
ARTICLE – DIGITAL MODERN LANGUAGES

Exploring Chinese Poetry using Adobe Spark Video

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This tutorial offers Chinese learners from lower-intermediate to advanced level a digital approach to exploring Chinese language and culture through poetry, using a free educational tool: Adobe Spark Video. Based on a multimodal (verbal, visual and textual) and transmedia (from abstract text to digital production) approach, it provides learners with a step-by-step guide to synchronising a selected Chinese poem with recorded recitation as well as corresponding images and music. Grounded in the concept of digitally mediated learning, this activity aims to enhance learners' autonomy, creativity and participation in the process of foreign language acquisition (Hourigan & Murray). In following this process, learners will have the opportunity to improve not only precision in their reading, listening and speaking skills, but also their understanding of the aesthetics of Chinese literature. Such an approach is particularly relevant to the learning of Chinese, given that tone, prosody and melodic movements are considered distinctive and crucial in Chinese speech, notably in literary genres such as poetry, making poetry recitation an important cultural and pedagogical (though not often practised) aspect of studying the language. Furthermore, in producing an audio-visual illustration, learners are engaged in a process of cultural decoding and recoding linguistically and digitally, thus also deepening their understanding of Chinese cultural and historical traditions in which this poetry is embedded.

While this tutorial makes its demonstration through a classical Chinese poem, 'A Quatrain' by Du Fu (712–770 CE), the digital tool and method can be applied to other types of Chinese literary text or to the learning of other languages and cultures. This tutorial can be used by learners independently for self-study or by teachers to complement other learning activities. It is adaptable for either university courses or non-accredited lifelong learning. The tutorial will explain the detailed technical process step by step and provides a demo video to showcase the product. It is recommended that the activity is further facilitated by input on the language and background of Chinese poetic traditions where appropriate.

Step 1: Technical set-up

Adobe Spark Video is a free educational video-making tool that can be accessed by both Mac and Windows devices. Users have to create an account and log in at <http://spark.adobe.com>.

Step 2: Select a poem (or another literary text)

First of all, a specific Chinese poem should be selected to illustrate. Given the longevity and diversity of Chinese literary tradition, before creating an audio-visual illustration users should understand the normative structures and styles of different Chinese literary genres. If the digital activity is integrated with language classrooms, such essential, prior knowledge should ideally be instructed by the teachers beforehand. For self-study, users may consult relevant reference books on Chinese literature (e.g. Chang & Owen) to prepare for the activity on their own.

Chinese poetic tradition began approximately in the fifteenth century BCE, matured in the fourth century CE, and reached its golden age during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) and the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) (Hinton). A range of genres and subgenres, including *shi*, *sao*, *fu* and *ci*, were developed through its long history. Being the dominant genres of distinctive historical periods respectively, they are characterised by different lengths, lyrical intensities and rhythm patterns (Cai 5).

'A Quatrain' by Du Fu, a Tang poet who is hailed by modern critics as the 'Poet Sage', has been picked to demonstrate this tutorial. The audio-visual illustration of 'A Quatrain' can be found on the project's YouTube channel as a product sample. The poem and its English translation are as follows (Xu):

绝句

两个黄鹂鸣翠柳，
一行白鹭上青天。
窗含西岭千秋雪，
门泊东吴万里船。

絕句

兩個黃鸝鳴翠柳，
一行白鷺上青天。
窗含西嶺千秋雪，
門泊東吳萬里船。

A Quatrain

Two golden orioles sing amid the willows green;
A flock of white egrets flies into the blue sky.
My window frames the snow-crowned western mountain scene;
My door oft says to eastward-going ships "Goodbye".

This poem belongs to the genre of *shi* and the subgenre of the five-character quatrain, which is defined by its symmetries in rhythm, lexical parallelism and tonal pattern (Barnstone & Chou lxii–lxiii). For example, the first two lines, describing the sight of birds in natural surroundings, are formed by the same lexical pattern: number (a pair/a file), noun (orioles/egrets), verb (sing/flies) and noun (willow/sky).

It should be noted that, while this tutorial chooses a classical Chinese poem to demonstrate the steps, less advanced learners are recommended to begin with less demanding texts, such as modern poems or idiom/fable stories (see Appendix).

Step 3: Create a new project on Adobe Spark Video

When integrated in classroom instructions, this learner-centred video-making activity can substitute conventional assessment formats such as essays and presentations. The task can be done either individually or in a group.

To create a new project, users should log into their accounts and click the blue button with a '+' sign at the top centre of the Spark Video homepage. While various templates are available, it is recommended to choose 'start from scratch' (at the right upper corner) to access a blank video project.

