

Bringing Traditional Chinese Culture to Life By Yue Zhang

This issue of *Education About Asia* addresses the question, “What should we know about Asia?” Based on my experiences teaching courses on China and East Asia, traditional Chinese culture is one of the most important topics in understanding both past and present Asia. China has one of the world’s oldest civilizations. This poses many challenges to teachers who desire to make this rich and complex tradition accessible to their students. On both a temporal and spatial level, traditional China may seem far removed to Western students of the modern world. To bridge these gaps in time and space, and to make it more relevant to my students, I often connect its significance to contemporary society by highlighting the current appeal of learning about traditional Chinese culture in modern China. To demonstrate this process, this article examines examples from three cultural fields: Chinese philosophy, focusing on Confucius and his thought; Chinese history, with an illustration from the *Shiji*; and Chinese literature, with a case study on plum blossom poems. Moreover, this article discusses how to develop course questions that are relevant to the students’ needs, as well as how to update teaching styles by incorporating multimedia sources, such as current news and films, in the classroom in order to appeal to students of the digital age. Furthermore, the examples and approaches outlined in this article are applicable to a wide variety of courses, including, but not limited to, Chinese literature, history, philosophy, or world history. It is hoped that this article may therefore encourage teachers across many disciplines to incorporate these techniques, as well as their own innovations, in their classrooms.

Confucius and His Thought

Confucian thought played an important role in shaping Chinese culture and identity. In order to make this complex philosophy more engaging, I utilize the “What Did Confucius Say?” articles from the *Asia for Educators* website, which



Confucius. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/yb78qcn4>.

is hosted by Columbia University.¹ This reading material is concise and contains seven major sections grouped according to various topics, including primary sources and discussion questions. The first two sections cover the life and major ideas of Confucius, and provide the background and main features of the *Analects of Confucius*. For instance, the reading informs users that the *Analects of Confucius* is not a single work composed by Confucius (551–479 BCE) during his lifetime, but rather multiple writings compiled by Confucius’s disciples after his death. The *Analects* are also a useful starting point for students to encounter traditional Chinese culture due to the format of the text itself. Students frequently perceive that in many of these stories, Confucius engages in either a monologue or a conversation with his disciples or a ruler to articulate his ideas. Moreover, Confucius’s words are terse and concise, leaving room for various interpretations, thereby promoting a lively class discussion.

When designing class activities, I include some of the discussion questions from the reading material on the website into my own questions in order to unpack both the meaning of his sayings in their own cultural context, as well as their current appeal in contemporary society. These questions are well-designed for high school and undergraduate instructors. The first few questions come from the website and are always based on a primary source in order to ensure the students understand the text. I then follow up these general comprehension questions with my own questions in order to place Confucius’s sayings into a larger intellectual and social context by

asking students to apply Confucian thought to modern and contemporary issues. To prepare for class discussion, I may ask students to read some passages together or invite individual students to take turns reading them aloud, followed by their interpretations of the text’s meaning and broader significance. For example, one primary source comes from “On Confucius as Teacher and Person,” which includes Confucius’s sayings on education. I assign students the following discussion questions:

- Why is Confucius often called a great teacher? Please note several qualities of Confucius's teaching philosophy as demonstrated by his sayings.
- If Confucius were your teacher today, how would you evaluate his teaching approaches and methods? Would you want to attend his class? Why or why not?

Students are then able to discuss these questions based on a close reading of the document itself. For instance, the students learn that Confucius broke away from the traditional education system of his time, which had been limited to teaching the sons of noble families. In contrast, he allegedly would teach anyone who was willing to learn. In addition, he taught students with different approaches according to their own situations and characters. As a teacher, he showed his eagerness to learn from other people and improve his knowledge and skills, stating that "Walking along with three people, my teacher is sure to be among them."²

Another important Confucian thought is the concept of *ren* (humanity). In this section, I demonstrate that some of Confucius's sayings possess universal value, and thus, everyone can relate Confucius's primary beliefs regardless of their own personal knowledge and backgrounds. The discussion questions below are used to facilitate students' understanding of this concept and allow them to compare it to other traditions:

- Based on the reading section, what qualities does humanity include? Could you use some examples to illustrate Confucius's ideas on humanity?
- Humanity is a universal value in many philosophies and religions. Please discuss the similarities and differences between Confucians' humanity and other traditions that you are familiar with, such as Christianity or Buddhism.

