

Poetic Wanderer: A VR Journey into Classical Chinese Poetry Taking Su Shi's Linjiang Xian: Returning at Night to Lingao as an Example

Xinyuan Mo

School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom
xinyuan.mo@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Abstract. This article explores how a Virtual Reality (VR) design approach can transform classical poetry learning from passive memorization into an active, emotion-driven experience. The classical education of poetry has been based on the essence of memorizing, and students are not able to understand the emotional meaning between the lines of the poems. The problem is particularly acute in the case of Chinese secondary learners: they have to memorize classic verses most of the time, but the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) requires them to be capable of learning and perceiving poetry on an interpretative level. Thus, the present research suggests connecting virtual reality (VR) with the traditional classical poetry teaching methods in order to change the passive memorization approach to an active and emotional one. The strategy of enabling students to recreate the poet as the first person and combining it with reflection and discussion led by the teacher not only fulfills the criteria of the exam to memorize the data based on comprehension, but it also trains the imagination of the students to be poetic. This research holds that this immersive VR pedagogical approach would greatly benefit students in their understanding of the imagery and emotionality of poetry and their ability to empathize, improve their desire to learn, and offer a new paradigm of integrating technology and humanities in classical poetry education.

Keywords: Chinese classical poetry, Virtual Reality, first-person, media affordances, cultural connection

1. Introduction

Among the enormous amount of poetry in the Chinese classics, there are two themes that can be heard about with an inspiring depth, and a soul-shaking earnestness: the ambition thwarted and the strife in the nation. Among the ancient Chinese scholar-officials, thwarted ambition is the most common and typical psychological complex. Both are fundamentally intertwined to explain the origins of this complex that first lies in the widespread political culture of study, which is summed up the maxim that the greatest thing in life is excellence in study, which results in officialdom; and

the second lies in the overwhelming yearning of self-actualization that can be achieved by serving the state.

This particular feeling, though, is common sense among students in secondary school today, which can indeed be hard to grasp. This makes them not experienced enough in life to appreciate their severity as they are cloaked by family and school. Only once they find themselves in the mainstream society, and have their own experience of professional misfortune like joblessness, career setback, poor pay, or oppression by the system, are they in a position to truly feel the deep sense of unacknowledged ability presented in the poems.

Ultimately, the eternal allure of classical Chinese poetry lies precisely in its unflinching confrontation with these fundamental, often perceived as negative, human emotions: disappointment, loneliness, indignation, sorrow, and suffering. This engagement is not merely a catharsis for such feelings; it is, more profoundly, the brilliant spark of the human life force itself, erupting in its defiant struggle against adversity.

In most Chinese middle schools, classical poetry is usually taught in two lessons. In the first lesson, teachers introduce the types, forms, and background of the poetry, such as *guti shi* (ancient-style poetry), *jinti shi* (regulated verse), *ci* (lyric poetry), and *qu* (dramatic lyrics). The second lesson focuses on analyzing the imagery and the poet's emotions and ideas. This article aims to solve the problem that mainly happens in this second stage — many students struggle to grasp the underlying meaning and emotions of poems. Students often resort to mechanical memorization, leading to quick forgetting once the exam is over. In junior high, exams only test simple recitation. But in high school, students face contextual memorization questions, where they must choose the right line based on meaning. Many of them can recall the whole poem, but they still don't know which line to write, because they don't really understand the feeling behind the poem. First, classical poetry is characterized by concise form and rigorous structure, with a great deal of imagery and deep meaning hidden in its succinct lines. Students who lack an adequate literary foundation find it difficult to grasp a poem's emotions by literal memorization alone. Second, the language of classical poetry is archaic and condensed, containing many obscure classical Chinese words and allusions. Modern students are unfamiliar with these elements — even understanding the literal text requires teacher guidance, to say nothing of developing an emotional resonance. Third, traditional teaching methods rely on teacher explanation and mechanical recitation, and class time is limited, so students often have no opportunity to savor the poem's artistic conception in depth. The combination of these barriers makes it difficult for students to move from simple memorization of a poem to a deeper understanding of its emotional insinuations.