Step 4: Input the text on the slides

A cover page is automatically generated for each new project (see **Figure 1**). The title and the poet's name should be typed there. By clicking the '+' sign in the navigation pane at the bottom of the screen, users can add new slides to their videos. At the centre of each blank slide, above the white '+' button, video, text, photo or icon can be added. Each line of the poem (and its translation) should be input on its own slide. Users can click the textbox to adjust the font size and drag it for different alignment options. Different layouts, font collections and theme colours are available in the pane on the right-hand edge of the screen.

Step 5: Insert audio tracks by performing the poem

Next, users should insert audio tracks into each slide by recording their own recitations of the corresponding lines of the poem. Voice recording is done by holding down the red button in the middle (see **Figure 2**). The timer on its right indicates the length of the recorded audio on the slide. One can click the timer to remove the existing audio track. Before carrying out this step, users should be equipped with a basic understanding of the prosody of Chinese poetry recitation (Boyce; Huang, Lu & Ren). To properly sound the original rhymes, for instance, certain characters are normatively pronounced in the ancient manner. Learners can therefore practise their pronunciation and deepen their cultural awareness when preparing and recording the audio tracks.



Figure 1: Input poem text and choose a theme.

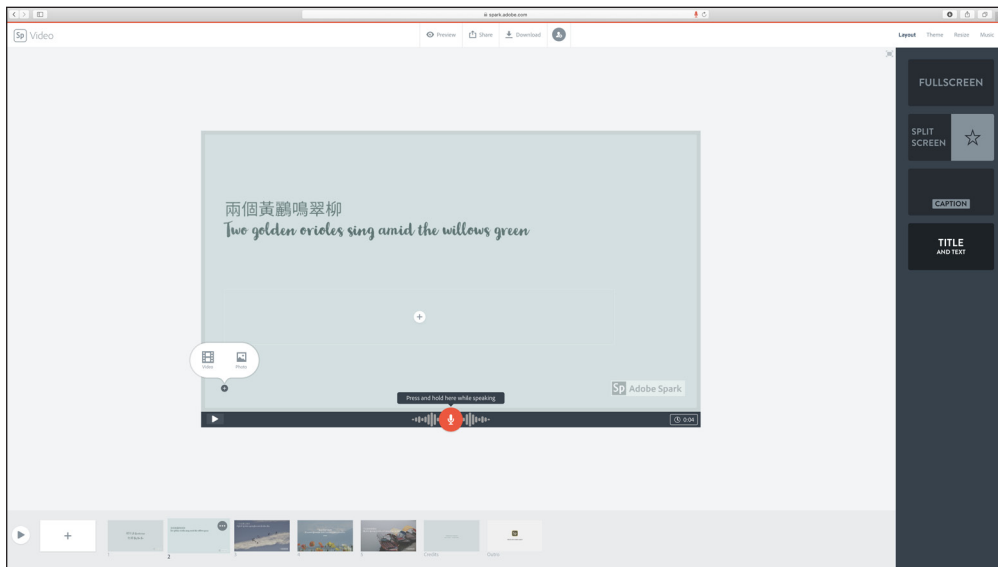


Figure 2: Press and hold down the red button to insert an audio track.

Step 6: Match the lines with pictures

After settling the texts and audio tracks, users can begin to work with the pictorial illustrations by finding images that effectively convey the meaning of each line of the poem. Clicking the white '+' button on the slide, users can choose to insert photos by either uploading images from their computers, finding free photos provided by Adobe Spark Video, or extracting files from other cloud storage platforms such as Dropbox or Google Drive (options are available in the navigation pane at the right-hand edge of the screen). If the final product is to be published publicly, it is recommended to use the photos provided by Adobe Spark Video as they are royalty free. By clicking the option 'find free photos', users can type a keyword into the search box to choose the images they want to apply to the slideshow.

Apprehending the meanings of classical Chinese poems and illustrating them with pictures are complex exercises of cultural decoding that require advanced language and cultural knowledge, as Hinton (xxi) describes:

[In classical Chinese poems] grammatical elements are minimal in the extreme, allowing remarkable openness and ambiguity that leaves a great deal unstated; prepositions and conjunctions are rarely used, leaving relationships between lines, phrases, ideas, and images unclear; the distinction between singular and plural is only rarely and indirectly made; there are no verb tenses, so temporal location and sequence are vague; very often the subjects, verbs, and objects of verbal action are absent. In addition, words tend to have a broad range of possible connotation. [...] In reading a Chinese poem, you mentally fill in all that emptiness, and yet it remains always emptiness.

