

Reading Assignments:

I. “A Life More Weighty than Mount Tai”: The Sacrifice of a Scion of the Kingdom of Chu

In this session, we will encounter the exemplary figure Qu Yuan—the statesman and consider some of the textual sources and cultural practices that gave rise to and nurtured that exemplarity. Central to our discussion will be the evidence for his supposed suicide-by-drowning in the Miluo River, as well as the moral and spiritual implications of that terrible act as judged from the range of perspectives that have been expressed over the centuries.

- Read:
 - David Hawkes, “Introduction”
 - “The Fisherman,” “Embracing Sand”
 - Sima Qian, “Biography of Qu Yuan” (to be distributed)

II. The Flight of the Shaman: Writing the Romance of the Southland

This session will introduce the rich imagery and supernatural sensuality of the ancient shamanic culture of Chu as it is manifest in some of the most ancient poems of the anthology—and discuss how its extravagance can be reconciled with the righteous Qu Yuan of Confucian lore. We will end with a surprise presentation of a famous Tang Dynasty poet who took his inspiration from Qu Yuan—but with a twist.

- Read:
 - “Calling Back the Soul”
 - “Nine Songs”

III. Reading the “Li Sao”: Saving the Man from the Archetype

This final session is devoted to reading the long poem, “Encountering Sorrow,” the work that is both attributed to Qu Yuan, a man tortured by his circumstances, and that constitutes the very basis for his having been squeezed into the straitjacket of one archetype or another. As we go through the key movements of this poem, segment by segment, bringing in some snippets of influential traditional commentary as needed, we will consider what it is like to read it through these radically different interpretive lenses. We will come away with a deeper understanding of both the power and vulnerability of human experience once it is released into the world in the form of lyric poetry.

- Read:
 - “Li Sao” (“Encountering Sorrow”)