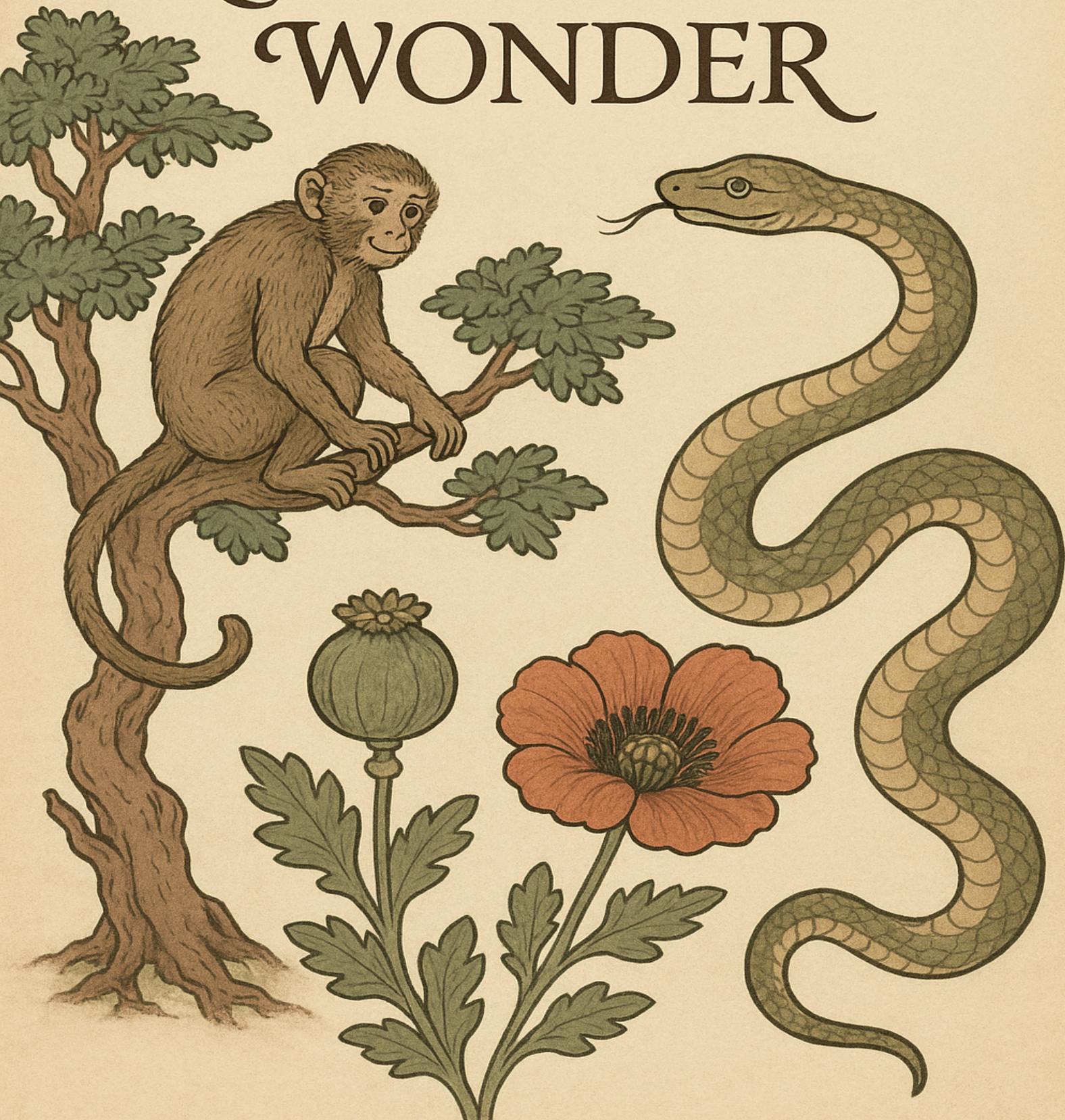


An Invitation to
READ, THINK,
WONDER



PA250 Topics in Asian Studies
EV261 Topics in Environmental Humanities
Block 5 Animals, Plants, and Monsters

What can a monkey, a tree, a snaky demones, or an opium plant teach us about identity, society, history, and ultimately what it means to be human? What can creativity and the interpretation of fiction offer in the age of the Anthropocene? This course seeks answers by exploring stories about nonhumans from the traditional and popular cultures of China, often retold across multiple media. We will engage with key terms from animal studies and environmental humanities, such as anthropocentrism, personhood, agency, and matter. With the optimism that *good futures are possible*, we will collectively cultivate a multispecies ethics of thinking and living with our nonhuman co-inhabitants of the world.

