

CHN 1651F – HUC
Chinese Symbols and Icons

Time and Location: Wednesday 2:30-5:30

Huron University College W6

Instructor: Dr. Guoyuan Liu **Email:** gliu23@uwo.ca

Office: Benson 1

Office Hours: Wednesday 1:30-2:30 / by appointment

Course prerequisite: NONE

Course description:

This entry-level, essay-type course aims to offer an overview of Chinese culture to students with a general interest in China. The course surveys traditional symbols and icons still prevalent in China's everyday life, ranging from "yin-yang," "dragon" "mandarin ducks" and "the double-happiness," to "the Three Stars," "Lord Guan" and "Avalokitesvara" (*Guanyin*). Treating these symbols and icons as image-signifiers, the course illustrates the socio-historical contexts that have shaped major symbolism in China. Thus with symbols and images examined comparatively in various contexts: pre-modern China, modern China, overseas Chinese communities and non-Chinese cultures, the course will demonstrate that symbolism is socially constructed and should not be taken for granted. By this means, the course will not only help students gain a basic understanding of Chinese culture, but will also prepare them in critical thinking skills and cross-cultural perspectives for university studies at a higher level. Taught in English.

Course objectives:

Upon successful completion of this course, students are expected to

1. recognize important symbols and icons in Chinese culture;
2. understand the role of symbols and icons in cultural interactions,
3. demonstrate basic critical thinking skills for observing cultural phenomena.

Textbooks and required resources: available on WebCT.

Class Methods: Lecture, in-class discussion, written assignments

Method of evaluation and assessment:

Attendance	10%
Participation/Discussion	10%
Short written assignment	5%
Mid-term test	30%
Long written assignment	45%

Schedule of classes:

September 12 Introduction: The Power of Yin-Yang

Symbols and icons as writing, in the narrow and broad senses

Readings:

“The Yin-Yang Principle in Chinese Culture” in *The Chinese Mind* by Boyé Lafayette Mente. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2009. 19-21.

“Taiji” in *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* by Wolfarm Eberhard. Trans. G. L. Campbell. London and New York: Routledge, 1986.

“Pan Ku and the Creation Myth” in *Myths and Legends of China* by E. T. C. Werner. Singapore: Graham Brash, Ltd. 1922. 76-78.

September 19 Zoological Symbolism in Chinese Culture

Mythical beasts and symbolic animals

Readings:

“Animals, Bat, Bird, Butterfly, Crane, Dragon, The Five Elements-Elephant, Fish, Fox, Lion, Horse, Lunar Stations, Magpie, Mandarin Duck, Phoenix-Pig, Qilin (Please do not call it 'unicorn'), Tally-Taotie, Tiger, Tortoise, Zodiac” from *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*.

Short assignment to be explained

September 26 Botanic Symbolism in Chinese Culture

The lotus, the peony, and other symbolic plants

Readings:

“Apple/Apricot, Bamboo, Azalea, Chrysanthemum, Date, Lichee/lily, Lotus, Magnolia, Orange-Orchid, Peach, Peony-Persimmon, Pine, Plum-Pomegranate, Tree, Willow” from *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*.

October 3 Exercise 1: Analyzing the Chinese-ness in Global Popular Culture

Film: *Kung Fu Panda 2*

Short written assignment (5%) due

October 8-12 Fall Reading Week

No class meeting

October 17 Saints, Immortals, Heroes and Beauties

The symbolism of human figures

Readings:

“Beard-Beauty, the Four callings, Children, Confucius, Emperor, the Eight Immortals

(Eight), Face-Fairies, Gestures-Ghost, Girl, Guandi, Hero, Immortals, Lao-zi, God of longevity, Official, God of riches” from *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*.

In-class test to be explained

October 24 Buddhist Symbolism in Everyday Life

Buddha, Bodhisattva, and Buddhist emblems

Readings:

“Bald Head, Bodhi, Buddha, Fat-belly Buddha, Guanyin, He-He-Hell, Luohan, Monk, Nun” from *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*.

October 31 In-class Test (20%)

The test covers Weeks 1-7

November 7 The Importance of a Decorated Life

Symbolism in furniture, vessels, and other objects

Readings:

“Ball, Bells, Bisection, Black, Blood, Blue, Boat, Book, Bottle Gourd, Clouds, Imperial Insignia, Jade, The Endless Knot, Lantern, Marriage, Married Bliss, Meander, Mirror, Money, The Eight Precious Things, Scepter, Swastika, Sword, Ten Thousand, Vase, Waves” from *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*.

Essay to be explained

November 14 Exercise 2: Reading Symbolic Images

Film: *The Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

November 21 Finding Your Way in the Symbolic World

Spatial symbolism in architecture, landscape and the beyond

Readings:

“Bridge, Gate, Geomancy (Fengshui), Landscape, Left and Right, Middle, Moon, Mountain, Pass, Pavilion, River, Sun, Terrace, Water” from *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*.

