

Masters and Masterpieces of Chinese Culture: An Interdisciplinary Study

by Kelly Ann Long

Teachers seek opportunities for content-rich educational experiences. In the Poudre School District in Fort Collins, Colorado, a Focus Grant funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities provided just such an opportunity. Each month, twenty-four teachers engaged in a weekend of intellectual stimulation and discussion. The NEH Focus Grant enabled educators to explore areas of the humanities through focused study of one society. "Masters and Masterpieces of Chinese Culture: An Interdisciplinary Study" provided a unique opportunity to broaden understanding of the aesthetic underpinnings of Chinese culture. The exploration of China's history, philosophy and artistic traditions provided participants with broader perspectives and insights to cultural studies in general.

NEH Focus Grant opportunities provide up to \$25,000 in support of projects that focus upon disciplines in the humanities and that support collaboration between individuals and institutions involved in K-16 education. Our NEH grant provided stipends for presenters and participants, as well as books and materials. "Masters and Masterpieces of Chinese Culture" provides a model for exploration of topics pertinent to areas of Asian Humanities and an approach that can be employed in other areas of cultural study.

The Focus Grant facilitated an exchange of

KELLY ANN LONG teaches Asian Humanities and World Authors in the International Baccalaureate program, and Asian Humanities for Poudre High School in Fort Collins, Colorado. She is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. Intellectual History at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Long was a 1992 recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities Teacher-Scholar Award. Her research interests in U. S.-China Cultural exchange developed as a result of that opportunity.

expertise between educators from different schools, disciplines and grade levels. Participants included teachers and staff from three district high schools, one junior high, and three universities, representing disciplines of social studies, language arts, foreign language, fine arts, and physical education. Along with classroom teachers, the group included a student teacher, departmental aides, school counselors, and a retired teacher who works with preparation of student-teachers. By inviting a diverse group of individuals from a variety of disciplines, we broadened the impact of the seminar. Our study focused upon content relevant to national, state, and local standards in English and Social Studies.

Our district humanities courses explore creative endeavors of various cultures through an integrated study of art, architecture, music, theater, dance, literature, philosophy, and history. One difficulty in teaching such comprehensive interdisciplinary humanities classes is that few of us are trained in all of these disciplines. Fewer still have had in-depth instruction in the content, form, function, and aesthetics of major artistic expressions in Asian cultures. China's long and complex history presents a particular challenge for teachers who strive to present a meaningful, coherent, and integrated approach to its diverse cultural achievements.

The NEH seminar directly addressed these needs. It provided challenges and intellectual stimulation which enriched teachers and directly benefited their students. All participants integrated some aspect of their learning about China into their professional endeavors. A physical education teacher developed a unit for her wellness class which introduced philosophical underpinnings of Chinese martial arts before she invited a guest to teach tai chi chuan. Seminar readings and discussions about relationship and family provided insight for a counselor who sometimes works with Chinese students and their families. Teachers of social studies, literature, and Asian humanities classes found ample opportunity to apply gleanings from the seminar, as will be discussed below. As a result of a shared and dynamic learning experience, teacher-participants felt better prepared to help their students synthesize the study of humanities disciplines and Chinese culture.

Our studies spoke beyond the Chinese culture to provide a system of inquiry and an understanding of how creative works reflect cultural values, shape cultural traditions, and fix self-perceptions within a society. Through an in-depth study of one culture, we became better able to read a variety of cultural texts. We studied not only Chinese achievements, but also considered the ways in which all cultures construct images of self and other. We discussed how the arts reinforce and sometimes bring into question cultural assumptions and characteristics. Such investigations improved our ability to address a variety of concerns which confront teachers of cultural studies. Of course, these monthly interactions between scholars and learners did not address all concerns of educators who teach about China.

As scholars shared their expertise and scholarly interests with secondary teachers, we developed a community of inquiry among those interested in Asian Studies and nurtured collaboration between the educational levels. Area experts selected the texts and directed sessions in which we sought to determine underlying cultural values and aesthetic principles revealed by masterpieces within each discipline. Scholars from Colorado State University and the University of Colorado at Boulder conducted most of the fourteen sessions which took place from 6 p.m. until 9 p.m. on Friday afternoon and 9 a.m. until noon on Saturday mornings.

Each session included readings, lectures and discussions focused upon distinct periods in Chinese history and key documents of Chinese cultural expression. Reading selections included philosophical writings, historical texts, poetry, song lyrics, traditional and modern Chinese theatrical works, works of modern fiction, and theory and criticism of fine arts. The selected readings provided added depth for participants already knowledgeable about China, as well as an introduction for those just beginning their study of China. Excerpts from several selections proved useful in the high school classroom.

The central question of the seminar was: Is there a Chinese aesthetic, and if so, how it is revealed in the masterpieces of Chinese creative endeavor. Other guiding questions included: In what ways do traditional and modern creative achievements of China draw upon and reflect the central values of that culture? What continuities and transitions are

revealed in masterpieces throughout Chinese history? How does the outer form of an artistic expression reflect underlying social values and philosophical frameworks?