Instructor: Mengqi “Mercy” An, Ph.D.

Regular class meetings: 9:30 AM - 12:00 PM, Tutt Library #327

Office hours: Tue & Wed, 1:30 - 3:00 PM, Interdisciplinary House #201

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, you will be able to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of Sinophone literature and culture through engagement with key texts.
- Articulate and critically respond to central concepts in the environmental humanities.
- Practice close reading and close watching to interpret literature and film with attention to meaning, style, and context, drawing on ecocritical, historical, and gender-based frameworks.
- Use creativity to deepen understanding and generate original perspectives.
- Conduct and present original research by developing a thesis in written form and delivering an oral presentation of your findings.
- Write down your own learning goals for this block. What do you hope to gain from this course that will support your learning journey and personal growth at Colorado College and beyond?

- _____
- _____
- _____

Policy

Student Wellness

Your well-being in learning is my top priority. One of the main goals of this course is to cultivate curiosity, creativity, and scholarship—and all of these seeds need well-cared-for mental space to grow. To honor wellness practices, I have built one wellness day into our class schedule. On this day, you are not expected to do coursework and should instead focus on caring for yourself in ways that work best for you. If you would prefer to take your wellness day on a different date, please reach out to me in advance. I will assign you the tasks scheduled for the built-in wellness day so you can take your chosen day off instead—no questions asked, no documentation required.

We often need more support than we ask for. If you or someone you know is struggling, please make use of supportive campus and community resources at [Colorado College Mental Health Promotion](#). The [Wellness Resource Center](#) also provides support for you.

Attendance

Attendance is essential in this course. Class meetings, field trip and film screenings are all mandatory.

If a class meeting or major deadline conflicts with your predictable religious or cultural observances, please let me know by the first Wednesday so that we can make an arrangement that is both supportive and meaningful.

Unexcused absences will negatively impact your attendance grade. However, I value communication, sincerity, and your effort to learn, and I am open to negotiating meaningful accommodations for unpredictable emergent issues that support your well-being and schedule.

How to request approval for an absence: If you cannot attend class due to an unexpected illness or personal circumstance (e.g., family emergency, mental health needs), please email me before class. Your message must include supporting documentation—such as a doctor’s note, an athletic training schedule, evidence of attempts to reschedule, or relevant correspondence related to the emergency. I trust your integrity, but I require clear evidence to ensure fairness and consistency for everyone in the class.

If your absence is approved, we will arrange make-up assignments as appropriate. Please keep in mind that missing class does not mean missing the reading/watching materials. You are still expected to complete all assigned materials and to participate in discussion based on the readings when you return. Missing three or more class meetings may significantly affect your progress. In such cases, I encourage you to consider switching to Pass/Fail.

Honor Code

Using the ideas of another person—be it a professional writer, speaker, or a classmate or friend—without proper acknowledgment constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism is a particularly significant issue in this course, because you will collect some of your data in groups, and you will be citing others' work in your research articles. All of your papers, including the group paper, must be your own. Do not take this issue lightly. You are responsible for reading, understanding, and adhering to the guidelines for acknowledging the work of others as outlined in *MLA Handbook on plagiarism and academic dishonesty*: <https://style.mla.org/plagiarism-and-academic-dishonesty/>. In addition, please see the *Pathfinder* for information on the Honor Code and CC's policies on academic theft. Even when it is unintended, plagiarism carries with it significant disciplinary action. Ignorance of the guidelines is not an acceptable excuse for violations of the Honor Code.

Technology

Laptops are allowed in class with restrictions. Please be mindful that screens create physical obstructions which have mental affects that often discourage fully engaged communication. When actively listening in class, please fold or half-fold your laptop screen. For jotting down notes, consider using paper or a tablet so the screen isn't up all the time.

Artificial Intelligence

Yes, AI is here to stay. As an educator, I see the ability to engage it critically as a core competence for the future workforce and society, and it is part of our collective responsibility as members of a civil society to assess and shape its use, rather than shy away from it. But in the context of higher education, you do not want to give away your own original and critical thinking, nor the hard-earned opportunity to study at Colorado College. I urge you to make your choices about AI deliberately.

