

Online, Multi-media Material for Teaching Chinese Culture

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The present glut of information about Chinese culture and society online is, for teaching purposes, both positive and negative. The challenge comes largely in finding an effective way to draw out the truly useful teaching material and stage it, so to speak, for the undergraduate student audience. This task is all the more challenging as our students are themselves ever more deeply submerged in the same morass of information, and usually much better at finding what they want—not to say what is necessarily educational—therein. The positive, however, may flow from precisely the same point. As we share with our students the experience of trying to sort out the great weight of information overload (often a matter of learning to deploy tools to navigate it), we can effectively incorporate that learning experience in the process. It is with this goal in mind that I have begun developing units based on materials I collect almost entirely from online sources. This article is an explication of one such exercise.

There are of course numerous paths to achieving the goal of integrating online sources into the classroom. The approach I am taking in this assignment might be considered a risky approach, using the simple but usually frustrating (and time consuming) “search” function and then integrating what I find. The process, when successful, becomes one of connecting dots, for myself and for my students. In the process, we can observe a single cultural element, what I will call the “core text,” in multiple manifestations, which are drawn randomly to respond to the search commands. As learning to analyze media is an ancillary focus of this exercise, this type of activity can set up conversation and learning about the contemporary dynamics of information flow (most prominently visually), which are part of any person’s education in the contemporary world.



Zhugue Liang replenishes the arsenal of arrows by his cunning subterfuge.

Applying the Method

To begin at the beginning, so to speak, our first dot occurs around the third century CE, a time when the “Three Kingdoms” (namely, Shu, Wu, and Wei) were preparing to battle for control of what had been the territory of the Han dynasty at a place called “Red Cliff”.¹ The leaders of the three states (Xuan De, Sun Quan, and Cao Cao) are, in subsequent accounts, depicted as brave and brilliant statesmen whose only true rivals are one another. By far the most famous version of these historical personages’ struggle for control of China is the expansive literary text *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (hereafter *Romance*), a fourteenth-century novel by Luo Guanzhong.² Whether due to the historical importance—an attempt to reconstitute what was arguably China’s most successful dynasty—or the inherent power of the stories themselves, *Romance* has been one of the most fecund works of Chinese culture, engrossing centuries of

readers of all kinds and spawning, as we will see, a variety of response texts.

For the purpose of this exercise, we begin with Chapter 46 of the *Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (Mair, 1994 957-966 [hereafter *Anthology*]), wherein Xuan De’s principal envoy and the expert strategist (Zhuge Liang³) tricks his enemy Cao Cao into providing arrows for Cao Cao’s own demise.⁴ Zhuge Liang is at this point in the text working to form an alliance with Zhou Yu, who is not entirely convinced of Zhuge’s loyalty. When summoned, Zhuge Liang appears and the following exchange ensues:

“When we engage Cao Cao in battle on the river routes, what should be the weapon of choice?” “On the Great River, bow and arrow,” Zhuge Liang replied. “My view precisely, sir,” Zhou Yu said. “But we happen to be short of arrows. Dare I trouble you, sir, to undertake the production of one hundred thousand arrows to use against the enemy? Please favor us with your cooperation in this official matter.” “Whatever task the chief commander assigns, I shall strive to complete,” replied Zhuge Liang. “But may I ask by what time you will require them?” “Can you finish in ten days?” asked Zhou Yu. “Cao’s army is due at any moment,” said Zhuge Liang, “If we must wait ten days, it will spoil everything.” “How many days do you estimate you need, sir?” said Zhou Yu. “With all respect, I will deliver the arrows in three days,” Zhuge Liang answered. “There is no room for levity in the army,” Zhou Yu snapped. “Dare I trifle with the chief commander?” countered Zhuge

Liang. “I beg to submit my pledge under martial law: if I fail to finish in three day’s time, I will gladly suffer the maximum punishment.”

Zhugé Liang, after waiting patiently without lifting a finger for two days, finally makes his move, asking Zhou Yu’s assistant Lu Su to assemble men, boats and bales of hay along the river bank. Confused but willing to accommodate—if for nothing more than to catch the wily Zhugé Liang in his own trap—Lu Su obliges. Early on the morning of the third day, Zhugé Liang leads these vessels up river to Cao Cao’s camp. The morning that Zhugé’s ships set sail is not coincidentally entirely enshrouded in fog, making view of the ships from the river bank only vaguely discernable. Nonetheless, when Cao Cao hears the arrival of the enemy, he instructs his marksmen to fire at the ships. As they cannot see what they are aiming at, they end up filling bales of hay, not enemy troops, with arrows—thousands of arrows. As the fog lifts, Cao Cao realizes that he’s been had, as all of his precious arrows have been lodged, perfectly intact, into Zhugé Liang’s bales of hay.

