Since I decided to pursue graduate degrees in Chinese literature, both modern and literary Chinese have been essential to my work over the past thirty years. My research focuses on the historical development of literature from the second half of the Tang, the Five Dynasties, and the Northern Song dynasties, a period from roughly the mid-8th through the early twelfth centuries. In my work, I often consider the ways Chinese writers engaged the past in literature—both the historical past, the record of events that constituted a shared cultural narrative, and the literary past, the inherited body of texts. And I was lucky enough to come of age intellectually in an era when Western scholarship on China, including the study of pre-modern Chinese literature, was booming. I am fascinated by moments of innovation and novelty in the Chinese literary tradition, and by how writers defended newness in a culture that venerated conservatism and ancestors. I’m especially interested in the way that broad social and political changes affected Chinese literature—how writers responded to watershed moments in their writing. My first book studied the emergence of a new literary genre, song lyrics (ci 詞), in an anthology of romantic song lyrics; my second examines the influence of friendship—the social practice of friendship as well as its literary and philosophical concerns—on the literature of the “mid-Tang” era (the 780s to the 820s). My current project explores the making of the Tang literary canon in the centuries after the dynasty’s fall.

I have also been a teacher of Chinese literature, history, and literary Chinese (文言文 wenyanwen) for the past twenty-three years, and for two brief periods in my career, I taught modern Chinese language. As a non-native, non-heritage, imperfect yet enthusiastic speaker of
Mandarin, I am very aware of the lifelong labor that is “learning Chinese.” And I’m something of an improbable student of Chinese language and literature: as a white woman who grew up in suburban Alabama in the 1970s and ‘80s, with few Chinese or Asian friends in childhood, I had no local influences that drew me to Chinese. I had studied French since I was nine and loved it, and knew that I had a gift for language and music generally, but had no exposure to foreign languages other than French, either at home or in my community. It was only in college, when I was planning either to be a scholar of French literature or a professional actor (yes: rather different choices) that my circuitous, unexpected path to Chinese literature began. It also began in English, with poetry in translation and English-language scholarship. My engagement with Chinese over time has been layered and intertwining: classical Chinese literature in English led to modern Chinese language, which led to the study of literary Chinese, which led to scholarship and translation of Chinese texts in English, which takes me to China and Taiwan (and elsewhere) for conferences with other scholars in modern Chinese. The path took yet another turn this year, since my first book has been translated and published in Chinese, and my second is currently being translated. The opportunities I have now to interact in multiple languages with a worldwide community of scholars were inconceivable when I first read Chinese poetry in translation.

Faced with the profound changes in mainland China, Taiwan, and other parts of the sinosphere over the past few decades—political revolutions, the explosion of new media, the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, even transformations in the scholarship of Tang China—scholars of Chinese culture can feel overwhelmed. I can use WeChat and Line and Facebook to stay connected to Chinese friends, resources like the Chinese journal database CNKI to stay abreast of new scholarship, and digital tools to map and understand Chinese history. And yet the material I work with, the poetry and prose of 1,000 or more years ago, has not fundamentally
changed, nor has it become magically easier to translate into English and explicate. New tools can help us decode the texts, but they do not simplify them, nor can they explain why we continue to study them. That last question has multiple dimensions and is answered differently outside and inside Chinese-speaking cultures. It is easy enough to justify the study of Chinese literature as a way to sustain cultural memory, or to preserve a national patrimony, but why should the study of Tang poetry, for example, matter in the U.S. college curriculum? How does the study of pre-modern Chinese culture, in an era of declining interest in humanities and the pre-modern world across the academy, influence the broader scholarly landscape?

