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Redefining the Boundaries of Language Study

Claire Kramsch
Editor

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Poetics to Pedagogy: The Imagistic Power of Language

Hung-nin Samuel Cheung
University of California at Berkeley

Writing conveys meaning through language; the more sensitive we are to language, the more creative and profound is our reading experience. While writing encodes meaning in words and sentences, reading retrieves or reconstructs the meanings encoded in the words; both processes are mediated through linguistic signs. A judicious reader undergoes this process of mediation regularly, although often unknowingly, when perusing a written text, be it a story, a poem, a journalistic report, or even a rental contract. The words may narrate an event, make a statement, describe a condition, or express a feeling. The interpretation of the text, in turn, depends on what words are chosen and on how these words are put together. Successful reading, therefore, requires not only an ability to identify what each linguistic constituent, semantic entity, or grammatical unit, denotes in the immediate textual environment; it also needs a thorough understanding of how these constituents contrast with other possible choices available in the linguistic code.

Any attempt at literary interpretation must begin with an investigation of the grammar of the literary text, its structures and patterns, and their interrelationships. These linguistic features are in fact products of the natural grammar of the language, which needs to be analyzed explicitly if the meaning of the text is to be explained in all its complexity, not just intuited or described. Comprehension of the text is possible only with proper linguistic knowledge.

Linguistic analysis is a field in which literature students need just as much basic training as language students. For students of language, the ability to analyze texts is generally taken for granted, as language competency is essentially acquired through various stages of linguistic prepara-

tion. For students of literature, this ability is regarded as crucial, especially when the text under study is in a foreign language. In practice, however, especially in the field of Asian languages, linguistic knowledge is utilized not to analyze and interpret the text in the foreign language, but to translate the text into idiomatic English. Once that task is accomplished, the link to the original language is readily dismissed. Any further discussion of the text is usually conducted in English and based on the translation. Granted that translation is a specialized discipline requiring a high degree of competence in both languages, it is nevertheless quite different from interpretation. A translated text delivers only one interpretation of the original.[1] If the purpose of literary investigation, however, is to study the multiple voices of the text, these voices are more audible when the target text is dealt with in the target language.

Teaching a literary text in the original language is what we all strive for, but often with little success. The obvious constraints are (1) lack of suitable materials; (2) insufficient class time for both close textual reading and intensive literary probing; and (3) inadequate training of teachers, who often do not know how to conduct literary discussion and employ literary terminology in the target language. The students themselves may be socially functional in the language but still shy of literary sophistication. When a teacher lectures in the target language on structural patterns in a narrative or the use of trope in a poem, are the students linguistically advanced enough to follow the literary analysis? If required to address a Chinese text in the Chinese language, does a student's performance suffer because of linguistic inadequacy? It is often assumed that students are not able to think as critically, speak as eloquently, or write as convincingly in a foreign language as in their own. In fact, some teachers contend that literature can be effectively taught only in the language native to the students, while language endeavors are best relegated to a language class.

Such arguments are valid only if the teacher is linguistically ill-prepared and unwilling to experiment with pedagogical techniques that deal with a foreign language text *in the foreign language*. When critically aware of linguistic complexities, teachers can extend their knowledge and their teaching from glossing individual words and sentences to examining how words and sentences are organically structured to inscribe meaning in a text. If they impart this knowledge directly in the target language, students may not fully apprehend or appreciate the value of this linguistic analysis; it may be more accessible to students when delivered through a series of instructional exercises in the original language that reveal the underlying

linguistic features of the text. These exercises could evolve from the obvious to the more challenging.[2] They could begin with word definition and continue with lexical comparison, bringing to light the semantic ramifications in the choice of an attribute or the naming of an object in relation to the overall context. Or, they could begin with sentence parsing, showing how the grammar of the text relates to its thematic or stylistic effects. The adoption of a particular tense, the use of the subjunctive, the choice of direct or indirect speech forms, of simple or complex sentences, of the active or the passive voice, are all textual features that deserve careful probing because they might bear significantly on the reading of the literary text. Students may come up with different readings for the significance of these features, and that, in turn, could become a topic for classroom discussion.

Linguistic analysis may be regarded as retracing the creative process of writing. Students who participate in this retracing have an opportunity to vicariously experience the act of writing the text themselves; their understanding of its structure, themes, and language is often more profound and revealing than what can be achieved in the traditional lecture format. When viewed in a pedagogical context, literary investigation may be characterized as a linguistic analysis that helps "the learner [to] relate a piece of literary writing with his own experience of language" (Widdowson 1975, p. 116).[3]

In the following section, I demonstrate how a Chinese text can be taught through a variety of activities, each designed to concentrate on a specific aspect of the language as it relates to meaning.[4] In particular, the exercises aim to examine the imagistic power of the words that generate the rich poetic appeal of the composition. To most English speaking students, Chinese is more foreign than other foreign languages, such as French or Spanish. Its use of tones, its writing system in characters, and its lack of tense distinctions are some of the linguistic features that make Chinese particularly difficult for American students. Despite an increase in the representation of Chinese people, Chinese landscape, and Chinese objects in various media, the Chinese culture remains unfamiliar to many Americans. In a Chinese literature class, when examining a text, students can easily identify images or issues that are dissimilar to those in their own traditions. This contrastive recognition is, of course, crucial to their understanding of a Chinese text, but a more discriminating and informed comprehension is attainable only when the text is viewed within the context of its own culture and literature. The purposes of using linguistic exercises are

precisely to examine and delineate these cultural and literary characteristics by first scrutinizing the function of the language in the original, the language that forms the basic fabric of any literary composition.

