

Introduction

The age was the Elizabethan; their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climate; nor their vegetables even. Everything was different. The weather itself, the heat and cold of summer and winter, was, we may believe, of another temper altogether. The brilliant amorous day was divided as sheerly from the night as land from water. Sunsets were redder and more intense; dawns were whiter and more auroral. Of our crepuscular half-lights and lingering twilights they knew nothing. The rain fell vehemently, or not at all. The sun blazed or there was darkness. Translating this to the spiritual regions as their wont is, the poets sang beautifully how roses fade and petals fall. The moment is brief they sang; the moment is over; one long night is then to be slept by all. As for using the artifices of the greenhouse or conservatory to prolong or preserve these fresh pinks and roses, that was not their way. The withered intricacies and ambiguities of our more gradual and doubtful age were unknown to them. Violence was all. The flower bloomed and faded. The sun rose and sank. The lover loved and went. And what the poets said in rhyme, the young translated into practice. Girls were roses, and their seasons were short as the flowers.' Plucked they must be before nightfall; for the day was brief and the day was all.

—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*¹

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928), 26–27.

The *Poetry* (*Shi* 詩), enshrined in the canon of Chinese classics as the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經), and also known, especially in China, as the *Mao Poetry* (*Mao Shi* 毛詩), after the name of its earliest editors, was the most important text of ancient China, quoted in the way that Western writers would quote the *Bible* or Shakespeare. It was apparently the first text that Confucius expected his students to master and has been read continuously now for well over two and a half millennia. It continues to be regarded as the fountainhead of the Chinese literary tradition.

The Structure of the Text

The collection of 305 discrete poems is usually understood to have been created over the course of several centuries, the earliest perhaps from about 1000 BCE, during the early to middle phase of the Western Zhou dynasty (1045–771 BCE), and the latest dating to just before 600 BCE. Most of the poems concern the Zhou people in one way or another. The collection is divided into three major sections: the *Feng* 風 “airs,” *Ya* 雅 “odes,” and *Song* 頌 “hymns,” corresponding to three more or less different genres of poetry and/or music, since the poetry was always accompanied by music. The “airs,” of which there are 160 individual poems, are further subdivided into fifteen separate sections that correspond to different states of China’s early Springs and Autumns period (722–481 BCE); these include many of the most beloved poems of the collection, often understood to reflect the popular music of the time and now often considered as something like early folk songs. Even though these come at the very beginning of the collection and many of the individual poems have traditionally been attributed to the founding fathers of the Zhou dynasty, in fact there is now something of a consensus that they are the latest poems in the collection; one poem, “The Yellow Bird” (*Huang Niao* 黃鳥; 131) explicitly comments on the burial of Lord Mu of Qin 秦穆公 (d. 621 BCE) and is often thought to be one of the latest poems in the collection.² The “odes” include 105 poems, with 74 *Minor Odes* (*Xiao Ya* 小雅) and 31 *Major Odes* (*Da Ya* 大雅); the *Major Odes*, in particular, are associated with the Western Zhou dynasty, looked back upon as the Golden Age of Chinese culture already at

2 Other poems, such as “Zhu Woods” (*Zhu Lin* 株林; 144), are said to be somewhat later (599 BCE in this case), but those dates are based on attributions and not on internal textual evidence.

the time when the *Poetry* was being formed as a collection. The final section includes three groups of “hymns”: the *Hymns of Zhou*, 31 hymns, usually quite short, associated with the Zhou royal court; *Hymns of Lu*, four miscellaneous poems (including two horse prayers) associated with the state of Lu 魯, which had been founded by the famous Duke of Zhou 周公 (c. 1090–1033 BCE) and which had long been considered as the state in which Zhou culture was most enshrined; and *Hymns of Shang*, five narrative poems describing the former glories of the Shang dynasty (c. 1550–1045 BCE), the dynasty that Zhou had overthrown. The *Hymns of Zhou* are now generally regarded as the earliest poems in the collection, some of which may date to the first decades after the Zhou conquest of Shang. The *Hymns of Lu* and *Hymns of Shang*, by contrast, are among the latest poems, one poem in the *Hymns of Lu*, “The Secret Temple” (*Bi Gong* 闕宮; 300), explicitly praising the Joyous Lord of Lu (Lu Xi Gong 魯僖公; r. 659–627 BCE).

The earliest poems in the collection, some of the poems in the *Hymns of Zhou* section, are prayers that were used in temple sacrifices or music-and-dance celebrations of the dynasty’s founding. The poem “It Is the Command of Heaven” is a good example of the temple prayers.