We examined the ideal of the Confucian Scholar, the cultured individual who knew and performed the arts of writing, poetry, painting, and music. The group scrutinized single works that embodied several disciplines. The criteria by which a Chinese viewer or reader might determine the artistic merit of a work became a focus of discussion. We asked: how were the designations of masters and masterpieces made historically? What were the aims of these cultural expressions, and why were certain works created during particular periods considered exemplary? Readings provided a basis for understanding the aesthetic criteria by which, and the cultural context in which, Chinese masters and masterpieces were designated. By reading works that revealed the importance of memory in Chinese arts, we learned about artists' contributions to subsequent ages and considered how these shaped an ongoing stream of cultural expression.

The seminar concept of focused inquiry around a central concept worked well in the high school classroom. Students responded positively to an investigation of the Chinese culture that sought to trace continuity and transitions in that culture. By observing how an idea such as the concept of the individual, nature, or social responsibility was treated through time and in different art forms, students refined their own ability to synthesize concepts. Tracing philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings evidenced in various art forms also offered a useful tool for approaching the vast history of China and its arts.

The first NEH session provided an overview of Chinese history up to the Tang Dynasty, along with an introduction to three philosophical traditions in China. In preparation for these sessions, participants read Ray Huang's *China: A Macro History*, Wing-tsit Chang's *The Way of the Tao*, selections from *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *The Sayings of Lao Zi*, and a selection on Chan Buddhism from Theodore De Bary's *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. These philosophical systems provided themes for our exploration of artistic expressions through Chinese history. Comic book versions of Confucianism and Taoism worked well to introduce high school students to basic philosophical ideals of Chinese

society. Students traced the influence of Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist principles in the poetry of Li Bai, Tu Fu, and Wang Wei prior to writing their own in the style poems based upon these masters.

In the second session, the seminar group surveyed Chinese fine arts, focusing primarily upon works created during the Tang Dynasty. This session centered upon the Silk Route as a means of exploring cultural exchange and the evolution of artistic forms in China. *The Principles of Chinese Painting* by George Rowley, and chapters from Michael Sullivan's *The Arts of China* served as primary texts. As we learned about the criteria used by the Chinese to assess masterpieces, we also learned about symbols and methods of expression utilized in the fine arts. We studied the application of Chinese artistic conventions to a variety of subjects, examined techniques, and speculated upon the meanings of various works. After learning about five major styles of Chinese painting—courtly, monumental, literal, lyric, and spontaneous—we observed works of several masters, and discussed how the Chinese traditionally evaluated mastery. We applied our understanding through oral critique of a selection of scrolls.

In the high school classroom, students also responded well to this approach. Using slides and reproductions, we discussed traditional subject matter, use of negative space, preference for asymmetry, and the use of color in Chinese paintings. After study, students offered insightful oral evaluations of reproductions of Chinese masterpieces. Students proved adept at applying specific and culturally relevant criteria to their evaluations of the Chinese arts. They also painted bamboo and landscapes in the style of Chinese masters, added their own in-the-style poetry to the work, and created chops to sign their names.

The seminar group continued the exploration of the interrelationship of the arts in China in a session on Chinese poetry. Discussion focused around two major topics: themes of Chinese classical poetry, and translations into English. Along with the central text, *The Heart of Chinese Poetry*, by Greg Whincup, we used selections from a variety of other texts. We studied the themes of love, war, nature, and religion in order to contrast Western treatment of the same topics. Observations about differences in how these themes were handled through the three-thou-

sand-year history of Chinese poetry also surfaced through our study. The lectures focused upon factors that drive choices translators make—relating both to the form of the original poems and to changing literary tastes in the target language (English). After listening to readings of poetry in Chinese and English, we discussed key concerns of Chinese poetry and practiced our skills at evaluating translations. In order to better understand how a Chinese poem works, participants tried their own hands at the translator's task. Using word-by-word translations into English of the Chinese characters, we attempted to reflect a sensitivity to the aesthetics that drive Chinese poetry as we translated the words into poetic English.

This activity was especially successful with high school students who learned about poetic techniques through their own struggles to create translations. A teacher of French used the Chinese poetry unit to introduce poetic form and translational concerns to her students. After using the translation packet on Chinese poetry as a general introduction to the topic of translation, she used the same mode of inquiry to introduce French poems and translations. In an International Baccalaureate World Authors class, the translation unit proved fruitful in helping students to practice their skills in close reading of a text. Students examined and contrasted the effect of particular word choices, use of figurative language, use or lack of rhyme scheme, prevailing imagery, and the influence of these elements on tone and meaning of a poem.

The NEH group continued exploration of China's history with a lecture focused upon transitions and consistencies in the Chinese culture from the Tang Dynasty to the mid-1800s, again reading from *China: A Macro History*. The lecture provided background for examination of the Chinese performing arts. Beginning with a discussion of traditional Chinese theatrical forms, we learned about ingredients of traditional Chinese theater, including story line, staging techniques, costuming, dance, acrobatics, music, and presentational styles. A reader's theater of *Peach Blossom Fan* led to discussion of how the script reflected the major characteristics, conventions, and concerns of traditional Chinese theater.

