

LITERATURE AND HUMANITIES 1 – Group 12 (Tyagi)

Assignment 2: Formulating a Question

Word Limit	1000–1200 words
Weighting	20% of overall course grade
Presentation	MS Word document (no PDFs); regular font size (e.g. Times New Roman 12) with double-spaced text; indent the first line of each new paragraph and do not include any blank space between paragraphs; do include an essay title, page numbers, and a Works Cited page
Deadline and Submission Instructions	11:59pm on Sunday, 25 October ; email your Word documents to me at ila.tyagi@yale-nus.edu.sg

The goal of this assignment is for you to improve your ability to formulate the questions that lead to a successful essay, since any essay is only ever as good as the question(s) it tries to address. In that spirit, you will craft a short essay that sets out an issue, in the form of a question, and then offers a response to that question.

For this assignment, you may focus on either the *Epic of Sundiata*, Sima Qian, or the *Malay Annals*. The issue around which you tailor your question should extend beyond a single episode/section of a work to embrace something that runs through the work more broadly.

Whatever text and issue you choose, the following structure will be useful in helping you to organise your discussion:

- (1) Title: Announce the question. Choose a title for your assignment, in the form of a question, which reflects the issue neatly and precisely.
- (2) Introduction: Explain and justify the question. In this section, describe the issue and justify why it is an issue in which the text is invested: in other words, *in what ways* does the text indicate that your chosen issue is worthy of discussion? Suggest briefly a possible answer as your thesis statement.
- (3) Body Paragraphs: Depending on the issue you choose, there may be a number of ways to explore the answer to your question. You will not have time to explore all possible responses, so choose evidence that supports what you consider to be the strongest responses. This may well involve weighing up the pros and cons of any one response.
- (4) Conclusion: Practice a conclusion that does not just restate the simple answer you formulated in part (2) above. Show how your discussion in part (3) has deepened and/or complicated your initial answer.

An appropriate referencing style for each of the texts would be:

Sundiata work + page number(s): e.g. ‘*Sundiata*, p.24’; ‘*Sundiata*, pp. 35-42’.

Sima Qian work name (or recognisable shortened form) + page number(s): e.g. ‘*Letter to Ren An*, p.231’; ‘*Basic Annals of Emperor Gaozu*, pp. 55-60’; ‘*Gaozu*, pp. 55-60’.

Malay Annals work + page number(s): e.g. ‘*Malay Annals*, pp. 25-7’.

For an assignment of this type, you do not need to consult secondary scholarly literature. You should base your ideas on your own reading of the set text and, where appropriate, the associated seminar discussion.

FURTHER GUIDANCE

Choice of Topic

You want to select an issue that is both manageable in a short assignment of 1000-1200 words and genuine: something that resists a simple answer, something (a particular theme/episode/character etc.) that is problematic, inconsistent, or otherwise intriguing in the text. By the same token, you want to choose something that does not rely on knowledge systems outside the world of the text and outside the lectures and associated seminar discussions.

Pitch

For an academic essay, you should typically think of your reader as a knowledgeable peer. Therefore, you can assume that they have a basic familiarity with your text, and are looking for guidance on the specific question that you raise.

Relevance

Everything you say should shed light on the issue you have chosen. Any extraneous information or discussion, however interesting in itself, will detract from your focus and may confuse the reader.

Grading Rubric

The following general rubric applies to assignments in LH1:

'A' range work demonstrates sophistication and depth in analysis; compelling and reflective expression; insightful and original perspectives; professional polish in terms of presentation and referencing.

'B' range work demonstrates good comprehension of the materials; earnest engagement; shows potential to develop further in expression or perspective.

'C' range work and below indicates scope for improvement in a number of aspects as indicated by your seminar professor.

[Student Name]

Professor Tyagi

Literature and Humanities 1

25 October 2020

What do the *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* tell us about hope?

The *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* tell the tragic tale of the narrator's horrific ordeal as a prisoner of Xiongnu barbarians. During her travels with the barbarians, she is thrust into a savage life of rape and mindless violence, amid an ever-changing backdrop of countless lands conquered, desecrated and abandoned by the tribe. Her only remnants of the past are her *qin* and poetic talent, which she uses to compose the eighteen songs, filled with her bitterness toward an indifferent Heaven and a desperate hope to return to her former life. With regard to the latter, I will argue that hope is a necessary illusion. This is revealed by the songs in an ambivalent manner, as the narrator's hope keeps her alive during her ordeal, but eventually, her spirit is not healed when she attains what she has been hoping for. In this paper, I will first focus on songs 5 and 6, which show that hope is the only way for the narrator to survive the cruel situation that she has no foreseeable means of escape from. Next, I will explore songs 13 and 14, in which the narrator's illusion shatters as she is finally able to return home, but her grief only takes on a new form, leaving her with an eternal longing for the unattainable.