November 28 Exercise 3: Understanding the Olympic City

Video: *The Opening Ceremony of the 29th Olympic Games*.

Written assignment due

December 5 A High-speed Train Named Harmony

The politics of symbolism in contemporary China

Images to be presented in class

Course work:

Attendance (10%)

Attendance is calculated by hours attended divided by total lecture hours. An attendance sheet will be passed around during the lecture. It is the student's responsibility to sign the attendance sheet before the end of the lecture. The attendance sheet cannot be signed on a different day. Signing the attendance sheet in place of anyone but oneself is considered cheating and will be penalized.

Participation / Discussion (10%)

The participation/discussion grade reflects how active you are in class discussion. In your participation in class discussion, you should not only demonstrate your familiarity with the subject discussed, but also your critical consideration of it. You are encouraged to ask questions. Good questions make great contribution to class discussion.

Short written assignment (5%)

A symbol is "something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else (not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion, or by some accidental or conventional relation)" (OED).

After the first few weeks of studies in this course, you have become familiar with such the concepts of "symbol" and "culture." You have also discussed some Chinese symbols and how they reflect Chinese culture—ideas, values, belief, etc. shared by those who identify themselves as "the Chinese." Now you can clearly explain what a symbol is and how it works. In this very short assignment, please demonstrate your understanding of "symbol" with an example of "symbol" of your choice. Explain why you think your example is a "symbol" by showing what symbolic features it has.

Short as it is, this assignment is expected to be in essay format. You are supposed to present a statement and prove it with an example of details. (This example is a symbol because it...)

Suggested procedures:

1. Research for an example that you think is a symbol.
2. Examine the example closely to find out features that make it a symbol.
3. Think why these features show that the example is a symbol; take notes.
4. Write your first draft.
5. Read your draft as if it were written by someone else to see a) if the writing is clear; b) if the writing is efficient and well organized; c) if the argument is based on sufficient, relevant evidences and sound logic.
6. Revise and proofread the draft; make sure there is no grammatical or spelling mistakes.

7. Submit.

In-class Test (30%)

If the test is missed for a legitimate reason, appropriate documentation must be submitted to arrange a makeup (See relative section in the appendix). It is the student's responsibility to attend the test at the proper time. Such excuses as mistaking or forgetting the date of the test will not be accepted.

Long written assignment (45%)

In this course, we have become familiar with the concepts of “symbol” and “culture;” we have exercised skills of analyzing symbols and icons in their contexts; and we have seen how symbols and icons reflect Chinese culture—ideas, values, belief, etc. shared by those who identify themselves as “the Chinese.”

In this assignment, you are asked to demonstrate how you can better understand a Chinese cultural phenomenon by examining Chinese symbolism. You are asked to provide an interpretation of ONE of the following: either the 2000 film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (dir. Ang Lee) or the opening ceremony of the 29th Olympic Games in Beijing (dir. Zhang Yimou), based on symbols and icons you observe in the material of your choice.

Please understand:

1. This assignment is a university essay. You are expected to develop an argument with a clearly stated thesis in the introductory paragraph, supported by detailed analyses of evidences in the body text. You are also expected to write in a clear and well organized fashion.

A reminder: you are not asked to provide a list or description of symbols and icons that you have observed in the film or the performance. You are asked to make a statement about how you understand the film or the performance as a cultural phenomenon, with symbols and icons (rather than other elements) as your evidence.

2. This essay is NOT a research project. Your task is to closely examine the material of your choice and try to interpret what you have observed. Your evidence should be symbols and icons you find from the film or the performance ONLY.

3. The expected length of this assignment is approximately 6 pages (double space; 12" New Times Roman).

Definition of grades:

A+ 90-100 One could scarcely expect better from a student at this level

A 80-89 Superior work which is clearly above average

B 70-79 Good work, meeting all requirements, and eminently satisfactory

C 60-69 Competent work, meeting requirements

D 50-59 Fair work, minimally acceptable

OWL sakai

Students must consult OWL for this course regularly. All course materials and announcements will be conveyed by this and no other means.

Electronic Devices

Electronic devices, including laptops, tablet computers, smart phones, etc., can be used in the classroom for pedagogical/academic purposes only (such as note taking, reading, research, etc.), and for no other purposes (such as gaming, social networking, etc.).

Written Assignment

The instructor is more than happy to provide help with the assignment. Yet please understand: 1) The instructor will only give advice and make suggestions; it is the student's responsibility to finish the assignment independently; 2) the instructor's advice and suggestions do not guarantee a higher grade.

The written assignment is to be submitted on the course website. **It is the student's responsibility to confirm that the assignment is successfully submitted.**

Extension is only granted for academic reasons, and must be requested at least one week before the due date. For medical or non-medical academic accommodation, see relative section in the appendix.

Plagiarism is not tolerated in any situation.



Appendix to Course Outlines is posted on the OWL course site.