Scholars of Chinese literature in the U.S. wrestle with these questions in many forms, whether in the context of defending a budget request to a dean or explaining to freshmen who Confucius was and why he will be on the exam. Though I am now at Princeton University, where the study of East Asia and pre-modern China has an illustrious history, I have spent the bulk of my career at large state universities, where such questions are often framed in financial terms, not merely as philosophical speculation. Low enrollments in a literary Chinese class can get the class canceled, no matter how critical you think it is to the curriculum. Answers claiming relevance that appeal to current events or trends, such as “you have to know who Confucius was in order to understand respect for social hierarchy in China” (possibly), or “students need to master the basics of Chinese history in order to do business in China” (unlikely), may serve short-term needs, and we deploy them that way. But the issues are also entangled with older, thornier problems: the future of the humanities in education, and the ongoing need for historical and culturally specific views of human nature and the human condition. Classical literature provides necessary perspectives in a “globalizing” world that sometimes flattens or ignores history and cultural difference. Reflecting on the role of Chinese in our varied careers, as these essays ask us to do, gives us an opportunity to consider these deeper questions.
Learning spoken and written Mandarin gave me access to the Chinese tradition through its script, and the study of literary Chinese revealed to me the ways classical literature shaped and continues to influence the modern language. (Here I observe the distinction between “classical Chinese” as the language used by elites from the Warring States through the Han, and “literary Chinese” for the literary language used from the Han through the end of imperial China and into the early 20th century.) Chinese script has historically been a powerful tool for creating cultural continuity over time and space—and also for disguising change and rupture. Most Chinese language learners have an experience that reflects this truth, such as picking up an early text like the Han historian Sima Qian’s *Historical Records* (史記 Shi ji) and being able to read a handful of characters—though not yet “words”—with a year’s study of Chinese. If students go on to study literary Chinese seriously, they acquire a sense of the historical development of the language and an appreciation of its nuances that goes beyond understanding idioms (成語 chengyu). Literary Chinese grew farther away from the spoken language over the course of its centuries of development, and it also varied greatly in style and form over time. Learning to perceive those finer distinctions—between the knotty style of prose letters by mid-Tang writer Han Yu and the elegant ease of those by Northern Song writer Ouyang Xiu, for example—is yet another critical stage on the scholar’s path.

But as I often say to students, we are fortunate that the sheer difficulty of the early years of studying modern Chinese distracts us for a while from the oceans of texts in the literary tradition. Otherwise we might quit before we really begin. In some years, I put a quotation from the Liang dynasty emperor Xiao Tong’s preface to the great sixth-century anthology, the *Selections of Refined Literature* (Wen xuan 文選), on my “Introduction to Chinese Literature” syllabus: “The names of men of letters and great talents overflow the blue bags, and
the texts of swift writings from moist brushes fill the yellow covers. Unless one omits the weeds, and collects only the purest blossoms, though one doubles his effort, it will be difficult to read more than half.”¹ This does not necessarily quiet their complaints about lugging heavy Chinese literature textbooks to class, but it helps them understand that the weight of the tradition has been a burden for centuries. Part of my job is to explain why it might be worth carrying. Here I offer you a few of my encounters with Chinese language and texts over the past few decades—some snapshots of discovery and difficulty—by way of a career narrative.

1. A Translated Chinese Past: The Ruined Palace

Thirty years ago, Stephen Owen published *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature*, one of a series of books on classical Chinese literature, this one written in the form of linked essays, that influenced many of us in the field. In the introduction, he states: “Classical Chinese literature made a promise, early in its history, that it would be a means to perpetuate the self of the good writer. . . . One consequence of this potent lure was that classical Chinese literature internalized its hopes, made them one of its central topics, and everywhere concerned itself with intense experience of the past.”² Though he referred occasionally to other literatures, Owen’s account remained largely within the boundaries and terms of the Chinese tradition, but it sought to make the tradition intelligible to readers outside it. When I first read the book in 1987, as a fledgling student of Chinese, I found his account of the significance of memory and the past to Chinese writers to be persuasive, lyrical, and moving.

---


My earliest encounter with a Chinese text in translation began the long process of complicating what I understood about literary uses of the past from my reading in the European and American traditions. It also made me suspect that reading Chinese literature—and learning Chinese—might change me as a reader. The text was the Tang poet Du Fu’s “Yuhua Palace” translated (by whom, I cannot now recall) in a world literature textbook. Readers familiar with the poem know that it is an example of the “reflection on the past” topos in Chinese poetry, in which a poet visits a famous cultural site, contemplates the inevitable passage of historical time embedded in the site and, often, sighs over the passage of personal time. Poets writing in this topos usually assert a deep and uncomplicated connection to the historical past; the ruined landscape presents itself to be read and rewritten as needed, even if the ruins have vanished. Poets can also write in relation to earlier “rememberers,” others who have written themselves into the history of the site, creating a literary palimpsest over time.3 Du Fu’s poem is neither superficial nor easy—it has at least one perplexing moment—but it also contains familiar, predictable elements of its type. Here is my rendering:

玉華宮 Yuhua Palace

溪回松風長 Above a winding stream, pine-filled breezes blow;
蒼鼠竄古瓦 gray rats scurry under ancient tiles.
不知何王殿 I don’t know whose royal palace this was—
遺構絕壁下 its ruined frame spread beneath steep cliffs.
陰房鬼火青 In dark chambers ghost fires burn green—
壞道哀湍瀉 over broken paths, rivulets rush, weeping.
萬籟真笙竽 The ten thousand pipes of the earth are the true flutes and reeds;
秋色正蕭灑 autumn’s colors just now their most sere and desolate.
美人為黃土 Beautiful consorts all turned to brown dust—
況乃粉黛假 even more scattered, their powders and paints.
當時侍金輅 Though they attended the golden chariot then,

3 Chapter 1 of Remembrances, “Lush Millet and a Stele: The Rememberer Remembered,” examines this practice.
of those ancient things, only stone horses remain.
Struck with sadness, I sink to the grass,
singing fiercely as tears fill my hands.
Going slowly yet surely on the wanderer’s path—
Who in the end can prolong their years?

Du Fu makes a few big claims in this poem: all flesh is grass; the past can deteriorate to the point of being unreadable; as mortals, we are compelled to lament those facts and to push back against them—by writing a poem, for example, to make one’s name endure. Encountering this poem after a diet of too much Romantic poetry, I read it initially as a Chinese version of Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” which ends: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!/Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away.” It seemed to be Du Fu’s take on *sic transit gloria mundi*, which it is, to some extent. But rather than sustaining Shelley’s long historical view and mocking the dead king’s vanity, Du Fu ends his poem by turning away from the ruins he describes with such detail. If we take the poem’s generally accepted date of 757, Du Fu was making a hard journey at this time during the An Lushan Rebellion, which threatened to end the Tang dynasty. He was traveling from the emperor’s court in exile to rejoin his family, who had fled at the fall of the capital, Chang’an, and thus had every reason to be preoccupied with both destruction and mortality. His true topic is not the disappearance of the imperial palace and its people but his own likeness to those fragile “ancient things.”

Literature teachers know that naïve readings, like outright misreadings, can reveal gaps in knowledge and provoke lively conversations. My first reading of this poem prompted more questions than answers: why did the poem begin with an evocative scene and end with a question? Why was there so much stuff—colors, sounds, and voices—in the poem, and what did it all
signify? Who is Du Fu addressing, or expecting to listen? The conventions and expectations that shaped the poem were opaque to me. Some of my initial confusion, such as the meaning of the “ten thousand pipes” (an allusion to Zhuangzi and the sounds made by the wind blowing across the orifices of the earth) and using a question to end the poem (a common technique in medieval poetry), was answered with footnotes and further study. But I would not learn until much later that Du Fu’s comment—“I don’t know whose royal palace this was”—was a point of scholarly debate. A palace on this site was rebuilt and named Yuhua Palace by the great Tang emperor Taizong in 647, then later converted into a Buddhist temple and not used as an imperial palace. But since Du Fu gives the palace’s name in his title, it has seemed unlikely to scholars he was ignorant of its history. Commentators explain this in various ways: Du Fu’s pretense of ignorance is veiled political criticism of Taizong’s excesses in his late years, for example, or perhaps a generalized critique of imperial excesses. Or more simply, that the history of this seventh-century palace had been forgotten after a hundred years. Du Fu’s passing comment reminds us that some questions—such as those about a poet’s intentions and knowledge—cannot be answered with additional commentary or variant characters. It also underscores the fragility of the past, even in a culture that venerated it.

This early blend of fascination and confusion with Chinese texts in translation drew me to courses in Chinese philosophy and literature and then to the study of Chinese language in college, at Washington University in St. Louis. There, the gap between the delight of reading Du Fu and Su Shi in English and the struggle to master boring early-1980s Chinese textbooks sobered me, as it should have: it was a clear warning of the work that lay ahead. But the memory of that gap is still instructive when I teach my staple “Introduction to Chinese Literature” course; though

undergraduates now often arrive with more exposure to China and Chinese than I had, they must still spend the first part of a semester learning the basic history and terminology of the literary tradition. The labor of countless scholars over the past few decades has made this easier: today, students who haven’t yet mastered enough modern or literary Chinese can rely on many solid English-language textbooks, histories, and guides, such as the recent two-volume *Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, to lay a solid foundation. The proliferation of these books also reveals an eager, intelligent audience of Western readers beyond the university classroom. Translations of classical texts—work that has long been undervalued by the academy—are becoming more popular as well, and they help us explain the appeal of Chinese literature to students and other interested readers.