The Chinese text that I have selected for illustration is an early fourteenth–century poem.[5] It is required reading for most Chinese high-school students and is often included as an apt selection for American students studying Chinese literature.[6] In five short lines with a total of twenty-eight characters, the poem depicts a rural scene at sunset with a lone traveler finding himself stranded at the edge of the world, weary and homesick. The above description, almost as long as the Chinese verse itself, accomplishes little in capturing the subtlety and emotional poignancy of the original. Below is the text given in both characters and romanization,[7] each line followed by a literal translation.[8]

枯藤、老樹、昏鴉
ku1 teng2, lao3 shu4, hun1 ya1
withered vines, old tree, dusk crows[9]

小橋、流水、人家
xiao3 qiao2, liu2 shui3, ren2jia1
small bridge, flowing water, people's houses

古道、西風、瘦馬
gu3 dao4, xi1 feng1, shou4 ma3
ancient road, west wind, thin horse

夕陽西下
xi2yang2 xi1 xia1
evening sun west set

斷腸人在天涯
duan4chang2 ren2 zai4 tian1ya2
broken-bowel person at heaven end

Essentially a series of picturesque images, the poem reads very much like a Japanese *haiku*, where the poetic pathos is invoked through the suggestive power of the words. The lines are short, two or three syllables per unit, and the language is refreshingly terse and simple. The images, mostly visual and static, are strung together in no apparent order, dotting a landscape that unfolds as the lines continue. The poem concludes with the presence of a "heart-broken person,"[10] and yet that person, just like the houses in line two, seems to form part of the scenery, which remains impersonal, void of any human interpretation or intervention. The poem

is untitled but is often referred to as a composition on the theme of "autumn thoughts." The following exercises are designed to investigate how these thoughts, or subjective consciousness, inspire and are expressed by this lyrical poem, which at first glance appears ever so simple and impersonal.

Exercise 1: Make a Picture

As the poem is rich in objects and images, the first means by which to begin a class discussion is to require students to draw pictures of the landscape as they imagine it in their initial reading.[11] Depending on the proficiency level of the students, a glossary in Chinese or in English may be provided beforehand.

To translate this picturesque poem into an actual drawing, a student must have a clear understanding of each word and phrase and be able to visualize how the objects referred to in the text are positioned in relation to each other. Even though the poem reads as if it follows a stream of consciousness, taking on any object that captures the poetic eye, the act of drawing forces a spatial reconstruction, however arbitrarily arrived at, one in which objects, such as the river and houses in line one, have to be precisely and squarely placed, either one before the other or next to each other. In other words, students have to choose a subjective stand, a perspective from which the autumn scene is viewed. The following are a few illustrations that I have gathered, with some modification of details for the present publication.[12] It is interesting to note that while the houses in all four pictures lie at the far end of the horizon, one drawing presents high-rise structures instead of the traditional V-shaped rooftop dwellings, an unexpected touch of modernism. Some pictures depict crows flying in the sky while others put them on treetops. The most intriguing interpretation is the fourth drawing in which there are two people, one by the tree and one literally "at heaven's end." The student who produced this picture explained the configuration by saying, in Chinese, that the figure in the foreground is the poet, who longs for the one travelling afar. In illustration three, humans are noticeably absent. This sketcher claimed that since the landscape unfolds before the eyes of the traveler, viz. those of the poet, human presence is implied by the perspective adopted for the drawing. The perspectives are indeed many in these pictures.[13] In the drawing with two figures, the reader is given a voyeuristic peek at a man gazing into the horizon. Is he looking toward or for the other person? A traveler, a friend, or a beloved? As students are asked to prepare illustrations at home, form-

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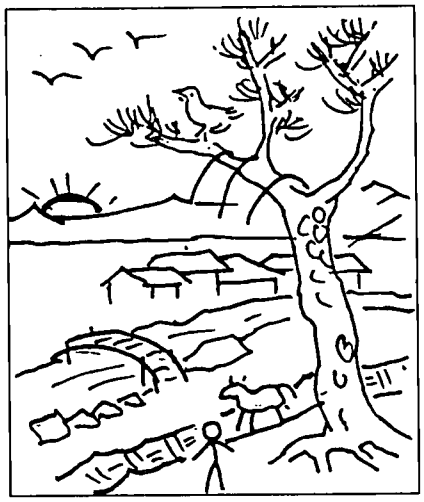
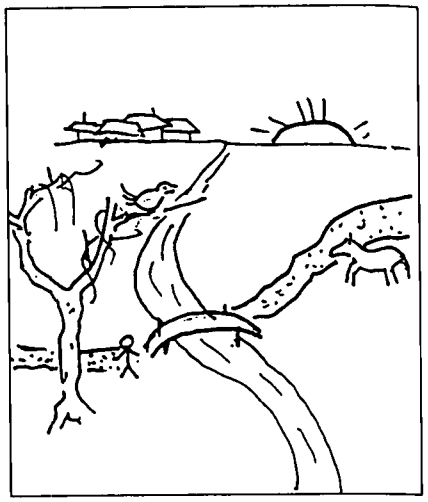