Although Confucius's beliefs, such as humanity, have many similarities with other philosophical and religious traditions, some of Confucius's values, such as filial piety, are different from Western cultural traditions. Filial piety is the core of Confucian moral philosophy, but it may be difficult for students outside of the Chinese tradition to understand, thus instructors must explain it and similar concepts in detail. To this end, I provide the following discussion questions:

- What are the major ideas of Confucius's filial piety?
- Why do Chinese rulers promote and advocate this concept?
- If you were to apply filial piety to your family, what would happen? Do you think that filial piety applies to modern Western society? Why or why not?

To make these abstract concepts more concrete, I also ask students to offer specific examples to explain filial piety and its reciprocity. For instance, Confucius teaches that younger family members should respect their family elders, and in return, the elders have an obligation to take care of their younger family members. When explaining this, instructors should emphasize that this kind of relationship is hierarchical and that it was later advocated by rulers in different dynasties to legitimize their power by equating the ruler to the head of the family. When discussing filial piety, the instructor must also highlight its societal significance and philosophical ramifications. For instance, Confucian scholars maintained that if family members showed filial piety, then they would become peaceful and harmonious. Moreover, because society consists of many small families that make up the state, following this logic, a society that practices filial piety will naturally become well organized. Therefore, these scholars argued, a ruler should not rely on severe laws and regulations to govern his state; instead, a ruler should lead by exemplary deeds and moral values. Thus, students will learn that Confucian values such as filial piety affected all aspects of traditional Chinese culture, from the individual household to the governing state itself.

After students have grappled with the original texts and their historical significance, I then assign them Jeremy Page's 2015 *Wall Street Journal* article "Why China Is Turning Back to Confucius"³ in order to further demonstrate the current appeal of Confucian thought on modern Chinese society. Page begins by describing a lecture on Chinese philosophy that many senior Chinese officials attended in order to further understand Confucian values and how to apply them in their daily lives. He then discusses the causes behind this revival of traditional Chinese culture (i.e., Confucianism), such as coping with domestic social problems, legitimating the Communist Party's rule by arguing that it has inherited the Confucian tradition, and opposing Western influence. In addition, the article briefly traces the reception of Confucianism from the 1840s to the present and discusses many ways that contemporary Chinese society commemorates Confucius, such as establishing monuments, opening Confucian academies and training centers, and holding museum exhibitions and lectures.

In class, I first briefly discuss Confucius's fluctuating status from the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when his thought was largely criticized and condemned. This provides a historical context behind the return that contemporary Chinese society is making toward the study and appreciation of Confucian

ideology. It also enables students to understand how the traditional Confucian value of obeying a ruler's orders is being utilized to keep the present government in power. As students discuss this article, many observe that the top Chinese leaders attend Confucian classics courses and workshops, and even tune in to national television broadcasts and lectures on Confucian thought during primetime. In addition, they discover that school textbooks include more materials that encompass traditional values, and parents send their children to learn Confucian rituals as part of their extracurricular activities. After discussing these newly developing trends in Chinese society today, students often conclude that the Chinese government wants to revive traditional Chinese culture rooted in Confucianism in order to promote the "China Dream" and build a harmonious society. Moreover, Chinese leaders want to gain wisdom from indigenous Chinese culture to help solve contemporary problems, such as government corruption and the decline of moral integrity, while simultaneously opposing strong Western political and cultural influence. However, I make sure that students also know that Confucianism is but one historical tradition that influences China's political leaders. For example, legalism, which dates back to even before the establishment of China's first empire, the Qin in 221 BCE, is equally influential on the policies of Chinese leaders in many ways. Historically and in contemporary times, it can sometimes have ominous results for elements of the Chinese population. Instructors interested in making sure their students have an understanding of legalism are advised to access the Columbia University *Asia for Educators* website.⁴