The emotional essence of the classical Chinese poetry that is served best by the theme of frustrated ambition presents a pedagogical difficulty to the modern student, since he has little contextual understanding of these kinds of historical feelings. This mental divide leads to the dissociation of the textual understanding and emotional appeal to the learning process. To resolve this problem, this paper hypothesizes a VR-based framework that will allow students to simulate the life experiences of poets and the creative process by simulating the first-person perspective. This didactic intervention does not just increase the level of performance in the exam-based tasks like contextual recitation drills, but more importantly, helps form a real appreciation of the culture as well as long-term interest in the works of classical poets.

2. Literature review

This study lies at the crossroads of three areas of research, including the use of Virtual Reality (VR) in learning technology; the cognitive and affective obstacles of classical poetry pedagogy; and the

theories of embodiment and empathy in the discussion of immersive narration [1].

2.1. VR in education: from presentation to presence

VR technology is quickly being applied in the education sector. It is common academic knowledge that the fundamental pedagogical benefit of VR is that it creates a high level of presence. This sense of presence has been identified to boost student motivation [2,3].

Nonetheless, in the humanities, especially in the field of literary education, the study of VR is still in its infancy [4,5]. For example, the recent in-situ study of immersive poetry learning demonstrated that the VR group showed a significantly different score on presence, whereas the primary learning outcome of the study was poem memorization [6]. This presents a serious research gap: the literature solely addresses VR as a new presentation method to strengthen memorization, yet the researcher does not completely investigate its capability to help overcome the existing barriers to advanced, affective learning of poetry.

2.2. Gap supplier: empathic process, first person

As it was confirmed in the introduction of this study, the main problem with poetry pedagogy is the fact that students cannot comprehend intricate emotions like unfulfilled ambition with ease. According to recent empirical studies, the images and emotions used in the poem play a very important role in improving the students' understanding and aesthetic pleasure [6].

Thus, the main position of the given research is that a successful pedagogical intervention would not be limited to memorizing; it has to fill the gap between the knowledge of imagery and empathy with the poet.

2.3. Bridging the gap: first-person perspective as an empathic mechanism

The research hypothesizes that the most efficient process to realize this empathy has to be the first-person immersive narrative; in other words, the student should be the poet. This architectural option is premised upon theories of Embodied Cognition.

Academia makes a distinction between the various views on VR. Gorisse conducted a comparative study revealing that, despite principles of both first-person (1PP) and third-person (3PP) perspectives implying the presence of space, the first-person perspective has a considerable advantage in creating the feeling of embodiment [7]. That is, a student has to view the world through the eyes of Su Shi in order to come out with the impression that I am Su Shi. It is believed that this great sense of embodiment is a way of empathy [3]. Moreover, one of the most recent reviews has pointed to narratives in VR as a powerful method of empathy development [8].

2.4. The research gap and this study's contribution

Overall, the literature review reveals that VR poetry instruction remains loyal to memorization; the main issue of teaching poetry is emotion, and the first-person is a solution to embodiment and empathy [9].

However, there is a lack of research that integrates these three elements: namely, using first-person, embodied narrative VR to specifically address the affective empathy challenge in classical poetry education. This study aims to fill this gap. Through the in-depth case study of 'Linjiang Xian', it explores the potential of an emotion-driven VR pedagogical model.

3. Methodology

This research design is a qualitative, holistic, and single-case study design [10,11]. The study unit will be the application of the Poetic Wanderer conceptual framework on a detailed, instructional module on Su Shi's poem *Linjiang Xian: Returning at Night to Lingao*. This is because the VR instructional design in this study employs first-person immersive storytelling as its main mechanism, where it seeks to allow the students to view what the poet viewed, and indeed experience parts of the life of the poet. The overall module has the shape of an interactive narrative, and the plot is developed with the help of four major chapters of the life of Su Shi: the time of youth, the period of an official career, the case of Crow Terrace poetry, and the period of exile in Huangzhou. The students use the first-person point of view to be presented in a virtual Song Dynasty setting where the students are free to explore, move through the space, and interact with objects so that they can develop a high degree of presence and embodiment. In the meantime, the system offers interactive conversations and choices of decisions that supplement the narrative. Being Su Shi, students have opportunities to communicate with virtual people (e.g., friends, officials) to know more about their background or to demonstrate their own ideas; at crucial stages, students can be involved in a decision-making process by choosing various behaviors or reactions. E.g., in the case of the Crow Terrace Poetry Case, students will have a choice of responding to how to answer the interrogation by the court, and, as such, they will personally feel the conflict and helplessness of the poet at the time. This interactive design, achieved through the plot, makes sure that the students are not mere observers of the story; they are part and parcel of the life of this poet, and this is what makes them more immersive and empathetic.