Picture 1



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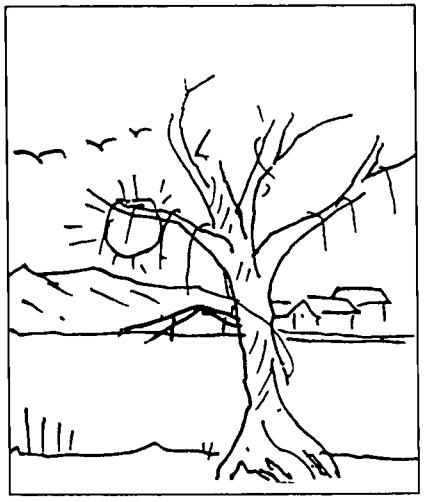

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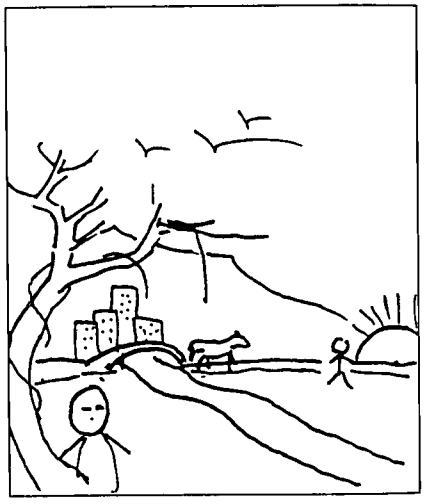

Picture 4

ing their initial impressions and perhaps preliminary interpretations of the poem prior to group interaction, a small portion of the class hour may be devoted to examining these pictures and exploring different possible readings. Each reading may be equally valid, but it may be also modified as the text is subject to close scrutiny, as will be done in the following exercises.

Exercise 2: Bingo

This exercise focuses on the first three lines, each of which contains three short expressions. The nine linguistic units present nine different images that detail the autumn landscape, a landscape from which the poet draws his inspiration. It is important that students fully comprehend the significance of these images and their linguistic representations. The first step of familiarization is a short exercise that requires memorization of the expressions. The game of bingo may be played with pictorial representations; while the teacher or a student calls out the Chinese terms from slips prepared beforehand, the students have to find the appropriate illustrations on their bingo cards. Or, the pictorial illustrations can be replaced with Chinese characters if students are familiar with the writing system. Without fail, the expressions become active vocabulary even after just a few rounds of bingo. A simple game of fun and excitement, bingo demands attention to the target words and familiarity with their sound representations. In the present case, active command of the poem's first three lines is necessary as the following discussion will focus on the formation, ordering, and function of these nine poetic units.

Exercise 3: Find a New Attribute

The first part of this exercise begins with the following question: What is one common grammatical feature that characterizes all nine expressions? Because of prior preparation at home, most students notice that every unit is made up of an attribute and a noun. Whether the attribute is an adjective or a verb, the expression is invariably a nominal compound and not in the structure of a verb-object or subject-predicate relationship. The pattern applies to all nine units, a linguistic uniformity that partially accounts for the static quality of the scenic depiction. In fact, most attributes in the three lines are descriptive terms, such as *lao* (old), *xiao* (small), *shou* (thin), etc. The only exception is *liu shui* (flowing water) in line two, where the attribute *liu* (flow) is, by part of speech, a verb. However, when we compare the expression with its reversed form, *shui liu* (water flows), where the

verb becomes the predicate announcing the movement of its subject *shui,* the difference in dynamics becomes self-evident. Whereas *shui liu,* a subject + verb expression, depicts a dynamic scene of a flowing river, the attributive structure *liu shui* seems to capture a single moment of streaming water and freeze it permanently on paper. The composition is a silent picture of still objects, each arrested in time.[14]

The second part of this exercise is to discuss the linguistic structure that underlies Chinese poetics, basic prosodic knowledge that students may have already learned from other classes but that they will find particularly useful in their appreciation of this poetic text. A verse line in Chinese generally consists of two or three units, each of which contains two syllables. Since Chinese is a monosyllabic language with each syllable constituting one semantic unit, a two-syllable compound contains two units of meaning and derives its conglomerate reading from both members. When an object is chosen as the focus of poetic attention, prosodic requirements dictate that the poet attach to the name of the object, a noun generally in one syllable, another word of modification so as to form a two-syllable prosodic unit. The deliberate choice of an attribute adds color to the object, most likely reflexive of the subjective thought of the poet. The selection of "thin" to describe a horse projects a very different picture from the choice of, say, "handsome." Indeed, the overall tone of the autumn thoughts in this particular text is decided not so much by the selection of objects as by the choice of attributes.

The third part of the exercise is to give students a list of all nine nouns but without their attributes, and ask them to find new modifiers, as many as they can for each noun. The following, in English translation, is a list of what students might generate:

a. vines: new vines, long vines, wild vines, spring vines, green vines, thick vines

b. tree: ancient tree, young tree, emerald tree, autumn tree, date tree, lonely tree

c. crow: old crow, black crow, crying crow, chattering crow, thin crow, dazed crow

d. bridge: big bridge, long bridge, wood bridge, bay bridge, crescent bridge, arched bridge

e. water: ocean water, green water, spring water, vast water, still water, dead water

f. house: peasant house, imperial house, a thousand houses, your house, other houses, everyone's house

g. road: big road, winding road, broad road, straight road, mountain road, level road

h. wind: east wind, west wind, cool wind, piercing wind, morning wind, sorrowful wind

i. horse: small horse, old horse, flying horse, handsome horse, white horse, multi-colored horse