And sometimes, classical Chinese texts need little explication or introduction—by which I do not mean the measure of a text’s “relatability,” but rather a sudden, unforeseeable convergence of text and moment. On September 16, 2001, in my third year teaching at the University of Arizona, I presented a long-scheduled lecture for the local community. I compiled the slides for the lecture in July, and included Du Fu’s “View in Spring” *Chun wang* among other poems. Because the month before the lecture had been spent caring for a newborn baby, my third child, I had forgotten the poem was in the lecture until I reviewed my slides a day or two before. When we came to that slide, I read it aloud. One of Du Fu's most famous poems, written when he was caught in rebel-held Chang’an, it begins:

國破山河在  A state destroyed—yet mountains and rivers remain;
城春草木深  spring comes to the city—grass and trees grow deep.

When I finished reading, the room was quiet. The small group of people absorbed the poem for a moment, five days after 9/11, and then we moved on.
2. Past (im)Perfect; Or 了 as Change of Status, Among Other Things

Chinese teachers who work with English-speaking students know the labor of teaching the grammatical particle 了: the first and most critical task is convincing them it is not “past tense.” The second task is to explain that this easy-to-write word can change the meaning of a sentence in different ways, and that they will have to master all of them: change of status, completed action, expressing duration, and intensifying stative verbs (adjectives), to name the more common uses. This process takes a great deal of teacherly patience and persistence, as well as plain speaking: no, the uses of 了 are not obvious at first; yes, at the beginning, you just need to memorize patterns to internalize them. Linguists of Chinese recognize the complexity of 了: one book on the subject states, “the particle 了 is one of the most frequently used and discussed, but least understood, elements in Chinese grammar.”

To flip the narrative, however, the modern uses of 了 are also not easy to understand from the perspective of the Tang, Five Dynasties, and Northern Song eras—which is to say the period when the particle began the long process of grammaticalization (roughly, the transformation from a “full” content word to an “empty” function word) that resulted in its many uses in modern Chinese. Though we find the word 了 used to indicate completion at least as early as the Han dynasty (a usage we pronounce today as liao), the full range of 了 we find in modern Mandarin does not exist in Tang or Song texts. To put it another way: learning how to teach 了 to American college students was for me, a non-native speaker, trained as a scholar of Tang and

---


6 Ibid., 87-89.
Song literature, knowledge painfully acquired. It also reminds us of how the Chinese script system can conceal significant linguistic change over time.

Two experiences of teaching modern Chinese forced me to wrestle with teaching le and other grammar patterns. In my first real teaching job at age 30, two years shy of finishing my dissertation, I taught second-year Chinese, classical Chinese, and Chinese literature in translation for two years as a lecturer at the University of Maryland. Though I had been trained and had worked as a French language instructor in college (trained in the famous “Rassias method”), I had not had formal training in Chinese language teaching—and I found it incredibly difficult. In later teaching positions at the University of Michigan, the University of Arizona (where I earned tenure), and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, I taught Chinese literature at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, literary Chinese, and Chinese culture, and did not teach modern language. Sixteen years after that first language-teaching experience, however, after stepping down from serving as the Director of the Honors College at UMBC, I had to teach first- and second-year Chinese again. That second experience of teaching Chinese was exhausting, with large classes of students at very different levels (including heritage speakers mixed in with non-heritage speakers), and yet in some ways it was more satisfying than before, and the students made more progress. My teaching evaluations were very positive, and I sent students off to study abroad programs in China and Taiwan and to graduate school to continue studying Chinese.

