

What Is (Chinese) Poetry?

Organized by Jack W. Chen, University of Virginia

Sponsored Panel by LLC Pre-14th-Century Chinese Forum

This panel addresses the broader problem of what poetry is, first by asking how the specific instance of Chinese poetry has been theorized in classical East Asia and second by asking how Chinese poetry is positioned and understood in the broader disciplinary contexts of poetry studies in the modern (Western) academy. The first question highlights the long history of theoretical writing on poetic genres, arguing for the present relevance of the kinds of aesthetic concerns, rhetorical strategies, and critical commentaries that have shaped the classical Chinese poetic tradition. The second question draws critical attention to how contemporary academic discourses on poetry often define it solely through the model of Western lyric, which, even as it has undergone recent revisionist critique by proponents of the “New Lyric Studies,” is nonetheless representative only of the English, French, and German literary traditions and their retrospective adoption of certain Greek and Latin poets.

All of this said, there are also questions of what is meant in speaking of “Chinese poetry,” both in terms of “Chinese” and in terms of “poetry.” Given the cosmopolitan nature of the classical Chinese language (sometimes referred to as “literary Sinitic”) shared among the cultures of East Asia before the twentieth century, the kinds of national boundaries enforced by modern academic institutions potentially distort and misrepresent the multiple histories of poetry written in classical Chinese. And a different kind of potential distortion is found in the application of the Western concept “poetry” to a tradition that had very different distributions of genre. To ask what is (Chinese) poetry is therefore to ask how we understand the idea of poetry both within a specific cultural instance that itself may be problematized, and to ask how we understand the universalizing model of poetry itself across different literary traditions.

We call for papers that draw on, and respond to, the recent debates between the historicizing arguments made by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (“lyricization”), and the universalizing, philosophical claims for lyric as characterized by Jonathan Culler. Just as Kuan-hsing Chen has insisted on “Asia as method,” arguing for the necessity of epistemological frames of reference other than the West that serve to destabilize unquestioned assumptions of universalism, these papers seek to rethink what has largely been a debate focused on Anglo-American and European poetry, offering new perspectives on the question of lyric by reframing it in terms of the classical Chinese tradition.

Please send abstracts to Jack Chen (jwc8v@virginia.edu) no later than March 15. Scholars accepted to the panel will need to have MLA membership current by April 7.