Most of the attributes are simple words that students have learned, many from their first-year syllabus. The exercise first makes students review these words, some of which they may not have used for a long time due to lack of appropriate context (e.g., "imperial," "piercing," etc.). Secondly, it makes them aware of a grammatical rule in Chinese, which allows both adjectives and verbs to stand before a noun as modifiers without any explicit syntactic or morphological marking (cf. the use of *-ing* or *-ed* forms in English attributes, such as "flying," "multi-colored," etc.). Students may come up with combinations that are semantically possible but stylistically not acceptable in Chinese. For example, while both *fei ma* (fly - horse) and *pao ma* (run - horse) are combinations of a verb and a noun, only the former is considered a case of modification: flying horse. The latter is an idiomatic expression meaning either "to ride on a horse" or "horse race"; neither demonstrates the attributive usage. In fact, the exercise provides an opportune moment to expound upon Chinese morphology.

The main purpose of this exercise on attributes is, of course, to sharpen a student's sensitivity to the use of modifiers in the poem and to call attention to the impact that the original choices create as compared to their selections. Another possible exercise is to categorize the newly formed compounds into different groups representing positive, negative, and neutral qualities. At least six of the original nine attributes (withered, old, dusk, small, ancient, thin) fall under the negative category,[15] a rhetorical phenomenon that, even without much explanation, adequately accounts for the desolate mood pervading this autumn verse.

Exercise 4: Form a New Verse

This exercise may be considered a continuation of Exercise 3, an assign-

ment that has produced a great variety of new attributive compounds. Students are now asked to choose one new compound from each list and arrange the selections in the order followed by the original text. Here is an example of a new grouping:

新藤、綠樹、鳴鴉
寬橋、闊水、萬家
大道、東風、俊馬
Xin teng, lü shu, ming ya
Kuan qiao, kuo shui, wan jia
Da dao, dong feng, jun ma

New vines, green trees, chattering crows
A broad bridge, vast water, ten thousand houses
A great road, the east wind, a handsome horse

The same set of objects, now cast in a different mode of attribution, creates a dramatically different picture, a scene of excitement and hope. When shown this new verse, a Chinese literature student gave the following impression: The poem tells the story of a high-spirited young official riding on horseback en route to a new post in a populated city. In this new version of the poem, every poetic unit conjures up an image of new life, an auspicious beginning, a mood that is surely quite different from that of the original. The multiplicity of options available in the language and the imagistic power of diction become apparent in the course of rewriting the old verse with new attributes.

Exercise 5: Old Words in a New Scheme

This is the most important exercise in the series designed specifically for this poem. The first three lines in the text are written in a paratactic style, juxtaposing nine expressions, three in each line, in no apparent order or with any expression of their relations. Is the selection and combination an impromptu act, an arbitrary stroke of genius? Or, is the arrangement carefully orchestrated? The best way to test whether there is an underlying structural order is to ask students to rearrange the members in each group and compare the literary effects of the various groupings. The following is line two with one variation:

original: small bridge, flowing water, people's houses

variation: people's houses, flowing water, small bridge

One student said that by reshuffling the words he noticed for the first time that the objects were ordered to represent a progression of the subject's view of the surroundings: the layout extends from the close to the distant. In the original line, the eyes first see the bridge, then the river, and finally houses that lie on the opposite bank. In the revised version, however, the houses are closer, located in fact on the same side of the river as the spectator. The perception of the ordering of objects is implicitly coded into the illustrations that students produced in Exercise 1: All of them put the habitats beyond the river, far from the observing eye.

The same principle of progressive, directional observation underlies the sequence of the first line:

original: withered vines, an old tree, evening crows

variation: evening crows, withered vines, an old tree

As crows are generally found on trees or in the sky, the revised version represents a downward trajectory as the eye moves from an object atop the tree, then follows the vines downward until one sees the tree directly ahead: Ah, an old tree. The progression in this order, however, seems a bit awkward and unnatural since one does not usually notice things high above before perceiving what is directly in the line of vision. By comparison, the ordering of objects in the original line makes much more sense. It provides a view that moves in a logical upward direction: first noticing the vines that creep upward along the trunk of an old tree close by, and ultimately spotting the birds on the branches against an evening sky.

The third line follows the same principle, this time extending from the road afar to the thin horse by the traveler's side, and in between one feels the breeze of the west wind.

Now that the perceptual progression is evident in the sequencing of objects, our next task is to relate this perception to our understanding of the entire composition. As noted above, the poem presents a series of static images, a scene of stillness that is linguistically achieved through the choice of the attributive construction rather than the predicative structure. However, beneath that dreary surface of quietude is a constant movement of perception as the poet or the poetic subject looks upward in the first line, outward in the second line, and back to where he is in the third line.[16] The tranquil facade is indeed deceptive. One can imagine that, with his feet firmly planted to the ground beside the old tree where the weary horse stands, the observer is never resting. His gaze keeps moving. As his eyes look out a second time, he sees the setting sun afar; as his focus

again pulls back, he finds himself positioned this time against a horizon beyond human reach. In fact, the movement never stops throughout the entire piece, creating a constant fluctuation of emotional responses that is achieved through the formidable array of attributes chosen to sketch various objects. The tempo is fast, thus heightening the tension in the poem. The observation comes to an ironic end as, in the final line, the observer, the heart-broken traveler, becomes himself an object to be gazed upon. The objectification has been coded into the pictorial illustration with two figures in Exercise 2. But, who is this second person looking at him? A stranger, an enemy, or could it be his beloved looking back with longing? These speculations readily open a new area of discussion.