Record of the Grand Historian

Another important aspect of Chinese culture is Chinese history. The *Shiji* (*Record of the Grand Historian*), written from the late second century BCE to 86 BCE, is the foundational text of Chinese history and covers a broad historical spectrum from the mythical Yellow Emperor to Emperor Wu (156–87 BCE) of the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–8). The class is introduced to the *Shiji* through a survey of its content, time span, the motivations behind its compilation, and major subdivisions within the work. For instance, students learn that the government did not sponsor the *Shiji*, and so did not dictate its contents. Rather, it was Sima Tan (ca. 165–110 BCE) who initially conducted the *Shiji* project, but his son, Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BCE), actually compiled this monumental masterpiece in order to fulfill his father's posthumous will. Moreover, Sima Qian fell out of favor with Emperor Wu because he defended Li Ling (134–74 BCE), a Han dynasty general, who defected to the Xiongnu nomadic tribes to the north of China. Sima Qian was ultimately punished for this by undergoing the humiliation of castration. In addition to these family and personal reasons for compiling the *Shiji*, Sima Qian also sought to establish a lineage of great historical figures who would otherwise have been forgotten in history. These factors strongly influenced what type of historical figures Sima Qian selected for the *Shiji*, the ways in which he narrated their accounts, and the conclusions he reached about them, as well as the lessons they represented for society as a whole. In general, Sima Qian emphasized the moral value and social impact of historical figures rather than their social or political status.

In my class, I select some biographies to discuss, among which is "The Biographies of the Assassin-Retainers."⁵ Here I use the biography of Jing Ke (d. 227 BCE) as an example of how I lead class discussion, integrate the *Shiji* through film, and highlight its appeal in a contemporary context for students.⁶ The Jing Ke story took place toward the end of the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE), when the state of Qin had already annexed several rival states and had set its target on the state of Yan in the north. Prince Dan of Yan (d. 226 BCE) consulted his officials about this important issue, and a senior official named Tian Guang (d. 227 BCE) suggested that the prince should hire Jing Ke to assassinate the King of Qin (259–210 BCE). In order to gain an audience with the King of Qin, Jing Ke requested three items: the map of Dukang (part of Yan's territory), a poisonous dagger, and the head of General Fan (d. 227 BCE), a traitor to the state of Qin. After obtaining these items, Jing Ke was granted an audience with the king in the Qin court. Jing Ke concealed the dagger inside the map scroll and unrolled it to its end. Suddenly, he grabbed the dagger from the scroll and attempted to kidnap the king as a hostage, but was unsuccessful. Eventually, the king and his courtiers killed Jing Ke. After reading

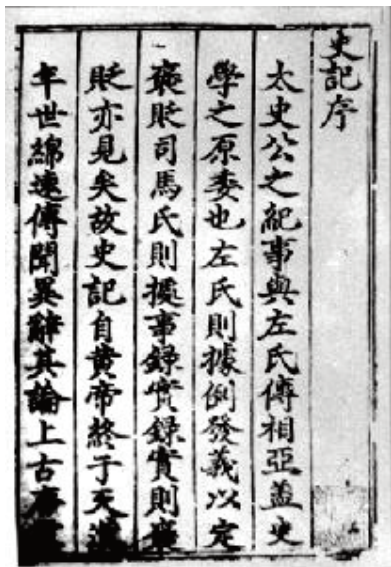


Sima Qian. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/y8lm6jon>.

this story, students must first summarize the text's plot, as well as the major characters and their personalities. To engage critically in understanding the historical narrative, students discuss the following questions:

- Why is Jing Ke willing to accept Prince Dan of Yan's order and carry out this assassination?
- How do you understand Jing Ke's complex personality and psychological state?
- Jing Ke was a failed assassin, yet he is glorified in Sima Qian's record. Please consider Sima Qian's own situation to explain why Jing Ke is immortalized and praised.
- In your opinion, is Jing Ke a hero? Why or why not?