It Is the Command of Heaven (*Wei Tian zhi Ming* 維天之命; 267)

維天之命	It is the command of Heaven;
於穆不已	Oh so stately, never ending.
於乎不顯	<i>Wuhu!</i> Illustrious
文王之德之純	Is the purity of the Cultured King’s virtue.
假以溢我	Approach and shower upon us,
我其收之	That we may receive it.
駿惠我文王	Grandly favor us, oh Cultured King,
曾孫篤之	May your grandchildren make it strong.

These poems are not marked by great literary sophistication. Although this one anticipates the four-character lines that would become the hallmark of the *Poetry* (six of the eight lines being of four characters), it includes hardly any rhyme at all,³ one of the other defining features of the rest of the collection. It

3 Wang Li 王力 indicates that *shou* 收 and *du* 篤 in the last two couplets are an acceptable cross rhyme.

is a simple prayer that looks back to the past, in this case to the Cultured King, King Wen of Zhou 周文王 (r. 1099/1056–1050 BCE),⁴ the nominal founder of the dynasty, and also looks ahead to the future, with the hope that the state might flourish for generations to come.

The poems in the next oldest section, the *Major Odes*, are far more regular and often present a strong narrative thread. The first poem in the section is a praise of the Cultured King. It features both systematic use of four-character lines and also end rhyme. These poems tend to be much longer, broken into stanzas of regular length, in this case seven stanzas of eight lines each. The first and last stanzas will give some sense of the entire poem.

The Cultured King (*Wen Wang* 文王; 235)

文王在上	The Cultured King is up on high,
於昭于天	Oh, shining is he in heaven.
周雖舊邦	Although Zhou is an old country,
其命維新	Its mandate, it is renewed.
有周不顯	The Zhou lords are illustrious,
帝命不時	God's mandate is very timely.
文王陟降	The Cultured King goes up and down,
在帝左右	To the left and right of God.
...	
命之不易	That the mandate is not easy,
無遏爾躬	Let it not stop with your person.

Wang reconstructs the ancient pronunciations as *sjiu and *tuk, a cross rhyme between the *you* 幽 and *jue* 覺 rhyme classes. See Wang Li, *Shijing yundu* 詩經韻讀 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji chubanshe, 1980), 361. For a different reconstruction of the archaic pronunciations, see Axel Schuessler, *Minimal Old Chinese and Later Han Chinese: A Companion to Grammata Serica Recensa* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), which gives *hju 172 (13-8) and *túk 186 (14-8).

4 The Zhou kings and also the rulers of the various independent states that would develop after the end of the Western Zhou period are generally known by a more or less restricted number of posthumous epithets. Thus, the Cultured King was so named apparently in recognition that he did not use violence to overthrow the preceding Shang dynasty. Although it is common in most Western works concerning ancient China to use the transliterated name (e.g., King Wen), it seems to me that this misses the meaning intrinsic in the names, and so throughout this book I will refer to these figures with translations of the epithets (e.g., the Cultured King). I will also provide dates of reign for rulers and approximate dates of life and death for other figures; these will be in accordance with Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 BC* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 25–26.

宣昭義問	Shine everywhere your proper fame.
有虞殷自天	Again consider how Yin fell from Heaven.
上天之載	That which Heaven on High supports
無聲無臭	Is without sound, is without smell.
儀刑文王	A proper model the Cultured King,
萬邦作孚	Whom the ten-thousand countries trust.

Many of the poems in this section, especially those at the beginning, tell the story of the dynasty's founding fathers, and in one notable case, of its founding mother,⁵ always with the wish that its good fortune might extend well into the future. Other poems at the end of the *Major Odes* extol military and government officials toward the end of the Western Zhou dynasty, some of whom are known from inscriptions on bronze vessels cast at that time. Indeed, several of these poems feature wording almost indistinguishable from that of inscriptions on contemporary bronze vessels, good evidence for their date of composition.⁶

While most poems of the *Major Odes* are thus praises of the dynastic heroes, there are also a half dozen poems toward the end of the section that are very different in content, even if they share the same linguistic expression and poetic features. They too are set at the end of the Western Zhou period, but rather than lauding military conquests, they lament natural disasters and corrupt government that was then plaguing the country. The first of these poems, with the memorable title “The People Are Worn Out” (*Min Lao* 民勞; 253), begins:

5 The poem “Bearing the People” (*Sheng Min* 生民; 245) is a praise, at least at its beginning, of Origin the Jiang 姜嫄 (c. 2000 BCE), the progenitress of the Zhou people.