Exercise 6: Where Is the Action? Find the Verb.

It has long been noted by many critics that one of the most striking features of the poem is its obvious lack of verbs, especially verbs in their regular predicative role.[17] The purpose of this exercise is to alert students to this unusual practice in versification. Students are asked to list all the verbs in the text and decide whether they are predicative or attributive in function. The following is the list of the only verbs in the poem, three words in a total of twenty-eight, a scarcity whose significance students easily note as they begin their discussion.

liu (to flow), line two

xia (to descend), line four

zai (to be at), line five

As described above, *liu* in line two is attributive in usage and hence static by connotation. There are in fact only two predicative verbs, *xia* and *zai,* both in the second half of the composition. Of the two, *xia* is a motion verb and *zai* is merely a location marker. In other words, the entire composition hinges upon only one action, *xia,* the descent of the sun. Students may see that as the sun sets, hurrying the passage of time, everything, the landscape both far and near, will become shrouded in darkness, a negation of all existence. And, as one participant noted, in contrast to or against that impersonal and immutable rush of time, human existence is planted in stillness, as marked by the static verb *zai,* and is a presence that will also soon be swept away when the night falls. The poem ends on a note of profound despair.

Exercise 7: Where Does It Stop?

As the last line forms its predicate with the verb *zai,* noting the position of the traveler in relation to the horizon, we will now return to the first three lines and study the spatial relationship among the three objects in each line. Specifically, students are asked to discover a pattern by which the poet connects the first two objects in each line to the third member. In the first line, one's eyes follow the tree upward to its top where the crows perch. The second line ends with the image of houses located beyond the river, a rustic village inviting the traveler to rest at the end of the day. By comparing these two lines, students come to realize that the third member in each line represents animate beings and that the first two compounds describe shelters to which the beings, crows in line one and people in people's houses in line two, return for the night. The third line, ending with horse, seems to conform to the same pattern. However, as some students quickly pointed out, the horse is located on or near the road, perhaps resting temporarily but not in its stable. Does the road head home? Can one envision an ancient highway that extends into the distant horizon? Is this a journey that never ends, a journey in life as well as through the landscape? The evening now settles in and old age approaches. Following the pattern established in the previous line, the poem concludes with a locative expression: the end of the earth. This time, however, the location is beyond reach. The journey goes on and on, and does not stop until death comes, subsuming all. The sadness of a lone traveler, the longing for home and the fear of the unknown are all conveyed in a highly condensed form, these simple words and suggestive images.

Exercise 8: Rhythmic Speech

As students begin to develop an analytical understanding of the textual manipulation of language and images, our next task is to introduce them to other prosodic features of the composition. After all, a poem follows strict rules of prosody. There are three different assignments in this exercise, each concentrating on a specific prosodic feature.

The first assignment is to identify the rhyme, a fairly easy task that students can accomplish in just a few minutes. All five lines rhyme, and the rhyme words are *ya, jia, ma, xia, ya.* It is interesting that, even though the tones are different, the poem begins and ends with the same syllable *ya,* forming a rhyming cycle that reinforces the thematic pathos of entrapment, the feeling of finding oneself, after a temporary flight in thought,

physically immobile, rooted to the same spot in nature.

The next assignment deals with tone, the pitch contour of a Chinese syllable. There are four tones in modern Mandarin, here numerically labeled as 1, 2, 3, 4 after each syllable. Traditional poetics, however, identifies only two tonal categories: Tone A, which includes tones 1 and 2 in modern Mandarin; and Tone B, which encompasses tones 3 and 4. The tonal dichotomy is a complex and controversial issue that linguists and literary critics are still debating,[18] but poets have observed the prosodic requirement for centuries. As described above, a verse line can be divided into several units. The last syllable in each unit forms its tonal base. It is a common practice for units in the same line to be tonally antithetical. In other words, if the first unit ends with Tone A, the following unit should end with Tone B, and the next one should end again with Tone A. This tonal requirement can be easily demonstrated by comparing the original ordering with the new grouping of compounds as produced in Exercise 5. For example,

original:	*ku teng2,*	*lao shu4,*	*hun ya1*
	A	B	A
	withered vines,	an old tree,	evening crows
revised:	*hun ya1,*	*ku teng2,*	*lao shu4*
	A	A	B
	evening crows,	withered vines,	an old tree

In addition to its illogical thematic progression as observed above, the revised line also fails prosodically. With two members of Tone A in a row, the tonal requirement is violated.

The third assignment looks at the length of each verse line. It is evident that, except for the fourth line which has four syllables, all other lines are six syllables long. Although the length of each line is historically prescribed by a generic pattern, it is the manipulation of the set length and its poetic effect that students are asked to speculate upon. The first three lines are structured in the same mode, six syllables each line, divided into three units, two syllables per unit. The pattern gives a uniformity to the first half of the piece, a rhythmic flow that is nonetheless abruptly interrupted by the fourth line with only four syllables.[19] The short line, which tells of the quick approach of darkness, creates a structural imbalance and thus evokes

a sense of emotional disturbance. The sun sets at a pace so fast that only a short line can capture its hasty departure. The contrast in the first four lines leads one to anticipate the last line in which the balance is restored. Indeed, the fifth line returns to the normal length of six syllables. Or, does it? When confronted with this question, students will notice that while order seems to have returned, it is not quite the same as that of the old sequence: The last line actually is composed of only two units, three syllables each. The subtle deviation from an established pattern creates feelings of anxiety that further intensifies the overall mood of restlessness in the composition.