In this short excerpt we find a compelling and memorable introduction to some of the major characters of the novel. We also have a sense of the narrative strategies (e.g., suspense, dialogue-based character development) that are used in the text. Most importantly, though, we have a sense of the characters involved, their superhuman intelligence, their patience and their joyful one-upmanship. Having our core text in print-published format also gives us a convenient textual starting point, a sort of home base from which to work.

Exploring Internet Sources

From this point, or dot, we delve directly into internet sources. With a combination of searches (e.g., “red cliff,” “three kingdoms,” “borrowing arrows”) typed into *Google.com* or *Baidu.com* search engines, we begin our journey. In this iteration of the assignment, I move from the core historical event as depicted in the historical novel (though notably prior to the composition of the text attributed to Luo Guanzhong) to the poet Su Shi (1037-1101), who some seven

centuries later wrote numerous pieces featuring the “Red Cliff” battle and its heroic figures. Su Shi was, in addition to being a successful statesman, a master of various lyric genres, and an accomplished calligrapher. Here is where the internet serves my purposes particularly well. Led, via *Google.com*, I open the website *China the Beautiful*, for instance, and found Su Shi’s “Nian nu jiao: chi bi huai gu” in both Chinese and numerous English translations. Below is the poem:

The Yangtze flows east
Washing away
A thousand ages of great men
West of the ramparts—
People say—
Are the fabled Red Cliffs of
young
Zhou of the Three Kingdoms
Rebellious rocks pierce the sky
Frightening waves rip the bank
The backwash churns vast
snowy swells—
River and mountains like a
painting
how many heroes passed them,
once ...
Think back to those years,
Zhou Yu—
Just married to the younger
Jiao—
Brave, brilliant
With plumed fan, silk kerchief
Laughed and talked
While masts and oars vanished
to flying ash and smoke!
I roam through ancient realms
Absurdly moved
Turn gray too soon—
A man’s life passes like a
dream—
Pour out a cup then, to the
river, and the moon⁵

In addition to the translations and the original text, *China the Beautiful* also provides a link to an oral reading of the same poem and, finally, a reproduction (etching) of Su Shi’s own calligraphy of which the following is one panel:

Each of these elements could certainly occupy considerable space in a Chinese culture class, exploring in as much detail as time will allow

the *ci* genre of poetry, the Song dynasty’s contributions to the art of calligraphy, or the importance and technique of poetry recitation in China, ancient and modern. For my purposes, there is in this one example a stylistic focus, the essence of which comes into relief precisely because of the shifts in media.

We can plainly *see* the broad, heroic, self-assured lines of Su’s calligraphy (principally in the panel above the character *nian*), just as we *read* the literary-fictional depiction of the characters in the *Romance*, and just as we *hear* the robust, expansive delivery of the poem’s reader provided on the website. Thus, despite the fact that we’ve moved between eras, genres, and media, aspects of the “message” have remained highly consistent. As a classroom strategy, reading the poem out loud in both languages while following along Su Shi’s calligraphy (allowing the forms of the characters to suggest modulations in volume, tone or color) is one way to raise students’ attention to the potentially integrated nature of Chinese cultural aesthetic.

To this point the exercise is not particularly novel. *China the Beautiful* provides convenient access to material long available in book form (save, of course, the poetry recitation), which often contextualizes the material well, providing both primary and secondary texts in one accessible location. What is changing is the increased access to other forms of media, particularly those produced recently.

To further expand our view, then, we leap bravely into the modern medium of television, or, better yet, streaming online video excerpts of what originally appeared on television. In fact, the origin of this exercise was my discovery of what can happen when one inserts Chinese characters into the search function of Youtube.com. By typing “Zhuge Liang”

诸葛亮⁶, I landed upon numerous excerpts from the 1994, China Central Television Station series of the novel. In fact, one can pinpoint the very sequence in which K’ung-ming, to quote Su Shi’s poem above, “Laughed and talked / While



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masts and oars vanished to flying ash and smoke!" In other words, with minimal effort the points of connection between a 3rd-century historical event, a 10th century poem focusing on the event, and a 14th-century fictional text, and a late 20th-century television drama are vividly established. This fact alone provides considerable starting point for discussion of the nature, function and implication of these texts in Chinese culture.

