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The Epoch Times

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Staten Island Reads Chinese Poetry



POETRY READING: Isla Ng (C), a high school student who recently visited China, co-hosted the event along with her mother, Joan Harrison (L). ANNIE WU/THE EPOCH TIMES



STATEN ISLANDERS: Residents gather together at one of Staten Island OutLOUD's reading events to read and discuss Chinese poetry. ANNIE WU/THE EPOCH TIMES

讀唐詩宋詞

By ANNIE WU
Epoch Times Staff

Poets of the Tiananmen Square Massacre exile and classical Chinese scholars might not be your typical reading material, but for a group of Staten Island neighbors hungry to share great works of world literature, they were just the perfect subjects for an afternoon of reading and discussion.

According to their website, Staten Island OutLOUD is a "community dialogue and performance project" where neighbors gather together to read aloud and sometimes stage readings of literature by writers of all cultures from the past to the present, ranging from the Declaration of Independence to Zen poetry. Oftentimes, their choices of venue are scenic locations around the island. For a reading of Moby Dick, for example, they congregated at Fort Wadsworth, a favorite spot of Herman Melville.

On a late Saturday afternoon, a dozen or so Staten Islanders gathered at Tappen Park in Stapleton for an intimate reading and discussion of Chinese poetry. The event was inspired by two local neighbors Isla Ng and Anna Lung, one a young high school student who recently visited China for a model United Nations trip, and the other a Chinese poet herself. Lung publishes her poems on her blog, which is accessible to netizens in mainland China.

MISTY AND MYSTERIOUS

The reading began with the more recent poets, many of whom were exiled from China following the Tiananmen Square Massacre on June 4, 1989. The two most prominent poets read were Bei Dao and Yang Lian, the former a frequently named candidate for the Nobel

Prize in Literature. Both Bei and Yang were part of a new school of poetry known as the "Misty Poets," so named because of their use of hermetic imagery and ambiguous syntax in their work.

The Misty Poets were formed as part of a reaction to the suppression of artistic expression under Mao's regime. The oblique nature of the Misty school can be observed in Yang's "Storkwinkel, Berlin," which artfully captured the grim and somber in the first two lines: "death's play has twisted your features no longer people / remember one cry of a frail child's laughter and dread."

The Staten Island literary enthusiasts speculated that the bleak, dark imagery in Bei's and Yang's poems was perhaps a reflection of their traumatic memories of the June 4 massacre. Others said Bei's style reminded them of the American Beat poets of the 1940s and 50s. Many also noted that the nuances, complexities, and ambiguities intrinsic to the Chinese idiom must have been lost in translation. Thus, they believed, they were not able to fully appreciate the artistry in Chinese poetry.

CLASSICAL ELEGANCE

Afterwards, the group read poems by some of the most illustrious and celebrated poets in Chinese literary history, including Tang Dynasty poets Li Bai (also known as Li Bo) and Du Fu, as well as Li Qingzhao

and Su Shi (also known as Su Dongpo) of the Song Dynasty.

Tang Dynasty poets were masters of the "shi" form, while in the Song Dynasty, the "ci" genre flourished. The primary difference between shi and ci was that the ci was meant to be sung to a tune with a set melody, rhythm, and tempo, whereas a shi poem was not. Oftentimes, the title of the poem would be named after the tune, like Su Shi's "Shui Diao Ge Tou." Thus, many ci poems written by multiple poets could have the same title.

In classical Chinese poetry, there exist rules that poets must strictly adhere to. Much like sonnets in the English tradition, both shi and ci poetry have specific requirements for the structure of the poem, including the number of characters within each line, the number of lines and stanzas in the poem, and a specific rhyme scheme.

Within the shi and ci genres, there were different names for the various types and structures of poems. The "jin ti shi" (recent form), which Li Bai and Du Fu were particularly skillful in mastering, was the strictest in terms of rules.

The most common form was the five- and seven-character poem, both of which were required to end in four or eight lines. The four-lined poem is called a "jue shi," while the eight-lined poem is a "lu shi." Rhyme schemes also varied. In the lu shi, the last character in all

Many at the reading commented on the vivid imagery in the classical Chinese poems, which resembled paintings in its graphic descriptions of nature.

the even- and odd-numbered lines of the poem must rhyme with each other (that is, ABAB).

Like the English meter, some types of shi poems specified a pattern of flat and uneven tones for each line (Mandarin Chinese consists of four tones, the first classified as flat, the second to fourth as uneven) and which tone was rhymed throughout the poem. Some shi poems required the characters in each line to correspond to each other in syntax. For example, if the third character in the first line is a verb, the third character in each subsequent line must also be a verb.

Ci poems have even more distinctions. A combination of a specific number of characters in each line and a pattern of flat and uneven tones constituted a "ci pai," of which there were up to 800 different permutations. Ci poems were also classified by the length of the poem and the number of stanzas. For instance, a poem with 58 characters or fewer was a "xiao ling," and if it was separated into two stanzas, it was called a "shuang diao."

There was also a classification of musical style for the tune that the ci poem was sung to with a total of nine different categories. In addition, the tunes were also classified into four different tempo speeds, the "ling" being the fastest and the "man" the slowest. Finally, there was a distinction between poem styles, one called the "wan yue" (graceful and restrained) and the other "hao fang" (bold and unconstrained).

Many at the reading commented on the vivid imagery in the classical Chinese poems, which resembled paintings in its graphic descriptions of nature. They also noted that the classical poems were easier to understand, whereas the modern Chinese poets played with the language in ways that revealed their individualistic sensibilities. Classical or modern, the readers left with new insight into Chinese poetry, touched by the poets' powerful words and provoking images.

For more information on Staten Island OutLOUD's activities, please visit www.statenislandoutloud.org.

Li Bai (701–762), also called Li Bo, was one of the most popular romantic poets of the Tang dynasty. The following poem is among his most well-known.

靜夜思
jìng yè sī

床前明月光
chuáng qián míng yuè guāng,

疑是地上霜
yí shì dì shàng shuāng.

舉頭望明月
jǔ tóu wàng míng yuè,

低頭思故鄉
dī tóu sī gù xiāng.

Thoughts on a Still Night

*Before my bed, the moon is shining bright,
I think that it is frost upon the ground.
I raise my head and look at the bright moon,
I lower my head and think of home.*

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