Exercise 9: A New Touch by an Eager Hand

At this point, the text has been studied from every possible structural and stylistic angle, concentrating on the use of language in creating an ambiance that directs a reader's expectation and interpretation of the poem. Next, the students' linguistic skills can be put to work. There are all kinds of projects that require students to actively participate in a writing assignment, exercises that review and practice the various literary techniques they have learned from the preceding activities. One of the exercises I have used and with good results is the following.

In Exercise 2, the bingo game is played by juggling the nine compound expressions. Since the expressions are already written on separate pieces of paper that are drawn to be read aloud during the game, the slips can be saved for the present exercise. Each student is asked to draw three slips from the pile of nine and use the compounds written on them as the base for a first dabbling in Chinese versification. Students can choose the order in which the three expressions are to be arranged, any sequence that appeals to their aesthetic sense. They then add a line of four syllables to the sequence, a continuation that elaborates or comments on the thought or sentiment in the base line and that rhymes with it as well. The following are some contributions from my students, with English translations attached:

1. 枯藤、小橋、西風
   我去誰送
   ku teng, xiao qiao, xi feng
   wo qu shei song [I-go-who-see me off]

   Withered vines, small bridge, west wind.
   Who is to see me off as I depart?

2. 老樹、瘦馬、流水
去日難追
lao shu, shou ma, liu shui
qu ri nan zhui [go-day-difficult-capture]

Old trees, thin horse, flowing water.
Days gone, impossible to retrieve.

3. 西風、昏鴉、人家
滿地黃花
xi feng, hun ya, ren jia
man di huang hua [full-ground-yellow-flower]

West wind, evening crows, people's houses.
Yellow flowers on the ground, everywhere.

4. 古道、西風、枯藤
煙雨濛濛
gu dao, xi feng, ku teng
yan yu meng meng [mist-rain-murky-murky]

Ancient road, west wind, withered vines.
Drizzles and sprinkles, misty and moisty.

Composed in a matter of a few minutes, these short pieces are truly spontaneous, poetic, and beautiful. I did not ask for tonal antithesis because beginning students, who have not yet learned how to give free reign to their command of vocabulary, need more time than was available. However, if and when an effort is made in this regard, the products will be even more remarkable.

Exercise 10: My Piece of Mind

The last exercise is a Chinese composition on the topic Sunset. This is, of course, a take-home assignment that students can write in either prose or verse. However, the main emphasis of the composition is not so much to practice their writing skills as to encourage them to write on the same topic but according to how they feel when watching the sun go down. What this exercise reveals is that American students in general have a very different way of relating and responding to sunsets. To the modern Western eye, the sunset is essentially a celestial phenomenon of sheer beauty and romance. In the Chinese culture, however, it represents the end of a day, the approach of old age, imminent death, and the decline of a

dynasty. It generates a feeling of anxiety, a tinge of sadness, regret at being alone, realization of being lost, and a longing to return to one's beloved. If the setting sun is beautiful, it is only tragically so. While in contemporary English language writing images of sunsets are modified by words such as "brilliant, glorious, crimson, peaceful" far more frequently than by words like "dying" or "fading," the following poetic couplet from tenth-century China clearly exemplifies the contradictory associations with both wondrous beauty and irrevocable decline that typically accompany references to sunsets in the Chinese poetic vocabulary:

夕陽無限好
只是近黃昏
Xiyang wuxian hao,
Zhi shi jin huanghun.

The setting sun, infinitely beautiful,
Only that the dusk is near.[20]

Depending on their backgrounds, students may stretch their imaginations and make any free thematic or philosophical associations with the topic. They should, however, make an effort to experiment with the language so as to invoke its imagistic power.

Recent developments in language study have justifiably placed great emphasis on culture as an integral part of the learning experience. Language instruction should not only teach oral competency, and how to read and write; it should also demand intellectual curiosity and understanding, a challenge that necessarily requires awareness of the culture that informs the language. Writings in English about Chinese culture are informative and valuable; however, as noted by Swaffar, "the most consistent cultural networks are located in authentic texts,"[21] texts that are produced by natives and for natives. Authentic texts must be included early in a language study program. While native texts vary widely in form, style, and subject matters, the choice of a literary text over other authentic writings, such as a newspaper article or a rental contract, is a decision based on the goals of the program, the needs of students and the interest of the instructor. However, the choice should also be made on cultural grounds. A literary text, such as the above fourteenth-century verse, represents not only a significant achievement in the Chinese poetic tradition, it also contains philosophical and linguistic features characteristic of the Chinese culture.

Its diction belongs to the active vocabulary of a modern educated speaker, and its multiple metaphorical readings are part of the basic repertory of cultural conventions. Its prosody is found in lyrics of contemporary songs and commercial ads. A close reading of the text through linguistic analysis highlights all such features and allows students to absorb and internalize them. Creative exercises further develop their active command of newly acquired skills. A text may be read for its cultural inferences, its literary craftsmanship, and its linguistic particulars. When conducted in the target language, the discussion may prove to be just as much a challenge to the students' language skills as to their intellectual acumen.