What had happened—what status(es) had changed—in the intervening years? Three things come to mind: language, teaching, and technology. My modern Chinese had improved modestly through years of reading classical and modern Chinese and the formal study of Chinese linguistics. Though having young children made opportunities to travel to China or Taiwan rare, I kept up my language skills with graduate students, colleagues, and—since we lived in diverse suburban Maryland alongside a growing Chinese immigrant population—with families in my

Shields, 11
neighborhood and at my children’s schools. (Outside of class, I was more likely to speak Chinese at the school bus stop, Costco, and the YMCA than on campus.) Second, after two decades in the classroom, I had built a bigger teaching toolkit. Teaching Chinese language poses unique challenges, including the particle *le*, but the discipline and clarity required in other pedagogical contexts also transfer. Simple strategies I had mastered in teaching literature and culture—using small groups to tackle the too-many-students problem, or asking students to question other students to keep the entire class engaged and awake—were just as effective in the language classroom. Furthermore, the study of second language pedagogy was booming, and I could rely on both theoretical and practical resources to hone my skills, as well as much better Chinese language textbooks, videos, film, and software for use in class.

And also: the Internet happened. Teachers of all foreign languages have benefited from the proliferation of resources available online, from dictionaries, linguistics forums, and teaching discussion boards, to the millions of natural language examples found through YouTube, Tudou, Facebook, WeChat, Twitter, and other social media. None of those resources replaces good textbooks and solid language pedagogy—and online materials of course must be used critically—but they open students’ eyes to the variety and pleasure of modern Chinese beyond the classroom, and inspire them to test out newly acquired skills. To take a use of *le* as an example, here’s a Facebook page my oldest son followed while studying abroad at Cheng-kung University in Tainan, Taiwan this summer:  

---

7 Image retrieved on Facebook on August 18, 2016:  
One of the local campus dogs, “Cheng-kung U ‘Blackie’ Girl,” has become a celebrity that students take pictures of and create dialogue for—this post opens with, “Cheng-kung U, I’ve come back! [ChengDa wo huilaile 成大我回來了！] Where have all you people gone? [nimen ren dou qu nale 你們人都去哪了？]” Embedded in the joke (and she’s a really expressive dog) are two uses of le to mark change of status, simple and funny examples of a pattern my son had practiced in class. Of course as in any natural language environment, we can also find grammatically incorrect and non-standard uses of Chinese on the Internet; but detecting those is an equally important part of language learning.

Just as digital tools have improved the precision and speed of questions we can ask of classical texts, the Internet availability of Chinese media has enriched the teaching and learning of Chinese beyond what we could have imagined thirty years ago. Chinese language instruction

---

8 The dog’s uses of ne 呢 for successive “and what about” questions are good examples of another pattern.
is flourishing at all levels of American education, and immersion programs in Mandarin are popping up across the country. However, this success has not diminished the effort that non-native speakers must still dedicate to Chinese—producing and distinguishing tones, acquiring characters, building vocabulary, internalizing grammar patterns—and we have to be honest with our students about that as well. Characters have to be mastered in handwriting as well as with Pleco and flashcards on your phone; nothing can replace time spent immersed in a Chinese-speaking country; and language-learning never ends, even for those of us who have already spent half a lifetime at it.

3. Rereading the Tang Past: The Emperor Pauses on his Staff

Good stories never die; one quickly learns that in classical Chinese literature the best stories are those retold over millennia. The story of the mid-eighth century An Lushan Rebellion has been reworked for centuries by historians, poets, dramatists, and filmmakers, and it will surely be recast by future generations in media not yet invented. When I began studying literary Chinese in my master’s program at Harvard University (after studying Chinese in Taiwan), we worked through one of the most influential versions of the event, the narrative found in the Northern Song history of China from the Warring States through the Tang, Sima Guang’s *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* (資治通鑑 Zizhi tongjian). Although it is the most famous conflict in Tang history, the An Lushan Rebellion did not end the dynasty; the final blows were dealt by rebellions and crises in the late ninth century. But the fact that the Tang state recovered from the An Lushan Rebellion—and even had a period of revival in the early ninth century—meant that Tang literati had decades to write and rewrite its stories. Emperor Xuanzong’s blindness to the treachery of his general An Lushan and enthralment to his Precious
Consort Yang was detailed in state histories, gossipy anecdotes, and romantic poems throughout the century and a half after the Rebellion. When eleventh-century historians like Ouyang Xiu and Sima Guang wished to revise what they saw as flawed Tang accounts, hoping to create a clearer picture of the weaknesses and fatal mistakes that led to the Rebellion, they had hundreds of texts to consult, certainly more than they could reconcile. (Sima Guang went so far as to write a separate account of these sources in his “Investigation of discrepancies” (考異 Kao yi) and notes 138 sources he consulted for the Tang alone.) Out of these retellings, they had to make choices about narrative perspective, about the reliability of sources, and above all, about how to assign “praise and blame” (褒貶 baobian), the state historian’s chief charge.