Students brainstorm different points and piece them together on the whiteboard to understand the history of the Warring States, the knight-errant culture, and the reception of the Jing Ke story. In addition, I explain the possible connection between Sima Qian's choice of Jing Ke and his own life experiences.



Record of the Grand Historian.
Source: Wikipedia at
<https://tinyurl.com/y82o2kq9>.

To relate the Jing Ke story with contemporary Chinese society, I then show students parts of two film adaptations of the tale: Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* and Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, which are available through YouTube for a nominal fee. The former follows the standard historical narration fairly closely, while the latter changes the content substantially; however, students are still able to link the story with the film. In order to make this discussion more lively, students are required to complete a homework assignment on the following questions: *How have the two films adapted the Jing Ke lore? What are their major changes? How do you evaluate these changes; are they successful or not?* Through this exercise, students learn that the major plot of *The Emperor and the Assassin* is based on historical narration, with the exception of a new character—Lady Zhao—who is not found in any historical narrative. Students are to explain why this new role might have been created. Several factors shed light on this addition: since this is a three-hour-long, big-budget movie, the director may have been considering the box office results. More importantly, the purpose behind creating this role could have been to create a more complex and romantic plot. Even the director acknowledged in an interview that “Designing such a character like Lady Zhao cannot be said to have been done out of a lack of consideration for the plot. If I produced and shot a purely two-man story, it may not have had such a good effect.”⁷ Lady Zhao ultimately provides a link between the King of Qin and Jing Ke. When she is young, she admires Yingzheng's (the

King of Qin) courage and political ambition. However, when she later realizes that Yingzheng occupies the state of Zhao by slaughtering many innocent people, she turns to Jing Ke for help to stop such brutality. This additional character provides new possible interpretations of the motivations behind Jing Ke's assassination attempt, which stems not only from his loyalty to Prince Dan, but also from his righteousness in desiring to remove a brutal ruler. This modern adaptation increases the significance of Jing Ke's mission. In Zhang's film *Hero*, students identify the major change of the assassin abandoning his mission to kill the king, where the assassin instead engages in a direct dialogue with the king in the Qin court. Through their conversation, the assassin comes to understand that the king wants to defeat all other kingdoms and unify China in order to bring peace to all people under heaven. Students then discuss their implications of this change. Often, students are critical towards this adaptation because it glorifies the King of Qin and conveys a problematic and debatable message to the audience that a ruler can adopt any method or make any sacrifice to achieve one's goal, as long as one's intention is good or meaningful.

These films demonstrate how contemporary approaches to narrating the story of Jing Ke continue to provide different interpretations of the story and its significance. The discussion about the Jing Ke lore has switched from focusing on the details of his assassination attempt to adapting his story to fit the contemporary needs of strengthening nationalism and Chinese identity. The promotion of a strong “nation-state” ideology by Chinese leaders has played an important role in shaping this reception. Contemporary society portrays him as a national hero, a strong man attempting to remove an evil and despotic ruler, and a knight-errant who embodies the traditional moral values of China in the face of Western influence during China's rapid economic development, through which intellectuals can further probe China's recent past and thus bring history to life.

Poems on Things and Objects

Along with Chinese philosophy and history, literature also plays an important role in Chinese culture, particularly poetry, which was the dominant literary subgenre throughout premodern Chinese history. This section provides a creative approach not only on how to teach classical Chinese poems, but also on integrating them within a type of traditional art—blow painting. By exploring this topic, students develop a solid understanding of Chinese poetry, learn the cultural meaning of the plum blossom, and express their own appreciation for Chinese poetry.⁸