Adopting linguistic analysis in a textual investigation is, of course, nothing new in the tradition of literary criticism.[22] Scholars have long noted the importance of studying a text through its basic linguistic makeup, a practice traditionally used in the pedagogy of some European languages.[23] However, insofar as I know, the design of an organized set of linguistic activities to approach literary texts has yet to be systematically pursued in the field of Asian languages.[24] The exercises I have developed and presented in the previous pages are for a particular Chinese text. They are of two types: those that involve specific linguistic maneuvers and those that require original thinking. The latter type is based upon successful completion of the former and the former pedagogically prepares for the latter. In other words, exercises designed for this and any text should be an organic whole that builds gradually through an ever deepening and widening exploration of cultural topics. This gradual progression is crucial for developing students to their fullest capacities as foreign language learners. Some exercises may be shortened or omitted while others may be expanded or modified to meet class requirements. However, both the text and the exercises should stimulate probing discussions that not only achieve a greater understanding of the target culture, but also encourage students to think in a comparative and self-reflexive fashion about their own concepts of life.

I have used some of the exercises with my students and part of the results are presented in this study. I have discussed this pedagogical approach in Chinese language workshops, inviting fellow members to participate in the activities.[25] The responses have been enthusiastic and supportive. Some participants were native speakers of Chinese and well-trained in traditional literature. Nonetheless, afterwards many of them noted that as they took part in the exercises, they realized for the first time and in concrete terms how the poem derived its emotional appeal from the

power of its language. A few teachers vowed to adopt the same set of exercises as they introduce this text in their classes. I have yet to learn what their experiences have been, but I am confident that as more teachers experiment with the approach, more varied and challenging exercises will be designed to suit different curricular and textual demands.

In my workshop presentations, I have also included a twentieth-century Chinese short story and examined, through carefully designed exercises, its use of specific linguistic features in relation to a psychoanalytic reading.[26] In fact, prose or verse, fiction or drama, any literary text can be studied or deconstructed through close linguistic analysis. By focusing our critical attention initially on language, we are in effect retracing the writing process, only in a reverse direction, from the product to the conception of ideas. Just as speakers are seldom aware of using grammar rules when talking, writers may not be fully conscious of the power of linguistic manipulation when choosing the words that commit their ideas, thoughts, and emotions to paper. Nonetheless, grammar can always be reconstructed from a corpus of spoken materials, and compositional patterns and stylistic features can be uncovered in a literary text. The responsibility of literature teachers is to make fruitful use of these patterns and features as they are discovered, and to build them into learning activities that will encourage and enhance students' efforts to read and understand a text.

Traditional Chinese pedagogy in the United States relegates the task of linguistic identification to language teaching, while the task of literary interpretation is assigned to the mission of literature classes. Not without its own justification in terms of specialization in training, the division of labor often creates a tension between teachers in the two disciplines. More disturbing is the fact that students are often pedagogically short-changed by such academic segregation. The dichotomy fails to recognize the importance of making linguistic investigation a vital part of literary discourse. Consequently, students who examine a literary text without first conducting a thorough linguistic analysis may never learn how to appreciate the linguistic mechanisms that account for literary richness. The kind of textual approach through linguistic scrutiny that I propose cuts across the boundary between two disciplines and removes barriers that should never have existed. The approach may be used in a literature class for native speakers as well as for foreign students. It works just as effectively in a literature class as in a language class that uses literary texts as teaching material. Language is the only signifier that directs us to what we set out to look for, the meaning of a text. Language tells and suggests, and our job as

teachers of both language and literature is to find out what it tells and how it suggests.

Notes

I wish to thank the editor and reviewers for their many comments on an early draft of this paper. I also wish to acknowledge the editorial advice I have received from Ms. Marjorie Fletcher. I am grateful to Ms. Andrea Goldman for her assistance in proofreading the manuscript.

1. For a discussion on mediating the problem of translation, see J. Hillis Miller, "Translation as the Double Production of Texts," in *Text and Context: Cross-Disciplinary Perspective on Language Study*, edited by C. Kramsch and S. McConnell-Ginet, 124–34. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1992.
2. For a critical discussion on the pedagogy of literary texts, see Claire Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, 1993, especially the chapter titled "Teaching the Literary Text," pp. 131–76. Specifically regarding poetry, please read H.G. Widdowson, *Practical Stylistics: An Approach to Poetry*, 1992. The second part of the book is devoted exclusively to the teaching of poetry.
3. In this seminal work on stylistics, Widdowson argues eloquently on the dynamics of mediating between linguistics and literary criticism. By examining a poem by Robert Frost, Widdowson illustrates "an approach to analysis which focuses on the way language is patterned to create a message form which characterizes the poem as a unique act of communication" (p. 122).
4. I am most grateful to Professor Wei Hua, of Pacific Lutheran University, Washington, for involving me in a NEH project entitled "Culture in Language: A Manual for Beginning and Intermediate Chinese." Among the pedagogical materials we examined is the text that I have now used for this study.
5. The poem, generally referred to as *"Tianjingsha,"* its tune title, is attributed to Ma Zhiyuan (ca. 1260 – ca. 1324), a celebrated Chinese poet-playwright under the rule of the Mongol Empire. For a detailed discussion of his work, see a recent dissertation by Linda G. Wang, "A Study of Ma Chih-yuan's *San Ch'u* and *Tsa Chu* Lyrics."
6. The poem is included, for example, in *A First Course in Literary Chinese* compiled by Harold Shadick, Cornell University Press, 1968. Its translation is found in most anthologies of Chinese literature: e.g., Cyril Birch, *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, Vol. 2.
7. The romanization is that of the *pinyin* system, with tones given in numerals. In the following discussion, however, tone marking is generally omitted except when the tone becomes pertinent to the study.
8. The literal translation follows that of James Liu, with minor modifications. See James Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, p. 33. In addition, Liu gives a polished version in translation:

   Withered vines, aged trees, twilight crows.
   Beneath the little bridge by the cottage the river flows.
   On the ancient road and lean horse the west wind blows.
   The evening sun westward goes,
   As a broken-hearted man stands at heaven's close.