The following session centered on modern theater and considered events in twentieth

ESSAYS

century China which brought theater to the forefront of the modern literary movement. Through use of a dramatic script, Lao She's *Teahouse*, we were introduced to issues confronting China as it moved into the twentieth century. We read Tsao Yu's *Sunrise* to explore Western influences upon the Chinese culture and theater. A short and inexpensive text, *Teahouse* served well in the high school literature and humanities classroom to introduce modern Chinese theater, while also introducing major episodes in the history of twentieth century China.

The concluding NEH session introduced dominant themes, authors, and literary works of twentieth century Chinese literature. We focused upon works of social usefulness or social protest. After a survey of the major authors and themes of the May Fourth Movement, we concentrated upon contemporary works. Sections from Jonathan Spence's *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* provided insight to historical events that influenced the direction of China's literary movement. *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused*, edited by Howard Goldblatt, served as the primary text for study of contemporary fiction. Professor Goldblatt engaged us in discussion of his own interaction and work with dissident writers, and discussed issues and concerns relevant to translators of contemporary fiction.

The impact of this Focus Grant will be ongoing and far reaching. All sessions were videotaped and each high school media center has a full set of the sessions available for use by staff and students. In addition, a supplemental grant of \$1,500 provided by the China and Inner Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies enabled the seminar group to continue our studies into the following academic year. Readings have focused upon the questions: What was the role of the individual in traditional Chinese culture? What is the role and definition of the individual in modern Chinese culture? How does the history and literature of post-1949 China support or refute the idea of an underlying aesthetic? What continuities or transformations are revealed in the literature surveyed?

Beyond our expectations, the grant also prepared the way for other China related opportunities in our school district. Largely because of the enthusiasm which developed district-wide as a result of this study, we were invited to participate in an exchange

facilitated by the American Council of Learned Societies. Poudre School District is hosting an exchange teacher from Beijing, China, who teaches Asian humanities courses as part of a team and also Chinese language to high school and elementary students as well as adults. We hope to send a P.S.D. teacher to China next year and to again participate as a recipient district in the exchange program.

The NEH Focus Grant serves as a prototype for the development of content-based teacher development seminars facilitated by Colorado State University scholars for Poudre School District teachers. The goals of creating sequencing and coherence between the educational levels, and the need for content area professional development for teachers provide incentives for further collaboration between university and K-12 educators. The National Endowment for the Humanities provides an exciting and valuable opportunity for such explorations through the Humanities Focus Grants.

SELECTED READINGS ORGANIZED BY SEMINAR

HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

Chan, Wing-tsit. *The Way of Lao Tzu*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1963.

Chung, Tsai Chih. *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Singapore: Asiapac, 1993.

Chung, Tsai Chih. *The Sayings of Lao Zi*. Singapore: Asiapac, 1994.

Huang, Ray. *China: A Macro History*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1990.

FINE ARTS

Rowley, George. *Principles of Chinese Painting*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959.

Sullivan, Michael. *A Short History of Chinese Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

POETRY

Whincup, Greg. *The Heart of Chinese Poetry*. New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1987.

THEATER

She, Lao. *Teahouse*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1974.

Shang-jen, K'ung. *The Peach Blossom Fan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

Yu, Tsao. *Sunrise*. Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1960, 1978.

MODERN LITERATURE

Goldblatt, Howard, translator. *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused*. New York: Grove Atlantic, 1994.

Spence, Jonathan. *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1895-1980*. New York: Penguin Books, 1981.

RECOMMENDED READING

Baims, Geremie, and John Minford. *Seeds of Fire, Chinese Voices of Conscience*. New York: Noonday Press, 1989.

Birch, Cyril, editor. *Anthology of Chinese Literature, vol. 2, From the 14th Century to the Present*. New York: Grove Press, 1974.

Chaves, Jonathan. *The Columbia Book of Later Chinese Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Dolby, William. *A History of Chinese Drama*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976.

Man, Sai-cheong. "Li Yu on the Performing Arts," *Renditions: A Chinese-English Translation Magazine*. Hong Kong: Wing Tai Cheung, (Autumn, 1974).

Owen, Stephen. *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Spence, Jonathan. *The Search for Modern China*. New York: Norton, 1990.

Sullivan, Michael. *The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry and Calligraphy*. New York: George Braziller, 1974.

Waley, Arthur. *Study of Chinese Painting*. New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1974.

Watson, Burton. *Early Chinese Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962.

———. *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Yee, Lee. *The New Realism, Writings from China After the Cultural Revolution*.

Hippocrene Books, 1983. ■

Editor's Note: If you are interested in more information about National Endowment for the Humanities Focus Grants contact:

Bruce Robinson
National Endowment for the Humanities
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20506
Phone 202-606-8377
e-mail brobinson@neh.fed.us.