This class gives you the option to choose: *to use or not to use AI, that is the question.*

If you choose to use AI, you are required to do additional intellectual work and submit a three-page reflective essay on AI use at the end of the block, due Wednesday of Week 4 at noon. You will reflect on your interactions with it, explain how it improves your efficiency and learning, and critically examine its role and presence in your life and by extension, the broader CC community. No AI may be involved in writing these reflective reports.

AI use is defined as using any part of an AI-generated response in your submitted work, including discussion board posts and oral presentations.

What does not count as AI usage: If you ask AI to summarize a reading and you only read the summary without using any of its wording, ideas, or structure in your own writing or oral

presentation, this is considered consuming AI content (similar to reading an scholarly article) and does not count as AI usage.

What does count as AI usage: If you use any part of the AI's phrasing, edits, structure, organization, or bibliography in your submission, that counts as AI usage. This includes:

- Using AI-generated sentences or ideas in your writing
- Using AI-suggested edits, rewordings, or structural changes
- Using AI-generated bibliographies or citations
- Using AI to check grammar, flow, or clarity and incorporating those changes into your final submitted work

You will not be penalized for using AI and your work will be evaluated solely on its quality. But if AI plays a role beyond your control, trust me, the quality of your papers will suffer. Failure to attribute AI usage to the best of your ability and in good faith is plagiarism.

Please email me your AI choice by the end of **the first Wednesday**. Whichever option you choose, I support you and I want you to trust yourself in this learning journey and claim the chance for your own growth. You are the one who does the reading, comes to class discussions, and lives through the questions that matter to you in flesh and blood. You are taking this learning experience to your future.

Participation

You are expected to participate actively, frequently, and bravely in class. Everyone should aim to speak at least once each session. Meaningful participation involves interacting not only with me but also with your peers and contributing to the building of a class learning community. Try your best to encourage yourself and others to contribute—by paraphrasing, building on ideas, making connections, and initiating points that invite others to engage. Our goal is to make communication and collaboration part of how we think, not just what we say.

Sharing your thoughts with a group of people takes courage. Making a genuine point is always risky while saying a cliché is safe. Give yourself and others credit for speaking, no matter how much you agree or disagree. People often start by saying, thinking, or writing something imperfect or confusing. Uncertainty and confusion are part of learning. In discussion as well as in writing, focus on expressing, not impressing. Ugly is okay. Confusing is okay. Silence is not.

You will also submit a self-evaluation on participation on Friday of Week 3.

Accessibility

I am committed to creating a learning environment that meets the needs of its diverse student body. If you anticipate or experience any disability-related barriers to learning in this course,

please discuss your concerns and/or approved accommodation with me. I would like us to discuss ways to ensure your full participation in the course. Additionally, if you have not already done so, please connect with Accessibility Resources, the office responsible for coordinating accommodations and services for students with disabilities: accessibilityresources@coloradocollege.edu, 719-227-8285, Armstrong 219.

Daily Schedule

This schedule is here to support you in managing your time and energy so that you can move steadily and confidently through the block. Pay close attention to the afternoon to-do items which are essential for preparing for the next class meeting. How you plan and use your afternoons and evenings matters as much as how you participate in class each morning. The schedule may change as we go. Stay attuned to updates on Canvas.

Week 1

Mon 1/19 - Martin Luther King Jr. Day

- No class meeting. Please use this time to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the broader civil rights movement.

Module: *Monkey*

Tue 1/20

- Morning: Class orientation
- Afternoon:
 - Read *Monkey* (trans. Arthur Waley), Introduction, and Preface, and Chapter 1 (pp. 1-19)
 - Read *Critical Terms*, "Introduction," "Anthropocentrism"

Wed 1/21

- Morning: Class meeting; discuss *Monkey*; issues in animal studies and anthropocentrism
- Afternoon:
 - Read *Monkey*, Chapters 2-5 (pp. 20-52)
 - Read *Critical Terms*, "Representation"
 - Post QAQ on *Monkey*

Thur 1/22

- Morning: Class meeting; student presentation; discuss *Monkey*; show episodes from *Princess Iron Fan* (1941) and *Havoc in Heaven* (1961-65)
- Afternoon:
 - Read *Critical Terms*, "Personhood", "Anthropomorphism" in *Animal Writing*

- Go to film screening: *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (2015), dir. Tian Xiao Peng, 1:30 PM at Max Kade Theater
- Post QAQ on *Hero is Back*