Though I had first wrestled with the techniques, style, and moral objectives of early Chinese historiography in the annals and biographies from Sima Qian’s Historical Records, the Comprehensive Mirror narrative of Tang events was challenging—not especially on the level of grammar or lexicon, but in terms of narrative structure. It moves back and forth between vast panoramas and small scenes, between dry bureaucratic detail and dramatic conflicts. Readers must keep track of a huge cast of characters, their ranks, and their locations at all times when the action shifts. Learning to read this historical text requires mastering precise vocabulary and narrative techniques, and reading for what is left unsaid as much as for what is included. In chronicles and biographies, historians use time markers carefully: flashback scenes are often marked with words like “in the beginning” or “earlier” (初 chu), a brief span of time with words like “momentarily” (須臾 xuyu), and so on. The significance of those time words sometimes must be inferred from context: a flashback, for example, might prove a character’s longstanding perfidy; a brief moment might suggest urgency or carelessness. When reading the account of emperor Xuanzong’s flight from the capital, I was struck by one use of a time phrase: 久之 jiù
“zhi, “for a long time” or “after a long while.” The specific place I found this phrase so powerful was the scene in which the emperor, stopped at an imperial posthouse on the road from the capital, faces a soldiers’ uprising: they have just killed his minister Yang Guozhong, cousin to his Precious Consort, and they see her as equally guilty. Xuanzong realizes she will have to be sacrificed to keep their loyalty. The next sentences read: “He entered the gates, leaned on his staff, bowed his head and stood. After a long while [jiu zhi], Wei E, the Record Keeper for the Metropolitan Area, came forward and said, ‘Safety and danger lie in a brief moment of time [a notch on a sundial]—I wish Your Majesty may decide this quickly!’”

A short time after this first reading of the text (unfortunately not while I was struggling through it), I found Paul Kroll’s annotated translation published in an early issue of the journal *T’ang Studies* (the first English-language journal devoted to scholarship on the Tang), a translation I still use in class. In his introduction, Kroll discusses the terse description of the emperor before the time phrase appears: “Upon hearing this demand, he turns and goes back within the gate—and there, we are told, for a long time ‘he stood, leaning on his staff, his head bowed.’ In this plain but supremely moving sentence, the once majestic emperor is revealed a weary and beaten old man—no longer sovereign but now wholly human, and wholly powerless to prevent the death of his lady.”

One scholar found the poignancy of the scene captured in the emperor’s defeated posture; I saw it in the historian’s addition of extra time to the narrative, the long moment when the emperor confronts his own failure and his consort’s inevitable death—

---

when there is no time to spare, as Wei E tells him. We don’t know whether Sima Guang relied on a specific source for these sentences—neither the annals nor the biographies from the two

*Tang Histories* contain this phrasing—or if they were his original addition. But the scene is gripping and tragic no matter which element one focuses on; being able to feel that tragedy in the language of eleventh-century literary Chinese was, to me, exhilarating and addictive.

In my current research, I am exploring ways that Five Dynasties and Northern Song scholars read and wrote about Tang literature—how they collected, circulated, and printed individual Tang collections and anthologies, wrote biographies of Tang literati, compiled anecdotes about poems and poets, and built not just a canon of Tang writers and texts, but a usable Tang literary past. Though these scholars claimed to be merely transmitting, they were also creating: many of their new works on Tang literature have survived till today, and their influence on our understanding of the dynasty’s literary culture can hardly be overestimated. As in the West much later, the impact of the new technology of printing on Song culture was enormous, and it greatly improved the chances of survival for Tang literature. Manuscript copies of Tang texts continued to circulate throughout the Song, and at the same time scholars worked to find lost texts and editions to collate, copy, and print. A fire at the Song imperial palace library in 1015 that destroyed tens of thousands of scrolls only heightened anxiety about preservation, and the pace of collecting and printing increased at both the state-sponsored and private commercial levels throughout the eleventh century.\(^\text{10}\) Certain Tang writers, such as Du Fu, Li Bai, and Han Yu, received more attention than others, but the entire body of Tang literature benefited from Song readers’ labor. I sometimes remind students of this: when you are reading

translations of Tang poetry in your heavy Chinese literature anthologies, you have distant eleventh- and twelfth-century scholars to thank.