In order to grasp the ambiguity and openness of a Chinese poem, as a pre-video making activity, extensive research on the poet, as well as the historical context in which the poem was written, have to be conducted. The need for in-depth cultural knowledge and thorough interpretation can be demonstrated by the sample video the authors have created for 'A Quatrain'. For instance, as the second line of the poem describes 'a file' of white herons climbing up into

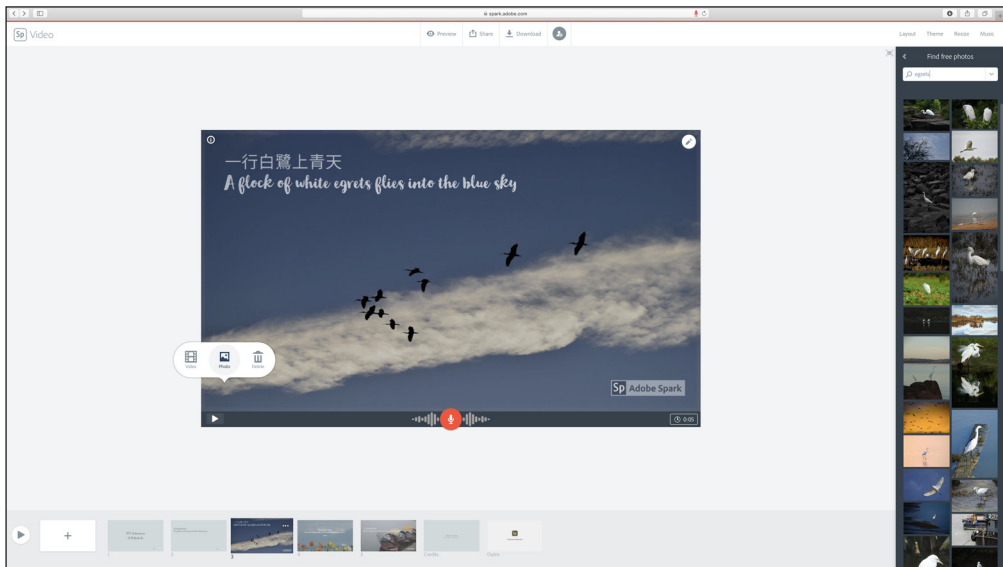


Figure 3: Matching the text with a picture of egrets flying in the sky.

the blue sky, one should select search results that feature multiple herons found in the sky but not on the ground (see **Figure 3**). For the third line, as Warner and Kroll (84) annotate in their translation of the poem that ‘the white snow on the western mountains does not melt through the four seasons’, despite the keywords ‘autumn’ and ‘snow’, the poem in fact describes a spring scene. Hence, instead of pictures of heavy snow, those that feature flowers and greenery with a snowy mountain in the background are better choices. Lastly, since classical Chinese poets tend to personify objects so as to implicitly express their own emotions and experience (Barnstone & Chou), although the final line runs literally ‘the door gate moors boats to eastern Wu’ (in the original Chinese text), it implicitly depicts the poet witnessing the arrival of the boats through the front door of his home. The sample video therefore opts for a photo that captures the sight of anchored boats from the land.

Step 7: Add background music to the slideshow

At the upper-right corner of the screen, the tab ‘Music’ allows users to add background music to the slideshows. They can upload their own audio file by clicking ‘Add my music’ or choose royalty-free ones provided by the platform. The free background music audios are categorised by the atmosphere they intend to create, including ‘Happy’, ‘Playful’, ‘Relaxed’, ‘Rousing’ and so on (see **Figure 4**). At the top of the pane, users can turn off or adjust the volume of the background music.

In order to choose suitable background music, users should identify the message that the poet intends to convey and, by extension, their mood when writing the poem. On the surface, ‘A Quatrain’ describes a lively and delightful springtime scenario that features active animals, green willows, blue skies and maritime transportation. But Du Fu, a tragic hero in the troubled times of the Tang dynasty, arguably wrote the poem with mixed feelings. Despite his talents, Du Fu had never been appointed to a significant position in the state administration due to corruption and struggles between political factions in the government, as well as his reluctance to flatter the emperor. In the aftermath of the political turmoil caused by a coup d’état in 756 CE, which forced the emperor to flee the capital, Du Fu began to drift towards the western frontier with his family. ‘A Quatrain’ was written in 764 CE when he