Fri 1/23

- Morning: Class meeting; discuss film language glossary; discuss *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* and Tsai's comic
- Afternoon:
 - Read Sun Yisheng, "Apery"
 - Read Franz Kafka, "A Report to an Academy"
 - Post QAQ on "Apery" and "Report"
 - Read: *Critical Terms*, "Sociality," "Ethics"
 - Watch the documentary *Jane* by yourself

Week 2

Mon 1/26

- Morning: Class meeting; student presentation; class discussion of *Jane*, "Apery" and "A Report to an Academy"
- Afternoon:
 - Watch *Langlang Mountain Little Monsters* (2025) by yourself
 - Read *Critical Terms*: "Matter" and *Vibrant Matter* (ch 7&8)
 - Post QAQ on *Langlang Mountain Little Monsters*

Tue 1/27 - Zoo day

- Morning: Field trip to Cheyenne Mountain Zoo
- Afternoon:
 - Work on your creative writing piece
 - Read *The White Snake and Her Son* "Introduction" (pp. xi-xxiv), and *White Madam* (pp. 216-261)

Module: Snake

Wed 1/28 - Co-Write session

- Morning: Discuss *Langlang Mountain Little Monster*; dedicated in-class time to co-write and workshop your creative writing
- Afternoon:
 - Go to film screening: *White Snake* (2019), dir. Huang Jiakang and Zhao Ji, 1:30 PM at Max Kade Theater
 - Post QAQ on *White Snake* the animation
 - Submit creative writing and reflection

Thur 1/29

- Morning: Class meeting; student presentation; class discussion of *White Snake* story and animation
- Afternoon:
 - Go to film screening: *Green Snake* (1993), dir. Tsui Hark, 1:30 PM at Max Kade Theater
 - Post QAQ on *Green Snake* the film
 - Read “Queering Chineseness” by Jen-Han Hsu, pp. 1–17

Fri 1/30 - Wellness Day

- No class meeting
- Consider starting reading *The King of Trees* and *Red Poppies* over the weekend

Week 3

Mon 2/2

- Morning: Class meeting; student presentation; discuss *Green Snake*
- Afternoon:
 - Read Ah Cheng, *The King of Trees* (pp. 3-56), “Afterword” (pp. 181-196, only read sections related to *The King of Trees*)
 - Post QAQ on *The King of Trees*
 - Read Zhuangzi excerpts: “Useless Tree” and “Cook Ding”
 - *Critical Terms*: “Life”

Module: Tree

Tue 2/3

- Morning: Class meeting; student presentation; discuss *The King of Trees*; campus tree tour
- Afternoon:
 - Read *Red Poppies* (Part 1)
 - Post QAQ on *Red Poppies*
 - Read Arnaud Chouvy, *Opium: Uncovering the Politics of the Poppy* (Introduction and Ch. 1, pp. xi-xvi, 1-12; ecology, botany, and labor, pp. 125-130)

Module: Opium Poppy

Wed 2/4

- Morning: Class meeting; discuss *Red Poppies*
- Afternoon:
 - Read *Red Poppies* (Part 2)
 - Start working on final paper ideas and drafts

Thur 2/5

- Morning: Class meeting; discuss *Red Poppies*
- Afternoon:
 - Read *Red Poppies* (Part 3)
 - Read Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (selected chapters)

Fri 2/6

- Morning: Class meeting; student presentation; discuss *Red Poppies* and *Sea of Poppies*
- Afternoon:
 - Submit self-evaluation on participation
 - Find at least one scholarly voice to engage with (consult librarian if needed)

Module: *Synthesis*

Week 4

Mon 2/9

- Morning: Class meeting; bring printed final paper outlines for all class members; discussion and reflection; individual tutorials
- Afternoon:
 - Work on expanding your outline into a draft

Tue 2/10

- Morning: Class meeting; bring two printed final paper drafts; in-class peer review
- Afternoon:
 - Revise your paper

Wed 2/11 - Everything due at noon

- Revise your paper and write a revision report (attach AI usage report if applicable)

Reading / Watching Responses QAQ (Quote - Analysis - Question)

This exercise is designed for you to practice close reading / watching on a daily basis. A response is expected to be less than 200 words long. I encourage you to follow the structure QAQ (Quote - Analysis - Question) as it prompts both your thinking and our discussion. A quote is a chosen excerpt from the assigned reading or video that stands out to you, leaves an impression, or makes you want to revisit it. A quote does not exceed a couple of sentences or, if from a video, a couple of minutes, and it includes the page number or timestamp. An analysis is a quick two- to three-sentence explanation of why this quote seems important. Is there a symbol at work, something about the word choice, language style, or narrative perspective? Does it echo

something mentioned earlier in the text, or is it thought-provoking because of its ambiguity - and if so, what is the ambiguity? A question then follows the analysis to connect what you have said to a larger theme, a recurring topic, a social context you are curious about, or a potential research topic.

