

What makes a good translation from literary Chinese? The Reddie Gary Snyder translated some poetry by Han Shan (“Cold Mountain”), a 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist mountain recluse, and he justified his work as follows:

I was able to do fresh, accurate translations of Han-shan because I was able to envision Han-shan’s world because I had much experience in the mountains and there are many images in Han-shan which are directly images of mountain scenery and mountain terrain and mountain weather that if a person had not felt those himself physically he would not be able to get the same feel into the translation.

Are you nodding in agreement or bristling in anxiety as you read that? Are there larger philosophical issues we must address alongside the mechanics of syntax and grammar particles?

Consider for a moment the following couplet, also written around the time of Han Shan and about a mountain, this one on the Tang frontier and the site of historical campaigns:

燕然山上雲  
半是離鄉魂

Of the clouds over Yanran Mountain,  
Half are ‘souls’ separated from home.

Nice image? Perhaps, but it is in fact considered an *inferior* poem, particularly when compared to its High Tang predecessors, because it doesn’t demand mental acrobatics on the part of the reader. That is, the reader doesn’t need to figure out the relationships between the images as it’s all spelled out – the clouds are “over” (*shang* 上) the mountain and “half are” (*banshi* 半是) souls. A High Tang poem wouldn’t do that. However, such Chinese poetic values get lost in this English rendition. So is this translation bad?

Scholars have been doing translations for thousands of years, but they’ve only been theorizing about it recently. In this course, I want us to do both – to learn the mechanics of translation and to develop an awareness of what it means to transform the words of one culture to that of another. In the very first paragraph of the introductory text we are using, Michael A. Fuller writes, “By carefully working through the selections in this book, one can begin to think in literary Chinese as one reads the text, just as when one reads this introduction, one hears English.” Despite the fact that I like Fuller’s text, I find that sentiment problematic and meriting discussion among ourselves.



Reading texts with the teacher  
Sichuan tomb stone relief  
2<sup>nd</sup> cen C.E.

## I. Required and recommended resources

1. Michael A. Fuller, An introduction to literary Chinese (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
2. Edwin G. Pulleyblank, Outline of classical Chinese grammar (Vancouver: UMC, 1995).
3. R.H. Mathews, Mathews’ Chinese-English dictionary (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). (This book is only recommended and must be used with care. Purists would be shocked that I allow this book on the syllabus, but to be honest, they all have it and use it but just won’t admit it. There should be copies in the

bookstore.)

4. Wang Li 王力, Wang Li gu Hanyu zidian 王力古漢語字典 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2000). (This book is also only recommended but is the best portable dictionary for classical Chinese.)

## II. Course requirements

1. Heavy conference participation (ongoing – set two alarm clocks and *never* miss class).
2. Grammar drills (ongoing).
3. Vocabulary quizzes (ongoing).
4. At least two take-home texts to translate.
5. Possibly a take-home final. (Students last time *requested* a final examination.)

## III. The syllabus: Crossing through the ‘territories’ of literary Chinese

As we marry mechanics to theory and then infuse content that leans toward religion, this syllabus defies a tidy chronology. It’s hard to say just how quickly we can progress, and if I spell it out on a day-by-day basis, we might either fall behind ambitious goals or impede our quick progress, depending upon the difficulty of the material. I therefore propose we recognize three grand stages or three territories we should endeavor to cross through this semester. In literary Chinese, a *fengjiang* 封疆 is a marked border of a field or territory, and a *feng* can be any mound of earth such as a sacrificial mound that is used in ritual to lay claim to a particular territory. I like that image, and so let’s make our goal the crossing of three sequential territories, the laying claim of three domains in succession, namely:

1. Acquisition of the basic syntax and particles of literary Chinese;
2. Practice using short texts (50-200 characters) both from Fuller’s Introduction (Part Two) and from the Chinese religious tradition in general;
3. Tackling a single, longer text or series of related texts that addresses an early or medieval Chinese religious issue at length.

At this point, I will map out the terrain of the first territory or *fengjiang*, but even here note that we will go well beyond the Fuller Introduction in a number of ways.