The plum blossom is famous, along with the orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum, as one of “The Four Gentlemen” in China. Furthermore, it is considered one of “The Three Friends in Winter,” together with pine trees and bamboo. However, plum trees are not common in the US, nor do they carry a significant cultural value, so the topic naturally stimulates student interest. Before we approach the topic of the plum blossom, my students have already studied other Chinese poems, so I briefly review some basic features of Chinese poetry, particularly the Chinese quatrain, which is often made up of four lines with five or seven characters in each line, and regulated verse, which is often made up of eight lines, and each line includes either five or seven characters. These two types of poetry were popular in the Tang dynasty (608–907), known as the golden age of Chinese poetry.⁹ Next, students gather information on the cultural meaning of the plum blossom and answer the following questions: *How and when do Chinese people discuss plum blossoms? What does the plum blossom mean in Chinese society? What interesting facts do you know about the plum blossom? What can you learn from the symbolic meanings of plum blossoms?* Students find appropriate information online and in the library about plum blossom culture and outline their primary ideas on the topic. Through class discussion, students also discover that the plum blossom has profound cultural connotations in China. The plum blossom symbolizes courage and strength because the fragrance of plum blossoms comes out of bitterness and coldness. The plum blossom also represents endurance and perseverance because plum blossoms flower in winter while most other plants do not survive. Furthermore, the plum blossom also embodies purity and lofty ideals, possibly because they bloom in winter, often covered with snow. To explore this motif, I incorporate several poems on plum blossoms in the lesson. Here are two examples from Shao Yong (1011–1077) and Wang Anshi (1021–1086):

A Leisure Walk by Shao Yong

Once upon a time, we walk leisurely for two or three miles

On the way, we see four or five misty villages

Six or seven temples and

*Eight, nine or ten branches of plum blossom*¹⁰

This poem is easy to understand but demonstrates the major characteristics of Song (960–1279) poetry, which focuses on the details of daily life. The poet’s focus gradually shifts from distant scenery to a closer look at his surroundings. At the beginning, the poet is far away, so he cannot see things clearly. When he moves closer, he sees the pavilions and houses. Looking even closer, he notices plum blossoms. The language in this poem is simple and clear without any descriptive words, but students still identify the poet’s cheerful mood and recognize that this is a pleasant experience. This is typical in Shao’s poems; as modern scholar Xiaoshan Yang states, “Shao Yong was always keen on distinguishing himself as a man of true joy and leisure from those who could only ‘steal leisure’ for a fleeting moment.”¹¹ After discussing the content of the poem, I highlight the word “misty” in the first couplet, which, rather than denoting smoke caused by fire, instead is used to depict the remote villages. Because one cannot see the villages clearly in the distance, it seems like they are surrounded by mist. Another possibility is that many families had been cooking, hence smoke from their chimneys could be obscuring the poet’s vision and creating this phenomenon.

The second poem that I use on this topic is a five-character quatrain:

Plum Blossoms by Wang Anshi

In the nook of a wall a few plum sprays,

In solitude blossom on the bleak winter days,

From the distance, I see they cannot be snow,

*For a stealthy breath of perfume hither flows.*¹²

In this quatrain, the poet encourages his readers to make use of their senses such as sight and smell. This poem does not focus on the appearance of the plum blossoms, but rather on their character and spirit. Students often note that

these plum blossoms appear in the corner of a wall during winter, which is unlikely to draw the attention of many people, revealing the unique character of the poet. In addition, without much nutrients, they still manage to blossom, demonstrating their hardiness. Furthermore, the last couplet forms a reverse causality: the third line tells the reader the result of noticing that the things in the distance are not snow; the fourth line informs the readers why the poet believes this is so: they are fragrant and cannot be snow. Thus, without describing the color of the plum blossoms themselves, the reader knows that they are either a white variety or are covered by snow, so they seem like snow when one looks at them far away. In terms of language, this poem does not employ overly ornate syntax. Yet through this simple and tranquil language, the poet conveys the spirit of plum blossoms: strong endurance and vibrant life. They are not afraid of cold weather, an analogy for people who do not fear power or authority. This allows the class to understand that the subtext of Chinese poetry often has political implications. Based on students' discussions, I further explain a possible hidden reading: this poem may also allude to the poet's own frustrated situation, when his political reform efforts faced resist-

ance and gradually lost the Emperor Shenzong's (1048–1085) support. However, through such adversity, like the plum blossom in winter, he was determined not to yield.

