



Guan Yu – The God of War by Jill-Valentine666  
<https://www.deviantart.com/jill-valentine666/art/Guan-Yu-The-God-of-War-565963213>  
CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

**Provisional Syllabus:**  
**HUMA 4221: Chinese Classics and Their Reworking in Various**  
**Media Around the Globe**  
**Spring 2026**

Class:	FR 09:00 AM – 10:50 AM	Tobias Benedikt Zürn
	Lecture: Room 2406 (Lift 17-18)	Office: 3343
	Tutorial 1: WE 11:00 – 11:50 AM; Room 5506 (Lift 25-26)	
	Tutorial 2: TH 06:00 – 06:50 PM; Room 5508 (Lift 25-26)	

Office Hours: WE 9:30-10:30 AM, TH 4:30-5:30 PM, or by appointment

Email Address: [hmtzuern@ust.hk](mailto:hmtzuern@ust.hk)

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

China is an increasingly impactful player in the globalized world. This influence does not only manifest in political and economic areas like the Belt and Road Initiative, but also crystallizes in the global dissemination of classical Chinese cultural artifacts. Qinshi Huangdi's Terracotta Army or Qianlong's collection of clocks are nowadays frequent guests in museums around the world and spread visions of classical China to an audience that only 40 years ago had only limited access to such materials. In the same manner, premodern Chinese texts like *Journey to The West* (*Xiyou ji*) or *Investiture of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi*) increasingly feature in series and movies like *The Monkey King* or *Ne Zha* produced for a global audience. The *Zhuangzi*, one of early China's master texts, and its enigmatic vignettes repeatedly appear in mangas like Tsai Chih-Chung's *Zhuangzi Speaks* (*Zhuangzi shuo*) and animes like *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie* or *South Park's* episode "Insheption," which reads the famous "Butterfly Dream" through a Freudian lens. Computer games like *Total War: Three Kingdoms* or the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise avail themselves in the rich narrative repertoire provided by the *Record of the Three Kingdoms* (*San guo zhi*). And Hong Kong cinema capitalized on the rich treasure trove of ghost stories found in the *Taiping guangji's* short stories and their later adaptations in collections like Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*). In this course, we will explore the four classics *Zhuangzi*, *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Xuanzang's *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* (*Da Tang xiyu ji*), the *Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility* (*Taiping guangji*) to analyze how cultural artifacts change when they are translated from one context, that is texts written in premodern China, into another, namely a new medium produced around the globe and for a global audience.

As a result, the course will introduce students to the background and history of these four narrative complexes that are still formative for contemporary Chinese communities. At the same time, it will help students reflect upon the consequences such a significant change in the repertoire of globally shared narratives may cause. How does this globalization of premodern Chinese cultural artifacts impact local understandings of their own cultural heritage? And what kind of changes in the political organization of the world does it reflect? Beyond such (geo-)political concerns and intercultural considerations, the students will learn that various kinds of media function differently, shaping the effects and functions of these narratives. Hence, the course will foster a media literacy in the students and nurture a critical awareness about the potentials, dangers, and limits of media. At the same time, the class also wants to showcase how these transformations of premodern Chinese narratives repeatedly led to a secularization of literature that is deeply rooted in ritual practices associated with Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and local popular religion. In other words, the course wants to make students aware of the potentials and dangers that such transformations from the local to the global and from one media to another inevitably entail.

**COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

1	Analyze premodern Chinese literary texts
2	Recognize important themes of premodern Chinese classics
3	Identify these themes in a global context
4	Detect differences in various receptions of the Chinese classics
5	Recognize, compare, and assess the historical and media contexts of the classics and their reworkings (f.e. difference between a Ming novel and contemporary TV series)
6	Summarize, analyze, and evaluate secondary scholarship on media studies
7	Analyze and evaluate different media and their distinct properties
8	Develop research presentations for their peers