The culminating point of this exercise finds us even closer to the present: Cai Guo-qiang's 1998 installation sculpture entitled "Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows." Created a few years after Cai had established residence in the United States, the work consists of a wooden boat, roughly 150 x 720 x 230 centimeters, with three thousand arrows stuck into its hull, a Chinese flag and an electric fan appended at the back.

Of the three views of the core text we examine, this is by far the most ambiguous. The artist himself considers the work a personal statement (Cai Guo-Qiang, 2002 26), one which demonstrates, through the dual nature of the arrows—a destructive force, but one that also gives flight—central tenets of Chinese marital philosophy. The fact that Cai is a Chinese artist living abroad, coupled with his propensity to comment on global politics, has caused many to focus on the Chinese flag at the rear of the vessel and hence draw a nationalistic message from the work. In fact, actually situating Cai's installation vis-a-vis China and the West (or any other geographical entity) becomes a highly complex assignment if one takes into account the source text for the work. With our core text of the *Romance* in mind, we are now charged to wonder Who, at last, is the enemy? Who is cleverly manipulating the enemy to exchange strength for weakness? Regardless of what consensus a class may come to on this or any related point, the text's progeny is now available to the student in a way it would not have been had the search functions of *Youtube.com* and others not placed the various texts at our disposal. Indeed, the view of any of the above works in isolation, and most particularly "Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows," is substantially inferior to the picture as a whole.

As I conclude the exercise I remind students that the historical text upon which

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all others are based is never actually identified; the only dot which does not appear in our arrangement is the historical event which spawned all subsequent versions. Our core text, which again post-dates our poetic and calligraphic view by many centuries, provides the most "information," but it merely mirrors an oral tradition that precedes and post-dates it also by centuries. The oral tradition is clearly the precursor to the relatively low-brow television series, but also inherently linked to the high-brow Song era lyric by Su Shi, the calligraphy by the same, and the contemporary installation by a globally recognized artist. (Indeed, the possibility that Cai was prompted to produce the work as a consequence of seeing the CCTV series is intriguing.) In fact, the very high- and low-brow distinction is one of the splendid casualties of online media experience, both our own and that of our students.

Finding effective ways to utilize the wealth of material available online seems an essential part of our current work as teachers at the college level. As this exercise demonstrates, with only the minimal (and inexpensive) efforts at searching, downloading and translating, meaningful connections can be made to a vast array of cultural texts. This exercise encourages students with no background in China to appreciate how they might "take in" the sights from the contemporary media, and from this attempt to draw, where possible, meaningful ligatures that point out precisely the comprehensive, holistic, interrelated quality of Chinese culture. Though the surplus of online information lends well to fragmentation, the context and therefore meaning of any group of dismembered cultural parts can be provided by us as instructors. Our

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Works Cited

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 Mair, Victor, Ed. 1994. *Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press).
China the Beautiful. <http://www.chinapage.com/china.html>
Poem Hunter. <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/battle-of-red-cliff/>

Endnotes

- ¹This is not a history course, and the detailed historical accuracy of these events is of secondary concern to their various fictional representations.
²Just as the actual history of the third century in China is not the focus of the assignment, the fact that Luo Guanzhong is not likely actually the author of this text is not a major issue. Problems of authorship are not well suited to online exercises of this kind, except perhaps to demonstrate once again that a hundred websites listing Luo Guanzhong as the author (complete with interesting if utterly unverifiable biographical notes) do not make it necessarily so.
³Mair's *Anthology* utilizes a modified Wade-Giles romanization system. We have converted the names to Hanyu Pinyin.
⁴*Anthology*.
⁵This translation is actually from <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/battle-of-red-cliff/>. A related assignment involves having students themselves collect as many online translations of single, famous Chinese poem as possible. In-class comparison then reveals the importance of these texts (such that they're translated over and over again) as well as the challenges of literary translation.
⁶Typing the search words in Chinese characters is an important element to the success of the search process.