Responses are due by **11:00 PM** on the assigned date.

Examples 1. " 'We'll cut down useless trees and replace them with useful ones,' I replied. (We had been given a general idea of our work when we got here.) 'Is felling easy?' He lowered his head. 'Trees can't run away.'" (*The King of Trees*, p. 11) This exchange raises the central question of tree felling for the sake of human utility in the story. Appearing early in the novella, it sets up a sustained exploration of what it means to cut down a tree and who gets to decide what is useful. Trees are perceived as immobile beings that later reveal themselves to possess a spirit, and it therefore invites reflection on the treatment of trees as passive resources. From here, I am interested in exploring how the conventional perception of trees as immobile contributes to an oppressive logic of powerlessness and legitimizes violence.

Example 2. "In the fourth month, birds were hatching. Yellow-billed fledglings would swoop down, skipping and pecking beneath the eaves. Litters of piglets grew fat. Only the women in the village, like farm horses, grew skinnier in the summer." (*The Field of Life and Death*, p. 45) This passage compares animals and women in the village. Animal birth and growth in nature are depicted as signs of prosperity, but women, who bear the gendered duty of carrying children and giving birth, are shown as depleted. It highlights the plight of women by evoking animal imagery. My question is: how to understand the joy and bodily suffering of giving birth, both for animals and for women? Is reproduction a shared experience across species, and if so, why does the novella present such a stark contrast? What human perceptions and social problems does this contrast reveal?

Assignment #1 Contextualizing Presentation

You will complete this assignment in groups. Each presentation should be 10–15 minutes long. Members of the same group will normally receive the same grade unless free-riding is reported.

This assignment is freer than it may initially appear. One way to think about it is this: as you read, consider what you want to know more about, and how learning that context might complement, complicate, or deepen the text.

These presentations are an opportunity for you to research and share relevant, interesting contexts with the class in an oral presentation format. "Context" is broadly defined and is never complete or fully controllable. There is no single, stable background that securely anchors a text. Instead, meaning remains open, iterable, and capable of taking on new significance in different situations, depending on what we know and how we read.

Context may include, but is not limited to:

- Historical context (e.g., who wrote *Journey to the West* and how the text evolved)
- Cultural context (e.g., how monkeys are conceived in Chinese culture versus other cultures)
- Scientific context (e.g., for Kafka's "A Report to an Academy," the history of primatology or ideas about *Homo sapiens*)
- Religious, intertextual, or technological contexts

Dates and Draft Topics

- 1/22 – *Journey to the West: History and Today*
- 1/26 – "A Report to an Academy," Jane Goodall, and Primatology
- 1/29 – Legend of the White Snake
- 2/2 – Snakes Across Cultures *or* Snakes and Queerness
- 2/3 – Daoism and the Environment *or* the Educated Youth Movement and the Chinese Cultural Revolution
- 2/6 – Opium: Plant, Commodity, and Empire in Colonial Asia

You are encouraged to change or refine your presentation topic in any direction that makes sense to you, as long as it still relates to the text in question. You will need to do some research and make thoughtful decisions about what you find most relevant, interesting, or important as context for the text(s) we read. Again, your focus is on context, not on summarizing the text itself.

Assignment #2 Creative Writing

We will visit the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo to meet the primates. We will spend time in front of the primate exhibit in silence doing free write. Use this time to write about the encounter between you and the animal. I invite you to be porous and let sensations penetrate your body and mind. Note what you see and feel, sense and smell; document movements and stillness, gestures, eyes, hair, shapes, emotions, affects that surface for both you and the animal. There are no rules for this free write—the only requirement is to be fully present with the encounter. We will then have a conversation to share impressions and brainstorm story ideas.

At home, expand your free write into a short story based on the encounter. Incorporate motifs from the stories we have read and watched.

You are free to experiment, but if you need ideas, here are some starting points:

- Imagine the Monkey King from China reincarnated as this primate in a Colorado zoo and escaping on a "Journey to the East."
- Rewrite Monkey King's *Havoc in Heaven* episode as "Havoc in the White House."
- Imagine a body exchange between you and the monkey—what happens when the monkey spends a day as a CC student?
- Invent your own scenario (highly encouraged!)