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:**

- 1) You are expected to do the assigned “readings” for each class in advance of the relevant meeting. I try to limit the readings to about 30 pages per week; however, this will not always be possible. A quick glance at the class schedule will alert you to the place of each reading in the week’s agenda. Since this is a course with a significant amount of discussion, the class will depend heavily on your preparation and participation. Thus, it is of major importance that you **attend** all class sessions and **contribute actively** to class discussions. Attendance is worth 10 % and Participation is worth another 20 % of the final grade.
- 2) There will be short in-class tests during each lecture about the readings and course materials we have discussed in class. These quizzes, conducted via Canvas, may include detailed questions about the readings of the day, when the quiz is hosted, simple questions about any of the materials we have discussed in class prior to the relevant quiz, or simple image identifications. The average grade of all quizzes combined comprise 20 % of the final grade. Unexcused absences will count as 0/100 points.
- 3) Each student will explore Guan Yu altars in Hong Kong. This exercise is worth 5 % of the final grade and will be conducted before week 6 (submission by March 12).
- 4) There will be a Mid-term test on all the materials we have discussed in class up until that point. The test will largely consist of multiple-choice questions, identifications of images and phrases, and short definitions of terms. This assignment comprises 20 % of the final grade. The Mid-term exam will be conducted in the lecture of week 7 (on March 20).
- 5) There will be a final exam about the course materials we covered throughout the semester. This assignment comprises 25 % of the final grade (date TBD).

**If at any time you don't understand what is expected, PLEASE DON'T HESITATE TO ASK.**

**Evaluation criteria are as follows:**

- An "A" paper or exam is clearly written and well organized, and most importantly, contains a thoughtful, original and analytical central argument supported by illustrations and evidence drawn from course materials. It demonstrates that the student has grappled with the issues raised in the course, synthesized the readings and discussions, and formulated a compelling, independent argument. An "A" paper is polished and grammatically fluid; an "A" blue-book exam may be less polished due to time constraints but shows evidence of clear preparation and forethought.
- A typical "B" paper is a solid work that demonstrates that the student has a good grasp of the course materials. This type of paper provides a mastery of ideas and concepts covered in the readings and discussions, but with little evidence of independent thought or synthesis. Other "B" papers do give evidence of independent thought but do not present an argument clearly or convincingly.
- A typical "C" paper provides a less thorough or accurate summary of course materials, or a less thorough defense of an argument. A paper that receives a grade less than "C" typically does not respond adequately to the assignment, is marred by frequent errors, unclear writing, poor organization, evidence of hasty composition, or some combinations of these problems.

**Class attendance:**

This is an in-person class. Therefore, when your health allows, you are expected to be present and engaged in class. At the same time, each community member has an individual responsibility to help prevent the spread of diseases. Following public health guidance is part of living in an honorable community. The following recommendations should guide your decision about coming to class:

- Self-isolation is the recommended course of action for anyone experiencing flu-like symptoms, whether due to possible coronavirus or to other illnesses. Please stay at home if you feel sick and contact the Health and Counseling Center (HCC) or your healthcare provider to discuss. This is especially important if you think you may have an infectious disease.
- You should not attend class if you have tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 10 days, or if you have received notification or advice from the college or a health professional (including HCC staff) to quarantine or self-isolate.
- The CDC suggests that people with the following symptoms may have COVID: fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea. As always, please consult a medical

professional (members of the HCC or otherwise) if you have any questions about your health or health safety.

- If you suspect or know you have been exposed to a case of COVID-19, contact the HCC right away to discuss your next steps. [For more information, visit the CDC's webpage on isolation and quarantine.](#)

If you need to miss a class, or series of classes, due to illness, self-isolation, and/or quarantine, you are responsible for emailing me to let me know as soon as possible. You are also responsible for coordinating with me to complete work that you might miss due to absences.

Students who have been approved for attendance-related accommodations (or other accommodations) through Disability & Accessibility Resources (DAR) should contact me individually to determine a plan for implementation. Students who do not have formal accommodations in place but are interested in seeking disability accommodations should contact (DAR) at [dar@reed.edu](mailto:dar@reed.edu).

### **Special needs**

I will make every effort to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. Please notify me as soon as possible at the beginning of the semester of any special accommodations needed.

### **Religious observances**

Please notify me in advance if you need to miss class or reschedule assignments due to participation in religious holidays.

### **Late work/academic misconduct**

Late work will be accepted only by prior arrangement or documented emergency situations. If you have schedule conflicts, please contact me right away. I am willing to adjust deadlines if students inform me at least 48h in advance. Any student not making prior arrangement will automatically be given a failing grade on the missed assignment. Academic misconduct, including plagiarism and sexual harassment, will not be tolerated. If instances of academic misconduct are detected, action will be taken in accordance with university policies.

### **Expression and Debasement**

Talking about religion is tricky at a university, but that should not mean that it must become a taboo subject. Reed College has very specific language about what kind of speech should be avoided in this context. Following this policy, students should avoid expressions that clearly derogate and debase a student or students in the class on the basis of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability. At the same time, it is important to note that students should also tolerate opinions

about the historical or contemporary consequences of religious or political positions when expressed in a way that is not derogatory towards others. Students uncomfortable with either of these policies should not take this course.