6 Already in the Song dynasty, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) noted the similarity between the wording of the poem “The Jiang and Han” (*Jiang Han* 江漢; 262) and ancient bronze inscriptions; see Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Shi ji zhuan* 詩集傳 (Sibu beiyao ed.), 18.33b. Martin Kern, the foremost Western authority on the *Classic of Poetry*, has also noted the similarity between the poetry and Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, stating: “The bronze inscriptions of mid- and late Western Zhou times show conscious efforts toward poetic form. Especially in the wake of the ritual reforms, a greater number of inscriptions were guided by the same principles of rhyme and meter familiar from the *Songs* [*Classic of Poetry*].... the inscriptions seem to prefer largely the same rhyme categories that also dominate the ritual pieces of the *Songs*.” See Martin Kern, “Bronze Inscriptions, the *Shijing*, and the *Shangshu*: The Evolution of the Ancestral Sacrifice during the Western Zhou,” in *Early Chinese Religion, Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 194.

The People Are Worn Out (*Min Lao* 民勞; 253)

民亦勞止	The people are still more worn out,
汙可小康	Seeking even a little peace.
惠此中國	Be kind to this central kingdom,
以綏四方	To pacify the four quarters.
無縱詭隨	Give no slack to fawning fraudsters,
以謹無良	To admonish the immoral.
式遏寇虐	May you halt robbers and rapists,
慁不畏明	Malignant, they don't fear the light.
柔遠能邇	Be mild to the far, patient with the near,
以定我王	To stabilize this king of ours.

This was one of fifteen poems that Arthur Waley (1889–1966), who as we will see later in this Introduction has been the most important translator of the *Classic of Poetry* into English, declined to translate, saying that they are uninteresting.⁷ While Waley may have found them uninteresting, I would think that readers of all times and places might well identify with these complaints. They certainly stand at the beginning of a long tradition of political lamentation in Chinese poetry, and so I have not hesitated to include them in the translation.

The last section of the *Classic of Poetry* was originally referred to as the *Airs of the Countries* (*Bang feng* 邦風), though since the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) it has been known instead as the *Airs of the States* (*Guo feng* 國風); this is due to a taboo on the name of Liu Bang 劉邦 (r. 202–195 BCE), the founder of that dynasty during which the text went through its definitive editing. Its 160 poems are by far the most numerous of any of the sections, and they are the poems that most modern readers find to be the most interesting; Arthur Waley certainly translated all of them. Indeed, because they come at the beginning of the collection, many readers do not make it past them to the *Minor Odes*, *Major Odes*, and the three sets of *Hymns*. This is unfortunate, but entirely understandable. The *Airs of the Countries* include lamentations, to be

7 Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1937; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1996).

sure, but these are of a personal nature, usually complaining of an unfaithful lover or an unfair work environment, sentiments with which most readers can also identify. Many other poems appear to be simply love songs. The following is just one example.

The Girl Says “The Cock’s Crowing” (*Nü yue Ji Ming* 女曰雞鳴; 82)

女曰雞鳴	The girl says: “The cock’s crowing!”
士曰昧旦	The guy says: “It’s not yet dawn.”
子興視夜	“You should get up and look at the night,
明星有爛	The morning star is shining bright.
將翱將翔	You’ve got to go, got to be off,
弋鳧與鴈	Fowling for ducks and for wild geese.”
弋言加之	“Whatever you hit at fowling,
與子宜之	I will make them ready for you.
宜言飲酒	Once they’re ready, I’ll drink some ale,
與子偕老	And grow old together with you.
琴瑟在御	Harp and lute are at your service,
莫不靜好	There’s nothing not calm and pretty.”
知子之來之	“Knowing that you will be coming,
雜佩以贈之	Mixed girdle-gems will I give you.
知子之順之	Knowing that you are in accord,
雜佩以問之	Mixed girdle-gems will I ask of you.
知子之好之	Knowing that you are loving them,
雜佩以報之	Mixed girdle-gems will repay you.”

As we will see below, other poems may or may not be quite so straightforward in their romantic sentiments, depending on how one wishes to interpret them. But almost all of the poems in the *Airs of the Countries* make use of interesting wordplay and cultural allusions. As such, they are the poems most open to different interpretations. Much of the discussion in the rest of this Introduction will focus primarily on these poems. But first it is necessary to explore in brief how the collection came together and how it was recognized as a classic (*jing* 經).