Hope is depicted as the narrator's only means of enduring her cruel and desolate situation. In song 5, she sings: 'With knitted brows I face the moon and strum my elegant *qin*', a line which beautifully captures her sense of escapism from reality. By knitting her brows, her vision is narrowed, such that she no longer has to look at the sights of unfamiliar savagery all around her. The only thing that remains in her vision is the moon in the night sky. The moon, just like her home, seems impossibly far away, yet she has not lost sight of it amid the infinite darkness that

surrounds it. Complementing her visual escapism, she strums her *qin*, the only object that can be described as “elegant” in her repulsive environment. This instrument is a memento of her home, and by playing it, she demonstrates her refusal to accept the new life that she has been forced into, defiantly clinging onto her hope of returning home. Song 6 takes the power of her hope further, depicting it as a means of survival. Despite being “bitterly cold” and “hungry” on a road that “spreads out forever”, she “cannot take the meal” of the barbarians. The use of the word “cannot”, as opposed to “will not”, suggests that the barbarians’ food cannot even be considered real food, and that consuming it is worse than her current state of extreme hunger. This further emphasises her refusal to accept her new life, even when her body is deprived of the most basic essentials of food and warmth. While her disposition does not appear sustainable for a journey that “spreads out forever”, the question of survival is finally answered in the last line: “I wish I could stop playing.” This line reveals the power of hope, manifested in the act of continuously playing her *qin*, as something that sustains her when even food cannot. Despite her claimed desire to “stop playing”, it is evident that her hope transcends even her own awareness, keeping her going at an unconscious level. Hence, the narrator’s hope is brought out by her rejection of her desolate reality, and her enduring hold on the remnants of her home sustain her through her ordeal.

However, the narrator’s hope is ultimately revealed to be an illusion in songs 13 and 14, where she is able to return home, but her grief takes a new form. In an unexpected turn of fate, she bears two nomad sons during her captivity and forms a genuine mother’s bond with them. Unfortunately, this precious attachment becomes a painful loss when she is forced to leave her sons. In song 13, she sings: “Step by step I am farther away, though my feet can hardly go on”. This subverts the act of returning home, from a miracle she desperately hoped for, to a separation no less heart-breaking than her original separation from her home. The words “step by step” prolong her painful and guilt-ridden parting, and with every step, the reality that she will never see her beloved children sinks deeper. Furthermore, the phrase “my feet can hardly go on” is extremely similar to her previous descriptions of her journey with the barbarians into the wilderness. Ironically, the very

thing she once hoped for is now the thing she cannot bring herself to approach. By attributing her inability to “go on” to her “feet”, she emphasizes that her resistance is so strong that it manifests on both emotional and physical levels. Occurring in the aftermath, song 14 begins with the line “My body returns to my country”. The narrator’s sentiment is immediately clear: all her hopes of attaining happiness from returning home have disappeared. The line is rife with a sense of emptiness, portraying the narrator’s “body” as devoid of emotion and spirit, no different from a zombie. She is cursed to be “forever... starved for news” about her sons. This “news” is likened to food as she is “starved” without it, yet this is more severe than the literal starvation she experienced as a captive. Now, she has no means of attaining the vital information about her sons’ well-being that she desperately longs for. Hence, the illusion of hope has been shattered, as returning home has only transformed her grief and left her with an unfillable void.

Ultimately, the greatest tragedy in the *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* is not the narrator’s ordeal of being a captive of the barbarians. Rather, it is her realisation that the hope that kept her going on her journey ultimately led not to happiness, but greater grief. Hope is initially characterized as the narrator’s only way to escape her painful reality. In this regard, it is portrayed as an essential means of survival, and empowers her to endure the harshest conditions. However, when she returns home, the very essence of her hope turns out to be an illusion, as her longing for home is replaced by a longing for her sons, gone forever. As such, the narrator’s portrayal of hope is one that is ambivalent: hope is necessary but also illusory in nature. In the context of classical Chinese history, this poem sequence offers a rare insight into the experience of an individual thrust between two starkly different ways of life, and more importantly, an insight into the volatile nature of a human’s hope.

(1112 words)

Works Cited

Cai Yan. 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute'. In *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, 22-29. Stanford University Press, 1999.

Hi [Name],

This is an excellent analysis of a text that we spent altogether too little time discussing in class—your writing is as elegant, in fact, as the poem’s *qin*. Additional feedback below:

Originality of Argument: Your argument that hope is a necessary illusion is simple, which is good, as simplicity is the ultimate sophistication. However, . . .

Introduction, Conclusion: . . . in the introduction, I would have liked to have seen a more persuasive justification for why the question you articulate in the essay title is worth asking. Why is hope the thing that the poem can best teach us about, as opposed to, say, suffering, or longing, or the creative process, or motherhood?

Your conclusion does a good job of rectifying the comparative cursoriness of your previous essay’s ending.

Quality of Close Reading: Your close reading throughout the essay is strong, with what you say in the first body paragraph about “knitting her brows, narrowing her vision” being especially striking.

Shadow grade: A