### **GenAI Policy**

Generally, it is allowed to use GenAI in this class as long as you mark and mention in your assignments whenever you have used and consulted GenAI during the research process. However, you may not use any text generated by GenAI. In other words, all your writings need to be produced solely by you.

### **Policy Regarding Lecture Recordings**

To protect students' privacy and to discourage a practice of voluntarily missing lectures and tutorials, this course does not provide any recordings. If you have to miss class, please reach out to your classmates and schedule an appointment with me to discuss the materials we covered in class.

## **CLASS SCHEDULE**

### **I. The *Zhuangzi*, Pericopes, and Global (Manga) Culture (Warring States Period)**

Week 1 (Feb 6-12):                      Readings: Excerpts from Mair, *Wandering on the Way*; Mark Meulenbeld, "Daoism"

Week 2 (Feb 13-19):                      Readings: Excerpts from Mair, *Wandering on the Way* and

**No Tutorials during the week of CNY**

Week 3 (Feb 20-26):                      Readings: Excerpts from Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* and Tsai Chih Chung, *Zhuangzi Speaks*, pp. 2-5, 8-9, 26-31, 50-51, 54-57, 72-73, and 102-107

## **II. *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Historiography, and Computer Games (Wei Dynasty)**

Week 4 (Feb 27-Mar 05): Readings: William Gordon Crowell – *San guo zhi* – Biography of Liu Bei

Week 5 (Mar 6-12): Readings: Excerpts from Ter Haar, *Guan Yu*

Week 6 (Mar 13-19): Readings: Excerpts from Rachel Wagner, *Godwired* and Exercise Guan Yu Altars in Hong Kong

## **III. *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, *Xiaoshuo*, and Animation (Tang Dynasty)**

Week 7 (Mar 20-26): Readings: Excerpts from Li Rongxi trans., *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*

Week 8 (Mar 27-Apr 2): Readings: Excerpts from Anthony C. Yu trans., *The Journey to the West*

Week 9 (Apr 3-9): **No Lecture and Tutorials (Mid-Term Break)**

Week 10 (Apr 10-16): Readings: Excerpts from Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine* and Wan Laiming dir., *Havoc in Heaven*

**IV. *Taiping guangji*, *Chuanqi*, and Hong Kong Cinema (Song Dynasty)**

- |                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Week 11 (Apr 17-23): | Readings: Excerpts from Nienhauser Jr. ed., <i>Tang Dynasty Tales 2</i> and Kao, <i>Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural</i> |
| Week 12 (Apr 24-30): | Readings: Excerpts from Pu Songling, <i>Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio</i>   |
| Week 13 (May 1-6):   | Readings: King Hu dir., <i>Painted Skin</i> and Bow Fong dir., <i>Painted Skin</i>  |



**COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

- Crowell, William Gordon trans. *Record of the Three Kingdoms: The History of Shu, Fascicle Two: "the Former Lord."*  
[https://www.academia.edu/5318625/Sanguo\\_zhi\\_32\\_Shu\\_2\\_Biography\\_of\\_Liu\\_Bei\\_Draft](https://www.academia.edu/5318625/Sanguo_zhi_32_Shu_2_Biography_of_Liu_Bei_Draft), last visited on August 15, 2025.
- Da nao tiangong* 大鬧天宮 [Havoc in Heaven]. Dir. Wan Laiming 萬籟鳴. Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1965. DVD.
- Huapi* 畫皮 [Painted Skin]. Dir. Bow Fong 鮑方. Hong Kong, 1966,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJR2ZVdix64&t=3s>.
- Huapi zhi yinyang fawang* 畫皮之陰陽法王 [Painted Skin]. Dir. King Hu 胡金銓. Hong Kong, 1993.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Lamarre, Thomas. *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Li Rongxi trans. *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*. Moraga, CA: BDK America, 1996.
- Kao, Karl S. Y. *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic: Selections from the Third to the Tenth Century*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Mair, Victor H., trans. *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Bantam Books, 1994.
- Meulenbeld, Mark. "Daoism," in *Introduction to World Religions: Communities and Cultures*. Edited by Jacob Neusner. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010, pp. 233-249.
- Nienhauser Jr., William ed. *Tang Dynasty Tales: A Guided Reader 2*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2016.
- Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio*. Denis C. and Victor H. Mair trans. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1989.
- Ter Haar, Barend. *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Tsai Chih Chung. *Zhuangzi Speaks: The Music of Nature*. Translated by Brian Bruya. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Wagner, Rachel. *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*. London: Routledge, 2012.
- Yu, Anthony C. trans., *The Journey to the West, Volume One*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.