The Coalescence of the *Classic of Poetry*

According to tradition, Confucius (551–479 BCE) is supposed to have selected these 305 poems from among 3,000 ancient poems that were known at his time. There is little evidence to suggest either that there were 3,000 poems at the time of Confucius or that he was responsible for selecting those that were included. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that the collection was more or less complete about his time and perhaps in more or less the arrangement in which it has come to us. The *Zuo's Tradition* (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳), the classic history of the Springs and Autumns period during which Confucius lived, contains a lengthy story concerning a diplomatic visit by Ji Zha 季札 (576–484 BCE), the youngest son of King Shoumeng 壽夢 (r. 585–561 BCE) of the southern state of Wu 吳, to the state of Lu in the summer of 544 BCE. As noted above, Lu was already an old state and apparently saw itself as the keeper of the Zhou literary heritage. It was also Confucius's home state, though at the time of Ji Zha's visit, Confucius would have been just a small boy. During his visit, Ji Zha asked to observe a performance of "Zhou music" (Zhou *yue* 周樂), which is to say poetry accompanied by instrumental music. The musicians of Lu are said to have performed virtually the entirety of the *Poetry*, section by section; the order in which the sections were performed was essentially the same as that of the received text.⁸ After each interval, Ji Zha commented on how the poetry moved him, many of his comments anticipating the ways in which the poetry would be appreciated in later times.

It would seem from evidence in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) of Confucius that study of the *Poetry* was central to his pedagogical practice. One of the best-known quotations in this regard concerns an encounter between a student named Chen Kang 陳亢 (511–430 BCE) and Confucius's own son, Yu the Eldest 伯魚 (532–483 BCE), in which Chen Kang asked whether Yu the Eldest had received any special instruction from his father. Yu answered, "Not yet. Once he (i.e., Confucius) was standing alone, and as I rushed by the courtyard, he

8 This famous story is found in the *Zuo zhuan* for the twenty-ninth year of Lord Xiang of Lu 魯襄公. The sequence of the first eight sections of the *Airs of the Countries* is identical with that of the received *Poetry*; thereafter there are minor differences vis-à-vis the received text. After the *Airs of the Countries*, the performance continued with the *Minor Odes*, the *Major Odes*, and the *Hymns*. For a translation, see Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg, trans., *Zuo Tradition Zuozhuan* 左傳: *Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals"* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), vol. 2, 1242–1247.

said, ‘Have you studied the *Poetry*?’ I replied, ‘Not yet.’ ‘If you don’t study the *Poetry*, you’ll have nothing with which to speak.’ I withdrew and studied the *Poetry*.” (「未也。嘗獨立，鯉趨而過庭。曰：『學詩乎？』對曰：『未也。』『不學詩，無以言。』鯉退而學詩。」)⁹ “If you don’t study the *Poetry*, you’ll have nothing with which to speak” seems to say it all.

Among Confucius’s disciples, the one generally credited with the best understanding of the *Poetry* was Zi Xia 子夏 (personal name Bu Shang 卜商; b. 507 BCE). In one exchange between Zi Xia and Confucius, as recorded in the *Analects*, Confucius claims finally to have found someone with whom he could talk about the *Poetry*. Given that Zi Xia was one of the youngest disciples, this conversation must have come near the end of Confucius’s life.

子夏問曰：「『巧笑倩兮，美目盼兮』，『素以為絢兮』。何謂也？」子曰：「繪事後素。」曰：「禮後乎？」子曰：「起予者商也！始可與言詩已矣。」
Zi Xia asked, saying: “When you said of the lines ‘An artful smile, oh, so lovely, Beautiful eyes, oh, so limpid,’ that ‘Oh, the plain silk becomes a painting,’ what did you mean?” The Master said: “The matter of the design follows after the plain ground.” Zi Xia said: “Is it that ritual comes afterwards?” The Master said: “The one who gives me a lift is Shang! For the first time I have someone to talk with about the *Poetry*!”¹⁰

After Confucius, Zi Xia is supposed to have been the person most responsible for the understanding of the *Poetry*. According to at least one authoritative source, he composed, at least in part, the *Preface* (*xu* 序; literally “sequence”) that standard editions include as an integral part of the *Classic of Poetry*. The *Preface* begins with a general statement about poetry and the structure of the *Poetry*; usually referred to as the *Great Preface* (*Da Xu* 大序), this is regarded as China’s foundational theory of literature.

詩者，志之所之也。在心為志，發言為詩。情動於中而形於言。言之不足，故嗟歎之。嗟歎之不足，故永歌之。永歌之不足，不知手之舞之足之蹈之也。情發於聲，聲成文謂之音。治世之音安以樂，其政和。亂世之

⁹ *Analects* 16/13.

¹⁰ *Analects* 3/8.