To make this topic even more lively, I integrate blow painting into the section on plum blossom poetry. The instructor should finish a complete blow painting before class so that students can see what the final product looks like. A simple blow painting requires some basic items, such as paper plates, calligraphy brushes, ink, red paint, and water. Ideally, one should use *xuan* paper made of different fibers, such as blue sandalwood, rice straw, and mulberry, which is specially designed for painting and calligraphy. However, it is difficult to obtain in the US, so I use paper plates instead. The procedure is simple: first, one puts drops of ink in the middle of the paper plate, blowing the drops slowly and patiently in different direc-



Cherry Blossom Blow Painting. Source: "Art Supply Guide" on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/yacz7pn2>.

tions as the first several blows shape the main stem of the tree. Then, blow a little harder, so the stem becomes thicker. Once the main stem is shaped, one can blow the ink quickly in various directions, which become different branches. One may use a straw to do the blowing to expedite the whole process. After the basic painting is completed, one may use a brush to dip into the red ink and put the petals or flowers around the branches and twigs. This combination of poetry appreciation and blow painting demonstration enables students to understand Chinese culture more vividly and concretely.

Conclusion

Many colleges and universities have some type of traditional Chinese culture courses, whether they be premodern Chinese literature, history, philosophy, or other China-related courses. This article offers personal insight and unique methods of diversifying approaches to teaching Chinese culture effectively. It investigates avenues for bringing traditional Chinese culture to life by demonstrating how to integrate multimedia (such as recent news and films), as well as fine arts (such as blow painting of plum blossoms) into a culture class. These examples and approaches, including discussion questions, are used to explore the current appeal of traditional Chinese culture, which continues to shape Chinese identity and character. In addition, these practices include useful materials for designing extracurricular activities in Chinese clubs, film presentations, or guest lectures. A combination of Chinese culture, multimedia, and hands-on experience in the classroom has proven to increase students' interest and motivation, as well as broaden their horizons with regards to Chinese civilization and society.

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NOTES

1. "What Did Confucius Say?," *Asia for Educators*, accessed February 20, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ycyosqn9>.
2. Ibid.
3. Jeremy Page, "Why China Is Turning Back to Confucius," *Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 2015 <https://tinyurl.com/ya6fhy37>.
4. See "Introduction to Legalism" on the *Asia for Educators* website at <https://tinyurl.com/ya6becmm>.
5. For the English translation of this chapter, see Burton Watson, *Record of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II* (rev. ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) and William H. Nienhauser Jr., *The Grand Scribe's Records: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
6. For a detailed discussion on the reception of the Jing Ke story, see Yuri Pine, "A Hero Terrorist: Adoration of Jing Ke Revisited," *Asia Major* 21, no. 2 (2008): 1–34.
7. Chen Kaige, Fenghuang Wang, "Chen Kaige jiu 'Jing Ke ci Qinwang' da jizhe wen," accessed May 24, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y726n7ew>.
8. A few good scholarly books on this topic are Maggie Bickford, *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Hans H. Frankel, *Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).
9. For more information on the Chinese quatrain and regulated verse, see Zong-Qi Cai, ed., *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 161–225.
10. The English translation of this poem is adapted from *Learning Mandarin Chinese*, <https://tinyurl.com/ya9jud46l>, accessed February 18, 2018. The flowers appearing at the end of this poem may not necessarily refer to plum blossoms, but for the purpose of teaching this topic, instructors may choose to interpret it as plum blossoms.
11. Xiaoshan Yang, *Metamorphosis of the Private Sphere: Gardens and Objects in Tang-Song Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 216.
12. The English translation of this poem follows: *Cultural China*, accessed February 18, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ya282e6h>.

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