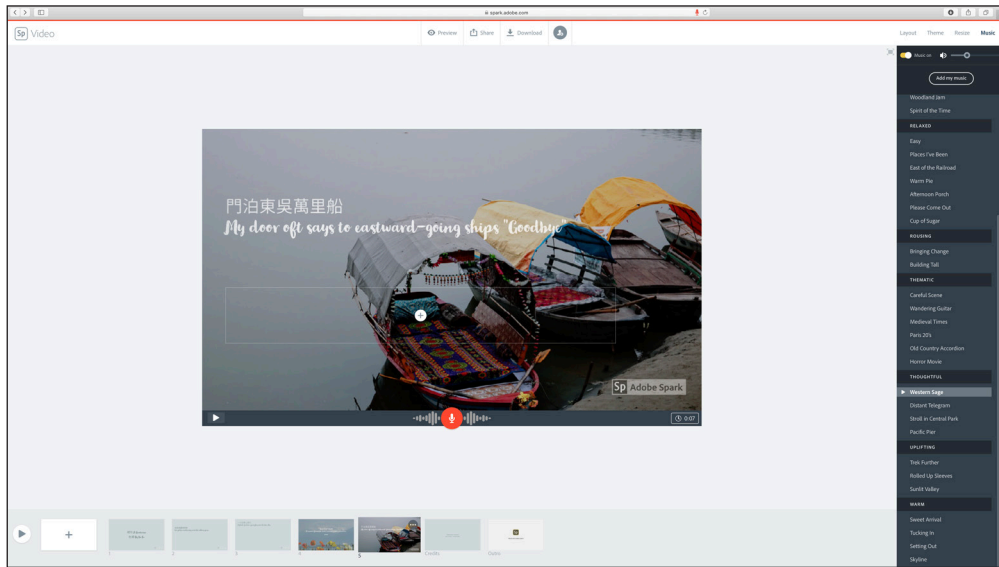


Figure 4: Select background music according to the atmosphere of the poem.

settled temporarily in Chengdu (Du xvi). In this context, although the boats heading to the East (where the capital lay) from in front of his door may indicate the poet's joy about the news that political stability has been restored, at the same time they may also remind him of his unsuccessful career and unfulfilled dreams. To express this ambivalence, the background music for the sample video was chosen from the category of 'Thoughtful'.

To be sure, there is no single way to illustrate a poem – as long as the users can justify their choice of images and music after thorough analyses and logical interpretation of the larger context. If applicable, teachers may require students to present their videos with annotations to explain the rationale behind each step.

Step 8: Export and share the final product

Once everything is finalised, users can preview, share and download their videos (see the upper centre of the window). After clicking the 'Share' button, they will be presented with spaces to enter the title of the video and the name/s of authors. Users can prevent their videos from being featured on the Adobe Spark website by turning off the option in the same window. The button 'Create link' will then generate a shareable link to the video. People who have this link can view the video directly online. Returning to the video making page, the 'Download' button at top centre will export the project into a MPEG-4 file, which should be automatically downloaded to the local computer (check the 'Downloads' file).

Summary

In recent years, various digital tools have been developed and utilised to support flipped language classrooms. Interactive platforms online potentially encourage and increase students' interest in classical Chinese literature and traditional culture, which are stereotypically believed to be old fashioned and boring (Wang). But rather than digitalising the hard knowledge of classical Chinese poems, this tutorial emphasises informal learning and self-creation of knowledge, providing learners sufficient room to practise their skills, exercise their creativity and thoughtfully process their unique digital products. Furthermore, in requiring users to interpret and illustrate a classical Chinese text, this tutorial highlights the importance

for intermediate/advanced learners of developing and integrating both their linguistic competence and cultural knowledge in the learning of Chinese. While a number of similar free apps available on the market can be employed to create slideshow videos, Adobe Spark Video is one of the most user-friendly platforms, as word processing, sound recording and image insertion can be done all at once on the same screen. In addition to the case presented in this tutorial, related but more advanced activities, such as the addition of an audio commentary on the poem, can be further developed.

Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Other sample texts suggested for lower-intermediate learners. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.290.s1>

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Video

- Videos from all the tutorials in this collection have been archived in a special playlist on the Digital Modern Languages YouTube channel at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLfaB2f0CyBdu10luU36KKLXpKWDCo62q>
- This is an archive copy of the video associated with this tutorial.
- Exploring Chinese poetry using Adobe Spark Video: A Quatrain by Du Fu <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVdGxw5-pZs>
- The authors wish to thank Wei Shao for reciting the poem for the video recording in this tutorial.

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