I am conscious that some of you may have taken classical Chinese with my colleagues in the Chinese department, and I already know which texts you studied. (Hyong is trying to get this course cross-listed for Chinese credit and may be some day.) For example, there is indeed some overlap in Yuan Naiying’s and Michael Fuller’s choice of primary sources, but their differences in approach far outstrip their similarity in selected texts. I will be adding my own supplementary texts, exercises and grammar explanations alongside each Fuller primary text in this first territory, and there will be no overlap at all in the second and third territories. Thus the general overlap will be minimal, and it is only natural that I will emphasize different things than Profs. Ditter, Jiang or Rhew did. Yet if you ever find yourself on familiar ground and zooming through a particular syntax issue, you can do one of two things: 1.) ask me for a related but unfamiliar text (of which I have *plenty*) and 2.) teach your colleagues who lack your experience because, by teaching, we really learn the material best. On that note, I may sometimes ask each of you to teach the rest of us about how a particle works or how we should understand a certain type of syntax. If you can figure out how to explain it to others, you are more likely to know it yourself.

### *The first territory to cross*

I chose Fuller’s Introduction because I think his explanations are fairly straightforward, and his exercises are the only meaningful ones I’ve liked. Thus we will begin our exploration of literary Chinese using Part One of his text, but as you will see, I have many things to add to each unit of his. For each chapter, I suggest the following order of study:

1. Master the entire Fuller chapter, including the exercises he provides. We will discuss the exercises in conference.
2. Then look to the extra drills on particles that I will give you as handouts, but before you actually do those drills, turn to the relevant particle discussions in Pulleyblank’s Outline of classical Chinese grammar. Let me pause to rave about this book – it’s fantastic and never leaves my desktop. When I get bogged down in a wicked translation, this book has saved my 臀部 so many times that I would like to emboss its pages with gold. When you come across any particle in Fuller or in my drills, look them up in the “Index of Chinese vocabulary items” (pp. 175-87) and then read the relevant sections, paying particular attention to his examples.

3. Now do the drills themselves. The handout content always coincides with Fuller's chapter.
4. Finally, read the theory article. These articles are usually on the general nature of the early Chinese language itself, and they will add variety to our semester. As our group is small, I will leave copies of these articles on my shelf in the ETC Classics/Religion Lounge. We might use exploratories to discuss them.

I have no idea how long it will take us to get through each of the eight units below, and each day we'll designate our goal for the next. I even have extra assignments I intend to interject from time to time. For example, I may have a passage written on the board (in my horribly spidery handwriting) and let you *as a group* work through it, thereby learning the steps each of us take in translating.



**Students ready to study grammar particles at 9 a.m.  
Shandong tomb relief, Eastern Han dynasty**

<b>Fuller's Introduction</b>	<b>Supplementary exercises &amp; texts</b>	<b>Theory</b>
1. Nominal and verbal sentences	Drills on 也、矣。 Seven additional <u>Analects</u> passages relevant to religion.	Fuller, <u>Introduction</u> , 1-35; Pulleyblank, <u>Outline</u> , 3-15.
2. Parts of speech	Dictionary exercises for 中文大辭典 (i.e. the Chinese version of Morohashi), 漢語大詞典, 王力古漢語字典 and <u>Mathew's Chinese-English Dictionary</u> .	Schulte & Biguenet, <u>Theories on translation</u> , 11-16, 32-54, 60-63, 68-82, 93-112.
3. Coordinate verbs	Drills on 而、則、者。	
4. The modifier 所 and nominalized verbs	Drills on 所、於。	Christopher Harbsmeier, <u>Science &amp; Civilisation in China</u> , VII.1, 26-107.
5. Negatives	Drills on negatives, 如。	A.C. Graham, <u>Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Language</u> , 322-359.
6. Pivot verbs, auxiliary verbs and classical commentary	Drills on 可、哉、豈。 A longer look at a Chinese commentary ( <u>Han shu</u> , 73.3122).	Chad Hansen, <u>Language and logic in ancient China</u> , 30-99.
7. Coverbs	Drills on 以...為...。	
8. Embedded sentences	Drills on 之、焉、謂。	Stephen Owen, <u>Chinese poetry and poetics</u> , 78-107.

