The history of Chinese literature stretches back thousands of years and remains vibrant to this day. In the Tang Dynasty alone, Li Bai and Du Fu created the Song Dynasty (960–1279), to modern writers like Lu Xun (1881–1936) and the blockbuster fiction of famous novelists like Nobel Prize winner Mor Yen (1955–)

While up to 200,000 books are published each year in China, only a small fraction of these are translated into English. In fact, less than 3% of books published in America every year are translations from other languages, and only a small fraction of these are from the Chinese. Communicating the richness of Chinese literature relies heavily on translation.

In 2008, scholars from the University of Oklahoma (OU) and Beijing Normal University (BNU) began laying the foundation for establishing Chinese Literature Today, a new literary magazine created in the image of OU’s famous, World Literature Today magazine, which publishes the poetry, fiction, and essays of some of the largest and most important literary figures of China and the world.

In addition to the Chinese Literature Today publications, OU is also the home of the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature, an annual award for the best new translation of a classical Chinese text. This prize is intended to further the work of scholars like Dr. Jonathan Stalling at UC Berkeley in 1997. By allowing English speakers the ability to use their own language as if it were Chinese, they are able to learn deep cultural concepts that have guided Chinese civilization for thousands of years.

Translation is not the only way Chinese literature moves across languages and cultures. It may surprise you to learn that for well over fifteen hundred years, Chinese poetry was read and composed in Korean, Vietnamese and Japanese. This was possible because classical Chinese poetry followed very strict rules that can transcend language barriers and be meaningful to anyone with the determination to learn.

Over the last five years, Oklahoma students have been learning classical Chinese poetry by form known as jueju (a variation of the largest monosyllabic vocabularies making such poems richly varied and more beautiful than one might expect.

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Over the last 1,500 years, the ability to compose poetry following complex rules became important to prospects hoping to serve in the Chinese Empire. Poetry was a way to test intelligence, creativity, and overall arrangement of words in complex ways. This can only be accomplished by someone who has studied the classical Chinese wedge form and is able to reflect this in their poetry. So, while it may be hard to imagine how the first two lines establish a scene in nature, while the third line presents in the first two lines and the inner emotional world of human beings presented in the third line. Line Four: Conclusion, ending, this line is the emotions that bring the poem to a full, complete end.

Here are the rules:

1. Only use monosyllabic words. Surprisingly, English has one of the largest vocabularies of monosyllabic words (you can access a slotew of 2,000 words broken into different part of speech and specific vocabulary like “four hot and dry”

2. Choose words that are “imagistic.” Here the saying “Show, don’t tell” is in full effect, but the good news is that monosyllabic words rank high in “imagistic” they often refer to concrete things. Only rarely use “function” words often called particles in English, or empty words like the, a, etc, in classical Chinese poetry.

3. When composing a 7 character jueju, pair your images into sets of 2 and create a scene in nature. So when we compose a jueju in English we must follow the same pattern by composing poetry in monosyllabic English:

How to Write a Seven Character Jueju

Rules and Guidelines.

Here are some examples:

4. Soft breeze lake shines storm waves high

5. Observe the rhyme scheme of AABA: June, moon, soon.

6. Extends and deepens the scene

7. Choose words that are “imagistic.” Here the saying “Show, don’t tell” is in full effect, but the good news is that monosyllabic words rank high in “imagistic” they often refer to concrete things. Only rarely use “function” words often called particles in English, or empty words like the, a, etc, in classical Chinese poetry.

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Old Style Poems (古体诗)
are referred to as level one difficulty poems as they follow rules 1-5 only.

New Style Poems (近体诗)
are referred to as Regulated Verse and represent a level two difficulty as they follow rules 1-5 as well as rules 6-7 (to be discussed).

Blank boards
Blank boards can be printed and used by students. Students can fill in the sheets with sample words (found on the Confucius Institute’s website at ouci.ou.edu/jueju) or any monosyllabic words of the student’s choosing. In this exercise, students can explore the basic forms of the poems by arranging words on the grid as they see fit, substituting whenever they like, blank tiles that they write their own monosyllabic words on.

Class Exercise
(Old Style Poem)
1. Get into groups of 4-5 and use several blank boards and word card sheets printed from the Confucius Institute’s website.
2. Cut out the word cards from the sheets. Word cards are available on OU Confucius Institute’s Website at ouci.ou.edu/jueju.
3. Now try out different words on the grid, focusing on the 2+2+3 units in the first line. Example: Moon+Light Soft+Breeze Cold+Bright+Haze (Make this first line as imagistic as possible.)
4. Pay close attention to the sound of the final word. This sound will need to be rhymed in lines 2 and 4. It may help to make a short list of rhyming words (as concrete and poetic as possible) on the blank cards provided.
5. Now think about how each line should move from one to the next. Jueju poems follow a set thematic progression by line. Intro, Extend, Turn/Shift, Conclude.
6. Be comfortable with changing your poem radically several times before finalizing it.

Try Writing An Old Style Poem Now
(Having trouble thinking of great words to use, please visit ouci.ou.edu/jueju for a word list)

What is Parallelism in New Style Poems?
Definition: It is the word-for-word and syllable-for-syllable matching of grammar and of meaning and tones.

Rules 6 and 7
Lines must relate to one another by matching nouns with nouns in the same position within the lines (for instance, grass and flowers), and adjectives with adjectives, verbs to verbs, particles to particles. In the case of the first two lines, the parallelism should reveal a similarity, and in the second and third lines they should reveal a dichotomy, difference, or opposition. Notice the fourth line must not be Parallel or anti-parallel.

Example:

Example: Moon+Light Soft+Breeze Cold+Bright+Haze

Parallelism reflects the deep structure of Chinese cosmology: correlation, balance, cyclical birth and decay. We can see both horizontal and vertical correlations in this form of poetry and thereby also better understand why poetry was thought to bring humans (language) into harmony with nature.

Poem by Nicole Emory, OU student

If you read the poems horizontally, you will find an exquisite poem that enacts dawn through its rich and evocative imagery. But if you read the poem vertically, you will find the words are composed in columns following the rules of parallelism: “dark” is parallel with “gray” and anti-parallel with “clear” and the same is true of the next column: “night” is parallel with “dusk” and anti-parallel with “day” and so on down the line. This pattern represents the ancient Chinese belief that poets should balance the ‘yin and yang’ to restore balance and harmony to the world in every poem. These complex rules make this poetic genre one of the most complicated forms in world literature and Oklahoma students are leading the way to introduce this ancient form into the English poetic tradition.

The Puzzle Game Boards:
Like to practice more? On the Confucius Institute’s website you can download two puzzle boards. One board contains a scrambled poem, and the second includes “Dulian” (parallel couplet). To unscramble the poem, cut up the first sheet so that each word is a small rectangle that can be placed on the second board. Then try to “harmonize” the language by placing the words in the proper parallel locations. It should be noted that the poems have more than one answer, but practicing will help you to feel confident that within the confines of the words, parallelism is possible.

For Additional Resources go to the OU Confucius Institute’s website at ouci.ou.edu/jueju