9. The word *hun* may be glossed as either "dusk, evening" or "dizzy, drowsy," the two readings being, of course, semantically related.
10. The English word "heart-broken" is rhetorically the closest to the Chinese expression *duanchang* "broken-bowel" in that both characterize emotional pain in hyperbolic terms of physical mutilation.
11. Cf. a similar practice in Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, p. 147, in which she suggests an activity that requires students to "provide a design for the book's paperback cover that captures the themes of the novel as [they] understand it."
12. Those who took part in the activities were A. Goldman, C. Hamm, A. Lee, and H. Tu.
13. It is also interesting to note that two of the illustrations place the setting sun on the right side of the pictures, which is generally associated with the east on a map.
14. For more discussion, see Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, pp. 41–42.
15. The attribute "west" as in "west wind" also carries a negative connotation. As west is where the sun sets and also where souls are said to return after death according to Buddhist belief, the word becomes figuratively associated with darkness, decline, and death. Autumn wind is generally referred to as the west wind in the Chinese literary tradition.
16. One interesting observation made during class discussions pertains to the gender of the traveler or the poet in the poem analyzed above.

I use "he" here, because, even though Chinese is a language with no explicit gender marking, the subject of the poem is always considered to be a man. It would be almost culturally impossible for a Chinese woman of the fourteenth century to travel on horseback in the evening. On the other hand, the autumn thoughts of the poem may be directed to a male or a female, whose companionship the traveler longs for when night falls. Gender reading would indeed be an engaging topic for class activity.

17. See, for example, Zhu Guangqian's discussion in *"Shi yu hua"* (Poetry and Painting), *Shilun* (Poetics), pp. 140–141.
18. For a thorough discussion on the topic of tonal dichotomy, see Ting Pang-hsin, "A New Interpretation of the Even and Oblique Tones," in *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology.*
19. See Wayne Schlepp, *San-chu, Its Technique and Imagery*, p. 125.
20. From a poem by Li Shangyin (A.D. 813–858).
21. Janet Swaffar, "Written Texts and Cultural Readings," in *Text and Context: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Language Study*, edited by C. Kramsch and S. McConnell-Ginet, p. 238. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1992.
22. For example, Widdowson in his *Practical Stylistics*, 1992, proposes a variety of exercises as a means to approach the contextual significance of a word or feature of grammar in a literary text vis-à-vis what it conventionally means. Exercises include line assembly, verse blanks, use of variants, using prose paraphrases, etc.
23. Cf. the French tradition of *explication de texte*. For more on the teaching of French literary texts, see Dominique Maingenau, *Eléments de linguistique pour le texte littéraire*, 1986.
24. Masako K. Hiraga reports a case study of using literary texts in a Japanese language class in her "Snow and Crow: *Haiku* Experience in Cultural Education," *Language and Literature*, vol. 19:1–17. After lecturing on the comparison between a Japanese *haiku* poem and an English poem, she requires students to compose a *haiku* version of the English poem, and on the basis of the compositions, she examines the various cognitive and aesthetic differences that students experience and internalize as they transpose from a native culture to a target culture.

25. I wish to thank the language teachers of both high-school and college levels who participated in the two workshops I gave at the 1994 Symposium of the Association of Northern California Chinese Schools at Milpitas, California, on August 20, 1994, and at the Fall Meeting of the Chinese Language Teachers' Association at Stanford University on October 29, 1994.
26. The story entitled *"Ai"* (Love) was by Eileen Chang, a twentieth-century Chinese writer most notable for her skills in studying and depicting human passions in unflinching psychological terms.

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Toward a Reflective Practice of TA Education

Celeste Kinginger
University of Maryland at College Park

Working in the complex middle ground between theory-building and practice, the language program director significantly influences both the competence and attitudes of future language educators. Yet, despite the clear significance of the director's formative and mentoring role, language program direction within many departments of language and literature, culture, or linguistics remains a somewhat marginalized enterprise (Dvorak 1986; VanPatten and Lee 1990).

Increasing national and international demand for competence in intercultural communication highlights the paradox of program directors' marginalization. The members of language department faculties with the greatest educational capacities in this domain are those whose voices are least heard (Rivers 1992). It is frequently the language program director who is responsible for overall quality of language instruction, for on-the-job training of teaching assistants, and for ensuring that TAs develop a longer-term awareness of teaching and learning practices that will carry them into professional life beyond graduate school. Yet such work is typically not given the significance or intellectual recognition it deserves because language teaching is viewed in such dubiously dichotomous terms as "language" versus "literature," or "skill" versus "content" (Kramsch 1993). The work of language program direction is principally cast as what it is not: pedagogical, hence not scholarly, practical, hence nontheoretical.

Language program directors must, of necessity, balance their interest in elegant research findings or theoretical orientations and the more messy exigencies of life in the classroom—their own and others'. As they struggle to find this balance between theory and practice, explicit and implicit knowledge, analysis and performance—they may appreciate the impor-