

In Pursuit of Qu Yuan (343-277 BCE)

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Course Description:

The name Qu Yuan (alternately written, Ch'ü Yuan) can provoke a range of responses, from admiration and compassion to exasperation and even disdain. Was he a wise and upright minister in the court of King Huai of Chu, who ended his life upon realizing that he was unable to save the kingdom from being overcome by the neighboring state of Qin? Or was he a man obsessed with the need to make known—and preserve—his own moral purity in the face of the corrupt and violent world of the Warring States? A supremely disciplined truth-teller or an unhinged madman? A statesman or a shaman? Patriot or narcissist? Or, as certain scholars have been wondering of late: did such a man ever exist?

The textual evidence on which we necessarily rely to pierce through the veil of confusion surrounding this man and his purported writings, or even to establish his existence as a historical individual, is sparse, to say the least, comprising little more than a collection of poems (known as the *Chuci* or “Songs of Chu”) and the short biography that was written by the Grand Historian of the Han Dynasty, Sima Qian (b. 145 BCE). Still, the record’s potent blend of moral conundrums, human drama, and fantastic imagery lends itself readily to the full range of assertions and interpretations that readers have proffered for more than two millennia. This short course on the great statesman and poet of the fourth century BCE will offer a window onto the history, legend, poetry, and cultural responses that comprise his complicated legacy, well beyond the festivals and traditional dishes that endure in popular culture.

In Class:

Each class will be prefaced by a brief lecture introducing the historical background of particular facets of the Qu Yuan story, the salient aesthetic features of the texts in question, and the key debates that have exercised readers in modern and contemporary times. Each presentation will be followed by a guided conversation as, together, we engage in close readings of the works that have been passed down to us, raising our own queries and questions along the way. (Note: Attendees who have competency in the reading of Classical Chinese may request these texts in the original.)

Book to purchase:

Ch'u Tz'ü: The Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology. David Hawkes, editor and translator. Penguin Classics, 1985. All readings will be drawn from this book, unless otherwise indicated.

Reading Assignments:

I. “A Life More Weighty than Mount Tai”: The Sacrifice of a Scion of the Kingdom of Chu

In this session, we will encounter the exemplary figure Qu Yuan—the statesman and consider some of the textual sources and cultural practices that gave rise to and nurtured that exemplarity. Central to our discussion will be the evidence for his supposed suicide-by-drowning in the Miluo River, as well as the moral and spiritual implications of that terrible act as judged from the range of perspectives that have been expressed over the centuries.

- Read:
 - David Hawkes, “Introduction”
 - “The Fisherman” (206), “Embracing Sand” (169-172)
 - Sima Qian, “Biography of Qu Yuan” (54-60)

II. The Flight of the Shaman: Writing the Romance of the Southland

This session will introduce the rich imagery and supernatural sensuality of the ancient shamanic culture of Chu as it is manifest in some of the most ancient poems of the anthology—and discuss how its extravagance can be reconciled with the righteous Qu Yuan of Confucian lore. We will end with a surprise presentation of a famous Tang Dynasty poet who took his inspiration from Qu Yuan—but with a twist.

- Read:
 - “Summons of the Soul” (219-231)
 - “Nine Songs” (95-121)

III. Reading the “Li Sao”: Saving the Man from the Archetype

This final session is devoted to reading the long poem, “Encountering Sorrow,” the work that is both attributed to Qu Yuan, a man tortured by his circumstances, and that constitutes the very basis for his having been squeezed into the straitjacket of one archetype or another. As we go through the key movements of this poem, segment by segment, bringing in some snippets of influential traditional commentary as needed, we will consider what it is like to read it through these radically different interpretive lenses. We will come away with a deeper understanding of both the power and vulnerability of human experience once it is released into the world in the form of lyric poetry.

- Read:
 - “Li Sao” (“On Encountering Trouble,” 67-94)