

Poetry in China

JORDAN CLARY

Teaching in a foreign country offers unique challenges. The most obvious is the language barrier, but cultural differences can prove just as difficult to bridge. In Hainan, China's small island province in the South China Sea, I sometimes feel like I've gone down Alice's rabbit hole and have ended up in another world altogether.

I teach English at Haikou College of Economics and Technology in Haikou, Hainan's capital city. The college is by the Nandu River, where junks float languidly on the water. Water buffalo wander outside the college gates. Coconut trees shade the campus.

Most of the students come from mainland China. China has four tiers of colleges and universities and Haikou College is a fourth-tier school. The students are here because they failed their entrance exams. China offers one standardized entrance exam for students all over the country. A student must do well in every area: math, language, history, etc. or they fail the entire test. Thus many of my students suffer from low self-esteem and feel they are not smart enough for a "good" school. As someone who also never did well on tests, I know that isn't the case.

When I arrived, I was given a textbook to use with practical dialogues and short excerpts about tourism and business. I quickly realized, however, that if I didn't teach what inspired me, I would never teach these students—who quite frankly, were often too shy to open their mouths—anything.

So I went back to poetry. I found that reciting poetry is a wonderful way to help non-native speakers develop a feel for the rhythm of English. After we finished asking directions to the post office or ordering a meal, I would read a poem and ask the students to read it aloud. I usually chose something short with a strong rhythm such as Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool."

One afternoon, while doing a tourism lesson on Beijing, we read in the text that 90 percent of the tourists who go there do so to visit Tiananmen Square and The Forbidden City. Why? "It's the biggest square in the world and the symbol of new China." So I asked the students, "Why are people so interested in seeing Tiananmen Square?" One after another, they answered, "Because it's very beautiful and it's the biggest square in the world."

As foreign teachers, we're expected to follow a strict code of conduct. Any talk of religion or politics in the classroom will likely land us on the next plane home. As an outsider, I do my best to respect a country's laws and customs. As a human being, I can't promote something that is an outright lie. I told the class, "I'm not at liberty to discuss this passage with you. If you want to talk to me privately, I'll be happy to meet later."

After class a few students did meet with me on the lawn. One of them told me, "We know something happened at Tiananmen Square, that a lot of people were killed, but it's forbidden to talk about it." Another one said, "In my school I heard that only three people were killed and one of them was an old man who stood in the way of traffic. The media greatly exaggerated what happened at Tiananmen Square."

The following week I read them a translation of "June" by Bei Dao, even though it's banned here:

Wind at the ear says June
June a blacklist I slipped
in time

note this way to say goodbye
the sighs within these words

note these annotations:
unending plastic flowers
on the dead left bank
the cement square extending
from writing to

now
I run from writing
as dawn is hammered out
a flag covers the sea

and loudspeakers loyal to the sea's
deep bass say June

We didn't discuss the poem. I simply read it and moved on to other topics. Since I read it only in English translation, I'm not sure any of them even knew what it was about, but I like to think that the power of metaphor may have exerted, at least on some of them, a subtle effect.

No matter how long I live here, I will probably never grasp how Mao and the Cultural Revolution altered the country. But, for a brief time after the Cultural Revolution, vibrancy, hope, and creativity seemed to flourish. I can't help but feel that June, 1989 had a devastating effect on the progress of an entire generation. Many of the students here seem to carry a deep sadness. They're driven to make money and find successful careers. I feel for them. What will they do when they find that money does not heal the soul? For whatever it's worth, I continue to slip in Ha Jinn or Mang Ke along with Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson when I read in class.

“Close your eyes and write about
the sounds around you.”

Since my classes emphasize spoken English and since my students' other classes demand copious composition, I don't do many writing exercises with them. One sultry afternoon, however, the humidity was near 100 percent and the six overhead fans were whirring like a nest of wasps. The students were either drifting off to sleep or tapping out text messages on the cell phones that they try to keep hidden from me. I closed the book and said, “Okay. Let's write a poem.”

They stared at me. “We can't write poetry,” a number of them said.

“Of course you can. We've been reading poetry all year. You already know it's about sound and emotion. Who is your favorite poet?”

In unison, they recited “Thoughts on a Still Night” by Li Bai. In Chinese, it has a wonderful rhythmical sound, like beats on a drum. In translation (this by Lin Xiaoming, one of my students), it goes:

Moonlight before my bed
I doubt it is the frost on the ground?
When I raise my head and look at the moon
I miss my hometown with my head down

I told them to think about what inspires them. “Close your eyes and write about the sounds around you,” I told them, “take a few moments and just daydream. They all took out pencils and paper and began writing.

Afterwards, much to my surprise, they all wanted to read. Normally, my Chinese students are extremely reticent about speaking out loud. But somehow having the words in front of them gave them confidence.

Alas, plagiarism is widespread in Chinese schools and a number of students simply wrote down the lyrics to pop songs. At least three read Celine Dion's “My Heart Will Go On,” the theme from *Titanic*. Most, though, took the assignment to heart. One of the real joys of poetry writing by second language speakers is the quirky syntax that sometimes arises (“I like cry because it can relax myself”). And as so often happens when I teach poetry, it is the quiet student in the back who never speaks that amazes. This time it was Zhou Ya Fang:

I want...

I want I'm a cup of tea,
To warming your cold hands.

I want I'm an umbrella,
To stopping the rain from frightening you.

I want I'm a strong tree,
To covering the hot sunshine...illuminate you.

One of the more rebellious girls, a student I'm particularly fond of, wrote:

Flying like a bird
Running like a lion
Laughing like an eagle
Living like a king
Dying like a hero
That's a perfect life in my eye.

—Dong Shunling

And I liked Guo Feng's poem, for its humor and surprise ending:

Love

Oh! The sky is blue like your eyes!
Ah, the air is clear like your heart
Oh, the ocean is large like your mind!
Ah, my computer, I love you!

China has changed me. I came here at a low time in my life and planned to stay for a year, then return to my home and family in California. One year later, I am still here. My husband and son joined me last summer and we have no immediate plans for going back to the U.S.—though eventually, we probably will. China is not an easy country when you are an outsider to the culture and I still feel I have experienced it on only the most superficial level. But to my surprise, more than anything, China has brought poetry back into my life.