As you craft your story, reflect on the role of language, narrative perspective, animal-human dynamic, the zoo as an institution, and/or other themes we have explored so far. Think in terms of deep time and expansive space, and consider how such imagination might reshape the reader's view of what is animal and what is human.

Submissions:

1. Short story (70%): ~1500 - 2000 words
2. Reflection on creation and insight (30%): ~500 words

Assignment #3 Final Essay Critical Analysis Essay

Format: 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, 1-inch margins, 8 pages.

You will develop a sustained argument about one literary or cinematic work's one key aspect. It could be a character, a trope, a literary or cinematic device, the narrative structure, the narrator's perspective, or more abstract concepts like subjectivity, agency, androgyny, queerness, embodiment, trans-corporeality, performativity, affect, emotion, and nationalism. Narrow it down. Engage at least one secondary source (e.g., cite a scholarly article, book, or chapter).

Check-list:

- Focus on one object of analysis and a central aspect of it. If you are really interested in making this a comparative project, talk to me and we will consider letting you write a longer essay.
- Include textual or cinematic details as evidence. Have a clearly stated thesis (as in Assignment #1).
- Draw necessary references to other course materials, both primary and secondary.
- Engage with at least one existing interpretation of the work or a scholarly idea you wish to challenge (e.g., cite a scholarly article, book, or chapter). It is not enough to claim that you are challenging common wisdom without citing scholarship. If you need help finding one, please come to me or consult a librarian.

Paper development steps:

- Paper outline (10%): A two-page plan. Please bring printed copies to class. The outline sketches out what you plan to write, including a list of relevant textual details, a thesis argument, a couple of secondary sources annotated, and a proposed structure for how your essay will flow.
- First draft (30%): A full-length version of your paper. Bring printed copies to class for peer review. This draft represents your best effort at developing your argument in full, even though it will still be open to revision.
- Final submission (60%): Submit as a Word document on Canvas. Due by Week 4, Wednesday, 11:59 AM. This version shall incorporate feedback and revisions, and please

do not hesitate to make substantial changes if needed or suggested. Along with the paper, attach a brief report (less than one page) explaining how you made revisions. If AI is used, attach an AI usage report.

Potential questions to start with:

- How is a nonhuman figure in a chosen story mobilized to tell stories, convey moral lessons, and/or generate aesthetic effects?
- In what ways are older narratives about nonhumans repurposed to serve modern cultural or artistic sensibilities?
- How does a chosen story challenge the human–nonhuman dichotomy in a particular aspect (such as emotional capacity, intelligence, moral capacity, ontology, power, agency) in its content and formal strategies of storytelling or visual representation?
- Follow your own inquiry.

Evaluation

- Attendance and participation - 15%
- Reading/ Watching responses posted on Canvas - 20%
- Assignment #1: Contextualizing presentation - 20%
- Assignment #2: Creative writing - 15%
- Assignment #3: Final paper - 30%

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C	D	F
93-100	89-92	85-88	80-84	76-79	70-75	60-69	<60

*For Assignments 2–3: If you work with a writing center tutor, your score for that assignment will receive a 5% bonus. For example, a score of 80 becomes $80 \times 1.05 = 84$. The Writing Center will send me an email if you visit them.

Evaluation Rubrics

What an A looks like in each case

Oral Presentation (applies to Assignment #1)

- Effort: have done the research and have solid content to show;
- Delivery: start with a clear roadmap, guide us through your points in a logical order, and wrap up on a strong note; use visuals effectively;
- Q&A: listen and respond thoughtfully to questions; use your presentation as a chance to spark conversation with the class.

Creative Writing (applies to Assignment #2)

- Originality: present novelty—ideas or designs that potentially surprise the reader.
- Insight: inspire insight, make the reader reflect, engage with philosophical ideas that raise questions, and open up new perspectives. Adequate reflection on the process of creation in relation to critical insights.
- Craft: Use thoughtful word choice to create a vivid, multisensory reading experience; pay attention to rhythm, flow, and structure; and use techniques such as flashbacks or echoes when appropriate.

Critical Analysis (applies to Assignments #3)

- Thesis: have a clear point that can be argued for; walk the reader through your reasoning step by step, i.e. no big or unexpected jumps between sections.
- Evidence: back up your points with specific details from texts or films; avoid staying vague or general; avoid making unbacked or sweeping claims.
- Organization: have a well-thought-out structure that serves the ends of persuasive writing; use polished prose.
- Secondary sources: bring in outside interpretation fairly and use it to help you make your point.