My project is in part literary archaeology: an examination of some ways that “Tang literature” was sedimented over the course of roughly two and a half centuries, and of why some specimens—texts and writers—were preserved, and others lost. At the same time, I intend to shed light on the creative literary and intellectual interests of the scholars who preserved Tang texts and compiled new works from them. Song readers all shaped a Tang history and a Tang literary canon to serve specific needs, whether those were lessons to emperors about heeding their ministers’ sage advice, or models for poets seeking to match (and perhaps surpass) the craft of High Tang poetry. And in a broader sense, I hope to add some historical nuance to the long story of the Chinese veneration of the past by exploring the survival and transmission of some Tang “ancient things.”

4. Back to the Future, Where Du Fu is Still Very Busy

Though four years is an eternity in Internet time, a Du Fu meme that went viral over the course of 2012 still lingers online to laugh at. Titled “Du Fu is very busy” (杜甫很忙 Du Fu hen mang) and inspired by the 1300th anniversary of the year of Du Fu’s birth in 712, the meme plays with an often-reproduced image of Du Fu found in Chinese literature textbooks, costuming Du Fu in different outfits and giving him funny objects to hold, ride, or sit on.11 Some cultural critics, such as officials at the Du Fu Thatched Cottage Museum in Chengdu, Sichuan,

responded in outrage at this perceived insult to the poet’s reputation. Whether or not the meme was invented for commercial purposes, as certain parties later claimed, netizens continued to populate Weibo and other social media platforms with new versions throughout 2012. Among the tamer ones are these, which tell us that “Du Fu is very busy….playing CF [Crossfire, an online first-person shooter game] in the real world….riding a bike to go shopping….going online to QQ [instant messaging platform] to write poems.”

I brought some of these images into my modern Chinese classroom in the spring of 2012 and had a stimulating conversation with students about the ongoing relevance of traditional writers and thinkers in contemporary China (it helped that even first-year students could read the words “very busy” 很忙). Those traditional figures of course included Confucius, an enormous statue of

---

12 The tweet on Weibo by the museum was indignant: #杜甫很忙#但这是童心吗？这是幽默吗？这就是潮流吗？这值得鼓励吗？这已丧失了对人格最起码的尊重，何况是对这样一位被尊为“中华民族脊梁”的伟大诗人？包容有尺度，娱乐有底线，世界文化名人值得世界的尊重和礼遇，#杜甫很忙#值得我们思考和反省…… Accessed August 25, 2016: http://weibo.com/2241912100/vb3l1ORc?type=comment#_rnd1472747746291

whom had appeared and then vanished in Tiananmen Square only a year before. Although students recognized some of the memes as the Chinese equivalent of drawing a moustache and silly hair on a portrait of George Washington, they were surprised that a poet could have generated such parodic energy. This then prompted a discussion about Du Fu’s reputation as it grew beyond the role of “poet,” as he was labeled a historian of his era, a loyal Confucian patriot, and even a “poet-sage” (詩聖 shisheng). Only Shakespeare in the English-language tradition can claim such exalted status, and yet he is not viewed—like Du Fu was and still is by some—as a culture hero in moral terms. Our discussion helped students understand Du Fu, contemporary Chinese notions of cultural heritage, and the vitality (and humor) of the Chinese Internet.

The diverse responses to this meme and other modern remixes of the Chinese past push us to reflect on the cultural work that classical Chinese literature continues to do outside the academy, both within the sinosphere and beyond it—as national patrimony to be constantly reclaimed and redefined, as export merchandise in television and film (Judge Dee movies, for example), as texts reread through non-Chinese languages in translation. Though the pace is relentless, I feel fortunate to have a ringside seat in the stands of Chinese language and literature at this cultural circus, when even the president of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping, wants to weigh in with a new treatment of early Chinese thought. Of course the stakes in reimagining Du Fu are not as high as they are in the debates over Confucius, and sometimes they seem like random noise. For example, when I saw the miniature concrete-and-metal version of Du Fu’s “thatched cottage” at “Splendid China” (錦繡中華 Jinxiu Zhonghua), the Disney-esque theme park in Shenzhen in 2010, I wondered what the builders of the park hoped Chinese

14 Much has been written about the rising role of Confucius in contemporary Chinese culture and discourse in recent years; for a brief introduction, see Evan Osnos’s essay in the January 20, 2014 issue of The New Yorker: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/13/confucius-comes-home
tourists would take away from that object, which is not even a close imitation of the site that draws so many visitors in Chengdu.¹⁶ (At least the concrete mini-cottage would not have its “thatch” blown away by the wind, as Du Fu did.) Commercial, cultural, and sometimes nationalist motives are intertwined in these ventures, and it seems difficult to gauge their impact on readership and appreciation of literary texts, at least just yet.

