie in his success in writing poetry but in his achievements and fame in officialdom. Poetry served only as a means to express his ideas and feelings, particularly in the times of political setbacks, whereas officialdom provided him an opportunity to put his talent in use for the betterment of society. To pursue an official career, one must be equipped with education and moral ability. In other words, as the aforementioned saying goes, one must first "cultivate oneself" in virtues before one could "run the country" or "govern the world." Virtue was such an important prerequisite for one's official career that not only was the ruler expected to select the most virtuous to be his helpers, but one's rank in the bureaucracy was also supposedly based on one's accumulation of virtues. These facts account for the prominent tone of self-righteousness in *Li sao*, or for the extent to which Qu Yuan goes to inform the reader of his distin-

guished moral qualities acquired especially through self-cultivation symbolized in the poem by the speaker's diligent effort in attending to the flowers:

*I had tended many an acre of orchids,
And planted a hundred rods of melilotus;
I had raised sweet lichens and the cart-halting flower,
And as arums mingled with fragrant angelica,
And hoped that when leaf and stem were in their full prime,
When the time had come, I could reap a fine harvest.*

Unfortunately, success in officialdom was not proportional with one's abilities and virtues in traditional China, founded on an autocratic system, but lay inevitably in the discretion of the ruler. More often than not, a man of great virtue found himself disfavored by the imperial monarch and hence removed from court, as in the case of Qu Yuan. This conflict between one's intent to serve and one's inability to serve due to the ruler's interference generates a strong sense of despair on the part of the literatus. Translated into his poetic works, this feeling of despair often results in what appears to be excessive complaint or self-pity. The conflict between the personal ideals of *zhi* and the political reality is also responsible for another dominant tone in a poet's writings, that of exceeding distress and worry. It has been pointed out that from the early beginnings, Chinese poet-officials have been susceptible to a worrying mentality (*youhuan yishi*) because of their inability to serve on the one hand and their tremendous concern for their country and people on the other.¹² Chinese literature seems to have well documented this worrying mentality of the traditional Chinese poets as we can detect its strong presence in the writings of many great poets, beginning with Qu Yuan's *Li sao*.

This short excursion into traditional Chinese culture makes it clear that *Li sao* actually voices a recurring theme in Chinese literature, that of a talented scholar deprived of the opportunities to put his knowledge and skills into practice. The strong frustration voiced by Qu Yuan in *Li sao* reflects not only the poet's emotional state at unfair treatment by the King but also his deep-seated desire for officialdom, typical of the general mentality of the intelligentsia in traditional China (*guan benwei yishi*). Unfortunately, this information about traditional Chinese values is not readily available in the poem. The inability to explain Qu Yuan's frustration signals, undoubtedly, a lack of proper cultural perspectives on the part of some students. However, to interpret *Li sao* as "an account of the poet's personal struggle for individuation or self-completion," as some scholars would have us think,¹³ is perhaps also a result of limited textual examination. Viewing the poem from proper cultural perspectives, Qu Yuan was not an individualist acting against the prevailing social norms. Viewed in a larger context, he was actually a conservative and a loyalist, who actively participated in mainstream social ideology as reflected in his quest for officialdom and his loyalty to the King. This demonstrates that in discussing *Li sao*, as in discussing

any other Chinese text, purely textual analysis is not enough and can sometimes lead to misunderstandings. Effort is needed to place the studied text in a larger cultural context to examine Chinese value or belief systems. After all, literature is nothing but a cultural product, and the goal for teaching a foreign literature is not to study this product *per se*, but to gain an understanding of the underlying cultural perspectives. ■

NOTES

1. I would like to first thank the two anonymous readers for their valuable suggestions on the revision of this essay.
2. We may embed the text in its social and historical context, introducing students to the life stories of the author or to the social and historical conditions under which the text was produced. However, our focus still seems to be on the literary work. In essence, the historical knowledge only serves as a means for the students to understand the text, rather than the culture through the text.
3. *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century: Including Chinese, Classical Languages, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, A Collaborative Project of ACTFL, AATF, AATG, AATI, AATSP, ACL, ACTR, CLASS, and NCJLT-ATJ, 1999), 474.
4. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 5.
5. Wimal Dissanayake, "Cultural Identity and Asian Cinema: An Introduction," in *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India, and China*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 2.
6. Qu Yuan has been identified as the first poet in Chinese literary history whose poetry represents an individual voice. A native of Chu during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), he was a scholar and eloquent orator at an early age, and was summoned to serve at court in his early twenties. Qu Yuan's ability and moral integrity soon won him King Huai's favor. However, his success subjected him to the jealousy of a handful of courtiers, and his proposal of "government by the virtue and the able" resulted in these courtiers' schemes to have him removed from court. They slandered him in front of the King, causing doubts in the latter's mind about Qu Yuan's intention and loyalty. As a result, Qu Yuan was exiled, and *Li sao*, written during the exile, records the poet's feelings over this unjust treatment, his remonstrations with the King over right and wrong, and his reaffirmations of his loyalty to the King. In his exile, Qu Yuan refused to go and be employed by other states, a common practice at that time, because

of his love for his own country and his commitment to the King. However, when Chu was defeated by Qin, the superpower that finally conquered all other states and gained the hegemony in the empire, Qu Yuan committed suicide by drowning himself in the Milo River on a fifth day of a fifth month in the Chinese lunar calendar. Legend has it that upon learning of his death, the people of Chu threw rice dumplings into the river and raced dragon boats in it to keep the fish away. In the south of China, the custom of dragon boat racing is still alive today as a way to commemorate Qu Yuan, called in the twentieth century a "people's poet" or a "patriotic poet."

7. For the influence of Qu Yuan and his poetry on Chinese intelligentsia from the Han dynasty down to the twentieth century, see Laurence A. Schneider, *A Madman of Ch'u: The Chinese Myth of Loyalty and Dissent* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1980).
8. The English translations of *Li sao* in this essay are all taken from *The Songs of the South*, translated by David Hawkes (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985).
9. James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 69.
10. Pan Xiaolong, "Lun Qu ci zhi kuangfang he qiyang," *Wenyi yanjiu*, 2 (1992):130–140. One of the seven states in the Warring State period, Chu was located on the banks of the Yangzi river in its middle reaches. Warm and humid, the area was marked by stretches of high mountains, the tributaries of the Yangzi river, and broad ancient forests. This geographical location and the local worship of shamanism were, according to many scholars, contributing factors for the rich imagination and unrestrained emotional temperament of people living in the area.
11. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 68.
12. Lu Yulin, *Chuantong shici de wenhua jieshi* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 2003), 41.
13. A typical expression of such opinion can be found in Jerah Johnson's translation, *Li Sao: A Poem on Reliving Sorrows* (Miami: Olivant Press, 1959), 11.

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