

In my course “Chinese Poetry in English,” we discuss the “zenification” of Chinese poetry – or how Americans have historically wanted to make Chinese philosophy into something that is about “wholeness” “zen” or beat/hippie reclusion and pacifism. What I have realized in the Chesapeake project is that this is perfect entry into issues of real, daily-life sustainability. We will start the section on sustainability with some correctives to *Dharma Bums*, like Tao Qian’s “hut in the realm of men” in which it is made clear that many Chinese poets were wishful thinkers, but very much plugged into the world of bureaucratic offices and appointments, political backstabbing and the daily grind. Their poetry, which is rife with symbols drawn from landscapes and vegetation, was knowledge gained from hiking and gardening, not from living in the wilderness. So, while there will be a number of small assignments, and hopefully a field trip to the agriculture school, one of the primary assignments will be to take a couple poems and in a group, research the plants that are discussed in them, in order to figure out what metaphors the poet might be employing. The group will present their findings in class, so that others may gain from their findings. The point of the assignment, and the specific learning objectives, aside from reading poetry closely, is to help students realize how cut off from the world of plants we are. We know so little about the food we eat, and about local vegetation, that I hope to raise the point that we can all do a bit of gardening, and in the process not only save the world, but also get back in touch with our heritage in which most of our ancestors were farmers and had an intimate relationship with plants, the soil and the weather. I will hold some classes outside to make this point clear, and may even assign that all students grow a plant and write a poem on it, or at the very least, go to the farmer’s market and write about some regional plant species. One of the major paper assignments will require students to reflect on the man/nature issue in Chinese poetry with specific reference to plants and consider some differences between Chinese poetry and western literary motifs (man versus nature, etc.). I will thus assess both their knowledge of plants through the presentation and their thinking on these issues of what we Americans want ancient Chinese poetry and poets to be, and what they really were (i.e., bringing an idealized life of the recluse into their daily lives).