*A long-distance look at the second territory*

I am open to suggestions as to what longer texts we look at when we leave the brief passages and detailed notes of

Fuller behind. Of course I have many texts prepared already and am fond of some classic pieces found in Fuller (such as Tao Qian's famous "Peach blossom spring"), but let me know your own preferences. We're a small group, so we can be wildly flexible. At present, I am considering texts such as the following:

### Classicist texts

- Excerpts from the Analepts (論語) particularly those passages with religious content.
- Excerpts from the Ritual records (Li ji 禮記), particularly on why sages invented ghosts.
- Excerpts from the Mozi 墨子 on why classicists are silly for not believing in ghosts.
- Mencius (Mengzi 孟子) on human nature.
- Xunzi 荀子 on where humans rank on cosmic ladder.
- Shang Jun shu 商君書 on the stages of human kind.
- Historical records (Shi ji 史記) on Gaozu's introduction of classicist ritual at court.
- The ancestral hymns of Madame Tangshan, consort to Gaozu.
- Excerpts from the "Xici zhuan" 繫辭傳 of the Zhou yi 周易.
- The description of the annual ancestral offering in the Simin yueling 四民月令.
- The *Han ji* (pp. 406+) has an interesting comparison between instructing people toward goodness and scaring them there.

### Daoist texts

- Zhuangzi 莊子 on being "Free and easy" ("Xiaoyao" 逍遙□).
- Shishuo xinyu 世說新語 discusses Zhuangzi's passage.
- The "Free and easy chant" ("Xiaoyao yong" 逍遙詠□□) by Bai Juyi 白居易.
- The exegesis of Zhi Daolin 支道林.
- Shi ji 130.3293 in which Sima Tan 司馬談 privileges Daoist thought above all others.
- An extended excerpt of the "Wuxing pian" 無形篇 by Wang Chong 王充 in which he explains why popular Daoism is silly.
- Excerpts from the Liexian zhuan 列仙傳 on why immortals are extraordinary but still natural.
- Cao Zhi 曹植 on why immortals do not exist and on why immortals are glorious.
- Excerpts from the Daode jing commentary by Wang Bi 王弼.
- A poem by Li Bai 李白 informed by popular Daoism.
- A poem by Du Fu 杜甫 on drinking and extrapolating from the cycles of nature.

### Buddhist texts

- The *Hou Han ji* (pp. 186+) is an interesting record of Buddhism coming into China.
- The self immolation of Sengyai 僧崖.
- Excerpts from the Platform Sutra (Tan jing 壇經) by the Sixth Patriarch Huineng 惠能 on sudden enlightenment v. gradual enlightenment.
- Chan poetry from Wang Wei 王維.
- The famous denouncement of



**A Tang Buddhist monk rushes in from India  
with more texts to translate  
Fan Pagoda, Song dynasty**

*And an even longer-distance look at the third territory*

The extended translation exercise that I have in mind (at present) is a collection of fourth-century court edicts and memorials on whether a soul can indeed be sealed inside a jar and then placed in a tomb. The Period of Disunion witnessed a massive southward migration as wars rocked the north, and with homes and corpses left behind, the question of how to venerate the physically absent dead arose. The court itself debated the metaphysics and practicalities of “summoning souls” (*zhaohun* 招魂) and then sealing them inside jars to be placed in the new southern tombs. The practice resulted in elaborate pottery pieces now generally called “*hun*-jars,” and we’ll read some secondary studies on these pieces. Yet despite how unique and worthy this religious debate itself is, it remains to my knowledge untranslated. We can be the first.

**IV. A word of encouragement – 加油！**

We’re all at different language levels, and we may shine in some things but be rather dull in others. I fully admit my literary Chinese is an order of magnitude better than my modern Chinese for the obvious reason that all my work is done in the former. And by any standard, I’ve converted a lot of Classical Chinese into English, having authored several articles that developed around long texts I’ve translated, having inserted vast amounts of translated passages in my other articles and manuscripts, and most recently having created a sourcebook on the early Chinese ancestral cult. (If you’re ever interested, I’m happy to share them.)

There’s no such thing as a perfect translation, and we all bristle at some of the published ones that end up in circulation. Don’t become frustrated if the 馬馬虎虎 translation isn’t quite good enough, if I push for accuracy even at the expense of readability. It’s better to know the literary Chinese as precisely as possible even if that awkward-sounding precision would not ultimately manifest itself in any translation you yourself might publish.

Finally, be prepared to have a lot of fun. The last time I taught this course, we were all amazed at how fast the time swept by every day (and if you all agree as a group that we meet a bit earlier such as 8.30 a.m. rather than 9 a.m., my arm could be twisted). As evidence of how preoccupied our translation groups can become, I taught this course in the spring, and four or five of your colleagues continued to translate with me over the summer, all of us meeting once a week out on the lawn. (I’m not saying I can do that again, but it does show how addictive this material can become.) Learning literary Chinese opens up millennia of material to your perusal; learning it well will let you become a conduit of that material to others.



Woodcut of Pure Land rebirth story  
Five Dynasties or Song, Dunhuang