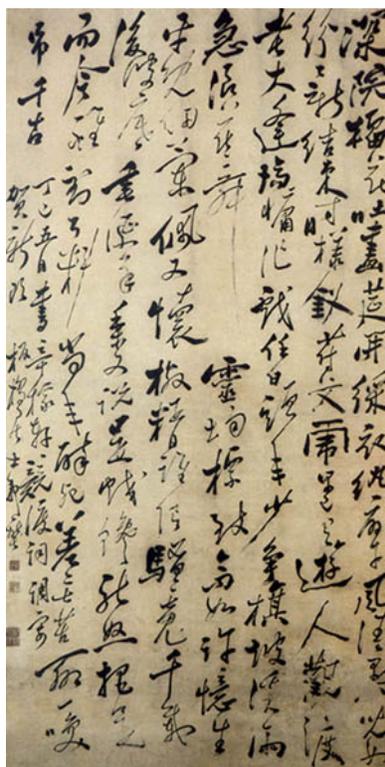


Literary Chinese (Wenyanwen) Introductory Texts

Robert Eno



Calligraphy of Zheng Xie 鄭燮 (1693-1765)

Introduction to Literary Chinese, Part I

Introduction to Literary Chinese, Part II

A Brief Prefatory Note

This note introduces two volumes of materials designed to serve as a textbook for teaching and learning Literary Chinese – often called Classical Chinese, sometimes also referred to by the Mandarin Chinese term *wenyanwen* 文言文. Each volume has its own introduction, which I will not duplicate here. This note has a different purpose.

I taught literary Chinese at universities for a period of about thirty years, and, particularly in the later part of my career, I used to welcome students to the initial semester of the course by telling them they were going to learn what was universally acknowledged to be “the world’s greatest language.” The universe I was referring to was in my own mind, but in that mind the statement reflected an experience so deeply felt that despite the obvious unseriousness of my words, I spoke them with complete sincerity. I have no natural talent for learning languages, although I have studied (and in most cases forgotten) a range of languages not native to me. But once I crossed the threshold of the competent beginner in Literary Chinese, I felt it had begun revealing to me an entirely new and profoundly aesthetic way of experiencing the world such as no other language had ever done. That sense has only deepened since.

I began preparing the first of these two primers when I was a young teacher. My goal, as with all those who prepare language teaching materials, was to make the step over that initial threshold of competence in the language as easy as possible. As I refined my text, I consulted a wide range of published textbooks, each of which helped me better to understand the language and how it could be effectively taught. The degree to which I succeeded in my goal was limited by my own abilities as a teacher and the range of my competence in *wenyanwen*, but I felt the text worked pretty well.

For many years, teaching assignments limited my role to that first semester of instruction, and I had little motivation to put together materials for a more advanced level. But at the end of my career, staffing changes allowed me to take on the second semester of a two-term sequence, and the second of these primers is the product of that time. My goal in volume II was very different from that of the initial primer. I was anxious to focus on some accessible but truly great short masterworks of literature, so students could encounter that sense of awakening to a new world through this extraordinary language – and I could be there watching as it happened. The final class of my teaching career was the full test of that second volume, and the result was so rewarding that had I not made an irrevocable commitment to retire, I might have continued, just to enjoy watching more students converted to a certainty that they had entered the universe of “the world’s greatest language.”

By making this series available as an open-source online resource, my hope is that teachers who may adopt parts of it or individuals who use it to become their own teachers may broaden the universe of people who share that nonsensical but meaningful conviction.

Bob Eno
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