4. Primary case study: the Linjiangxian module

This section will signify the creation logic and organization of the appropriate VR package. It will explain the exact learning goals of the module, the sequenced imitative experience crafted to attain the learning goals, and how the elastic climactic scene is an emotional bridge, which ultimately allows the students to realize the deep functioning of the emotional linking and perception.

This module focuses on the lyric by Su Shi named *Linjiang Xian: Returning at Night to Lingao*. During the module, students act out this role of Su Shi, a renowned writer during the Song dynasty, and go through the happenings in his life and also the surrounding events at the time he wrote this poem. It takes them out to the location of the river on the evening that he wrote the lyric, literally engaging them in the way of thinking of the poet. This module aims to guide students, through reflective study, to appreciate the poem's social and emotional origins, to experience the fusion of its imagery and emotion, and ultimately to develop a deep emotional resonance with the work. It enables the students to go beyond mere memorization into a deeper learning of the poetry through a step-by-step immersion journey.

The Poetic Wanderer breaks down into three stages, which are slowly introduced, creating the preliminary stage to the ultimate climactic immersive experience. During Stage One (Youth), VR simulations enable the students to feel the playful spirit of Su Shih when he successfully passes the imperial tests and enters his professional career (see Figure 1) in the approach of situational introduction. In the virtual world, the students can observe Su Shi receiving the best rewards and presenting his talent, which will help to build a certain emotional rapport with the identity of the poet in a positive and positive mood. Stage Two (Transition) captures the turns and mind gears within the professional life of Su Shi, such as in instances when he undergoes political challenges and failure. This step is simulated by means of interactive elements of the story that allow the poet

to face the downside, allowing the students to experience his transition between triumph and disillusionment, to set narrative preconditions of what is going to happen next. Case Stage Three (Crow Terrace Case) is a dramaturgical recreation of a celebrated Northern Song case of literary inquisition, the Crow Terrace Poetry Case. In VR, students themselves get the shock of imprisoned Su Shi due to his poetry and can personally feel how he falls down with arrogance to incorrect persecution; this dramatic collision is an emotional background to the next culmination or conflict.

In the picture of Su Shi as a young man (see Picture 1), the picture visibly depicts that the poet was full of ambition and was in a good mood. The scene is shown in terms of first person, where Su Shi is doing a written examination, and the general arrangement of the composition is wide and symmetrical. The visual impression is a high level of bright and warm colors of gold and other warm colors, which gives the picture the effect of brightness and liveliness. Such visual images are very useful in illustrating the high-spirited and idealistic atmosphere of Su Shi as a youth, not to mention that they also precondition the emotional contrast that occurs closer to the story, thus supporting the overall visual impression.

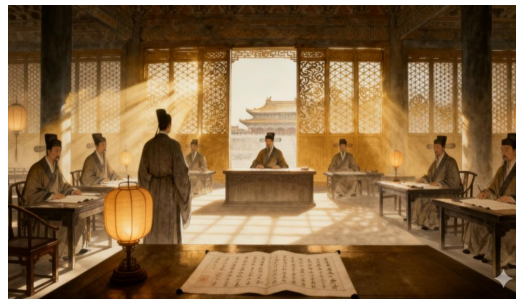


Figure 1. Youth (image source: Doubao AI-generated) [12]

In this picture, the third phase of the project, which is the "Crow Terrace Case," is an immersive scenario (see Figure 2). Being one of the major literary investigations in the Northern Song Dynasty, Su Shi was in jail and even close to being executed because of the supposed defamatory words in his poems, and the event had an enormous effect on his life and poetry. Here, the students are involved as participants in the first-person point of view to immerse themselves in the dramatic situation of falsehood and imprisonment to feel the psychological and intellectual upheaval that he must have gone through under the political persecution. The design does not merely re-create this historical moment that was so vital to the history of China, but also helps to understand the roots of transcendent and introspective themes so evident in the rest of the later works of Su Shi.



