The Chinese language and literature program at ASU, now to be offered in the School of International Letters and Cultures (SILC), was set up in the late 1960s for students who wish to take up the challenge of learning a language and a culture that is vastly different from the languages and cultures of Europe and America. While encountering anything foreign to one’s upbringing is enriching, the study of Chinese—an uninflected modern language, without conjugations, declensions, or tenses, but with tonal distinctions for lexical meanings, and with a writing system that utilizes imagistic graphs rather than an alphabet or a syllabary—has proven to be especially so. In the past four decades of its existence, the program has produced a good number of alumni who have repeatedly testified to the different ways the study of Chinese language and literature have made whatever they eventually do professionally so much more meaningful and rewarding.

The study of Chinese literature, as a concrete demonstration of Chinese culture, is ultimately inseparable from the study of the Chinese language. Because the written language endemic to any literature is relatively difficult in the case of China, however, the program has set up a couple of courses (CHI 321 and CHI 322), designed to provide a broad survey of Chinese literary highlights in English translation. Intending also to draw students who might otherwise not commit to Chinese language studies, the courses are expected to interest anyone curious about the Chinese literary tradition, and to further motivate those who take up the challenge of learning the language, to advance to the point where they can read the original texts for themselves.

For those of you from Barrett Honors College who are considering participating in the Chinese language and literature program, the following four points should be helpful.

(1) Learning a language in an academic environment is not the same as learning from, say, Berlitz. Our language program seeks to provide you with an infrastructure of the Chinese language that will help you make sense of the repetitive oral drills, and will help you take off in your fluency once you get into a Chinese speaking environment. Yes, we would like all our serious students to go to China for a period of time, and we have over the years set up a number of ways for you to do so during your time here. Your advisor has up-to-date information on the many opportunities.

(2) As is proper at a university, our program also stresses reading and writing, what language pedagogues call “the latter two skills.” Experience has also shown that learning to read and write modern Chinese well will greatly help your listening and speaking (the first two skills). Our language majors are required also to learn classical Chinese, so that they will begin to access China’s past for themselves.

(3) Our majors are expected to acquire more than a passing knowledge of China’s literature, culture and history, even though that will require taking courses offered in English in other academic departments. There are presently well over a hundred courses
on China offered in three different colleges in the University. Your advisor will be able to
tell you what you might take, while taking your own goals and interests into account.

(4) The program in Chinese is rather unique in that it encourages majors to look into
studying another East Asian language or culture (i.e., Japanese or Korean). Again, long
experience has shown that this allows the student to develop a broader concept of China’s
part of the world, and to come to a deeper understanding China’s language and culture
through comparison and contrast.

Our program has always prided itself on the personal contact with its students. You are
very much encouraged to make an appointment with the advisor (see below) or anyone
teaching about China in SILC for that matter, to get personally acquainted.

THE HONORS THESIS

For those who want to complete an honors thesis, the faculty in Chinese language and
literature is qualified to direct you in a wide variety of potential topics. Current courses
offered in the undergraduate level include traditional literature (both poetry and fiction),
modern literature (specializing in film studies), and linguistics. Students from Barrett
Honors College are encouraged to take these courses to discover for themselves the
specific topics they would consider researching for their honors thesis, along with the
instructor with whom they would like to do their work. Again, students are more than
welcome to meet with anyone on our faculty.

THE ADVISOR

For the 2008-09 academic year, anyone from Barrett Honors College interested in
studying Chinese language and literature is encouraged to set up an appointment with the
honors advisor for Chinese, Tim Wong (twong@asu.edu; LL 405 D, phone 965-7551).