The question of who controls the Chinese literary past in this chaotic environment is tricky to answer, and perhaps moot in the face of multiple competing versions that speak to different audiences for different needs. But this might give us greater freedom to experiment as scholars in the future: for those of us not indigenous to the Chinese tradition, or bound by a culturalist or nationalist agenda, what values of classical literature do we wish to explore and explain, and why? Just like Song scholars of Tang texts, each generation of readers chooses the Chinese literature it finds most useful and exciting; knowing this, we need to be honest about the intellectual commitments that inform our research. These issues are not just meaningful for current scholarship, but also in the work of training the next generation of scholars, our graduate students, who come from an ever-wider range of nations and who will often make careers outside their home country and in a second or third language. Pushing students to reflect on their path to the study of Chinese language and literature, and to think hard about what it means to pursue it as a career, has become a critical part of my work.

Aside from encouraging this reflection, I also help graduate students understand the varied academic environments for classical Chinese literature across the U.S. and elsewhere—the particular social and financial contexts in which they will pursue their careers. On the one hand,

¹⁶ Scholars from a wide range of fields have focused on the theme park industry in China in recent years, research that has gained in momentum since the first “Splendid China” park opened in 1989. For a recent overview of the research trajectory, see Wen Zhang and Shilian Shan, “The Theme Park Industry in China: A Research Review,” in Cogent Social Sciences 2 (2016); https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2016.1210718. In their conclusion, they observe that the cultural implications of theme parks are still the least-examined research topic.
judging from university faculties and the booklists of presses around the world, scholarship on classical Chinese literature is thriving internationally. Scholarly experiences that were uncommon, even unforeseeable, when I began studying modern Chinese in the fall of 1984 are now routine and frequent. To give a few examples of recent projects I have been involved with: scholars from Asia come to the U.S. or Europe to collaborate on dual- (sometimes triple-) language research projects, often with online or digital components, and American and European scholars do the same in Asia; conferences on classical literature occur where scholars from multiple countries use Chinese as a lingua franca; and scholarly, bilingual translations of classical Chinese literature, similar to the Loeb Classical Library series, are being published in Europe and the U.S. and marketed around the world.17 And this past summer I spent six weeks in Taiwan, where I did research on late imperial editions of Tang literature at the National Central Library, had the chance to participate in the multilingual AAS-in-Asia in Kyoto, and then gave a paper in Chinese at Academia Sinica to Chinese literature scholars from Taiwan and visiting scholars from Japan, Europe, and the U.S. This bustling activity seems to suggest that Du Fu will always be busy.

And yet my cheerful perspective over time, as I look at the rapid developments of the recent past, has to be balanced with a more somber perspective across space: it is not a flat world, and academic resources are not distributed evenly, either in the U.S. or abroad. Though we have seen the growth of Asian and East Asian studies in the West, and the most prestigious programs are robust, we are wise to be cautious about the future of classical Chinese literature in the American academy, even as Chinese language programs grow, given the pressure on the humanities overall. Succeeding as a scholar of Chinese today in the U.S. means building an

17 Stephen Owen’s six-volume translation of Du Fu’s entire poetic oeuvre was the first in this new series, the Library of Chinese Humanities, whose editorial board I serve on. The DeGruyter site for the series is here: https://www.degruyter.com/view/serial/449827
intellectual network that exists “out there” in that lively international community and also on a local campus and in one’s classroom; all of those settings are necessary for one’s sense of purpose, satisfaction, and dedication to the work. From the perspective of my career as a student and teacher of Chinese language and literature, I would encourage scholars of the next generation to create and sustain those communities. But as eager, lifelong students and readers, they should also constantly rediscover the Chinese voices, texts, and questions that matter to them the most.