Figure 2. Crow terrace case (image source: Doubao AI-generated) [13]

The climax scene is the night Su Shi wrote *Linjiang Xian*. It is located in Huangzhou during an autumnal evening. In the past, Su Shi had been drinking and, on his way back home, he heard the raging Yangtze River, which gave him the inspiration for the lyric. The student in VR is completely immersed in the role of Su Shi, standing on the south bank of the Yangtze on a cool evening with a rising moon (see Figure 3). Significant details are: the quiet river under a moon with a waving noise; Su Shi, going home under the influence of alcohol and finding the door closed to listen to the river; and the means of interaction where the student is able to look at and even touch the moon, stare at the water, touch the door, and listen to the river. It is that of deep night stillness, broken by the snoring of some distance and the sound of the river. The lights and the sounds are varied as Su Shi recites the lines of the poem, according to the emotion. This gives a strong emotional high to the experience. This exercise is to address the problem of having a shallow understanding of poetic imagery. In place of the creativity of imagination to comprehend the line "From now on my little boat shall drift-to let my soul on river and sea repose," the students are surrounded with the virtual visual and audio pictures and feelings. It also enables them to have an intuitive feeling of transcendence and freedom, and thus meet the needs of the requirement of comprehension-based recitation.

This example shows the essential interactive process of the project, the night when Su Shi is composing the poem by the name *Linjiang Xian*: *Returning at Night to Lingao*. Various interactive and visual details are used in the design, including the process of pushing back the door and going to the riverbank, and symbolic images, like the image of a solitary moon in the night sky and gentle glimpses on the surface of the river. This information will not only recreate the natural imagery and the calmness of the poem, but it will lead students to the state of mind of Su Shi, a complicated mix of feelings, an individual searching for spiritual release amidst the night after a career of political storming. Incorporated into the scenario, students can fully understand the way the poet combined personal destiny and nature, and thus, could gain immersion in both emotional and aesthetic targets.

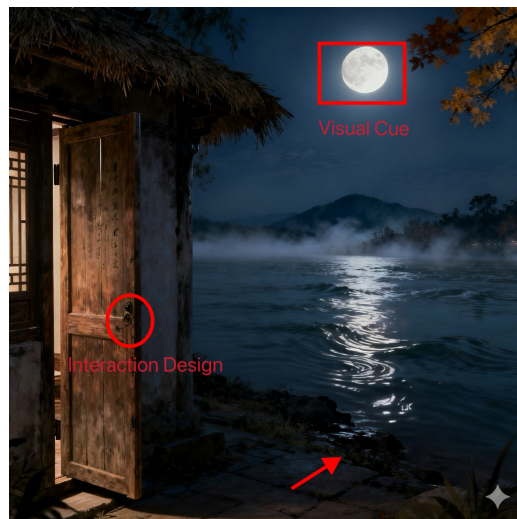


Figure 3. Climax scene (image source: Gemini AI-generated) [14]

5. Conclusion

The Poetic Wanderer virtual reality design is a revolutionary change in the traditional poetry education, where it is passive and memorized, but it has become an active learning area where one is emotionally involved. This way of teaching is in line with the wider trends in the education of the

humanities, where VR technology is implemented to bring literature to life and make the process more interactive. The main learning procedure of the design consists of three phases, where first the students engage in an immersive role-play, which provokes personal emotional response; second, the response is discussed in groups, and, as a result, the insights about the themes and meanings of the poem are gained. Such a sequence of role-play reflection ensures that students are absorbing the poetic text and do not just memorize the content.

In fact, under such a VR-based solution, it should be anticipated that the students will not only acquire the deeper meanings of the poems but will also demonstrate considerably better-motivated and more interested classroom performance. Educationally speaking, the project will provide a new teaching model that will successfully combine the humanities material with the immersive technology by showing how classical literature can be instructed more interactively and with a more technological enrichment. This also develops the poetic imagination in the students, and it is more likely to enhance the cultural relationship the students have with the material, since the creative activities in literary environments may lead to creativity and kindness, as well as better engagement.

In the future, the given immersive learning model can be further applied to the works of other poets and even to some other genres. In this way, the strategy can be expanded in its reach and make a deeper contribution to the traditional education of literature, exposing students to the venom of the literature curriculum to other equally effective and emotional learning journeys.

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