

Yao Dan

● Cultural China Series

Chinese Literature

Translated by Li Ziliang, Li Guoqing & Zhao Feifei



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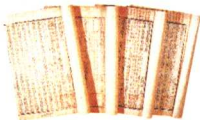
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Foreword

In the brilliant tradition of ancient Chinese culture, what has been preserved intact to the greatest extent up to the present time and is still being appreciated by us is ancient Chinese literature. Music and painting in ancient China were also highly developed, yet most of the ancient music scores were lost and most of the authentic paintings available today are those that were done during the time of the Song Dynasty and thereafter. Only literature, the songs and myths our forefathers created have been left to us and we can still get ourselves acquainted with them even today. Heaven and Earth of the Zhou Dynasty depicted in *The Book of Songs* still remains to be the homeland of our life. As we recite *The Book of Songs* and read the works by Pre-Qin philosophers, we are impressed by the heavenly principles and human ethics expounded therein, which, spanning over three thousand years, have well shaped the splendid and profound cultural identity of the Chinese people.

The beginning of the history of China with relatively clear historical records was marked by the Zhou Dynasty. Meanwhile, the Zhou Dynasty was also the mother land of ideal Chinese societies—a land of gentleness and kindness governed by classics, music, and feudal codes of ethics—as later sages had often aspired after. The ideal political pattern in ancient China was not the rule by power, but the



implementation of education. The scholars, a social stratum between senior officials and the common people in ancient China, played the role of educating the commoners. The scholars were low-ranking nobles. According to the political system of the Zhou Dynasty, the nobles ranked below the emperor. The nobles of the upper stratum were senior officials. The nobles of the lower stratum were the scholars. The scholars were further divided into the upper scholars, the middle scholars and the lower scholars. The lower scholars and the commoners were linked up. The earliest literature in China was the literature of the scholars. The scholars collected the commoners' folk songs from among the people, arranged them and polished them. Then they presented them to the emperor so that the emperor could read the social customs and learn the common aspirations of the people. These folk songs constituted the poems included in the section of "Guofeng" ("Folk Songs") in the earliest anthology of poetry *The Book of Songs*. The poems written for the ancestral shrine and sacrificial rites constituted the section of "Song" ("Sacrificial Songs"), and the historical records the section of "Ya" ("Court Hymns"). Chinese literature was of immediate practical use from its source. It concerned human relationships and everyday life as well as political education. Moreover, it was closely related with the spiritual life of the people. And this is also the essential spirit of Chinese literature as is recognized in this book.

The Chinese people strive for the harmony of man with nature, firmly believing that the foundation of human relationships and everyday life is in communion with the heavenly principles. What the geniuses in the field of literature aspired to know and concerned themselves with were the whole universe, history, and the bitter sorrow of the common people. This is why Qu Yuan hated to part his own country even though he had been vilified and misread time and again.

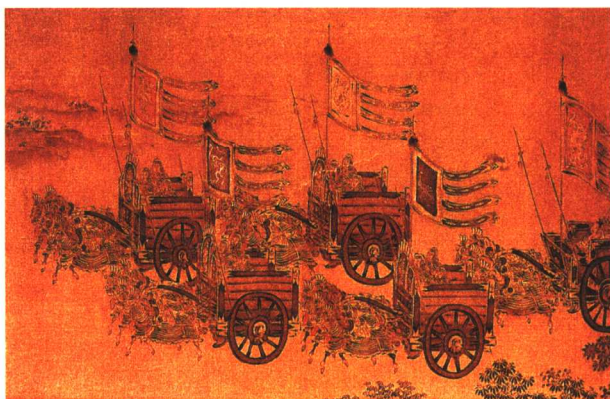
Grieving the life of the people with thorns and hardships laid, and with his way lying remote and so far, far away, he raised his questions about Heaven. Great thinkers of the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Period were actually political sages who cherished lofty aspirations of bringing prosperity to the country and a better life to the people. The views they expressed in their discourses or the writings they had left to us were their true feelings and the tracks of their lifelong pursuit. Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi shuttled back and forth between various states promoting their views and thoughts on life and good government. However, the thrust they possessed within themselves topped the monarchs they were trying to convince, for what they pursued ultimately was to “expound the ways of Heaven and Earth” and “speak for all the people.” Therefore, the writings of the great thinkers of the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Period stood to both human sentiments and the principles of Heaven. By the time of the Han Dynasty, Sima Qian, by writing a historical book *Records of the Historian* with the aim of fully “exploring the interaction between Heaven and Man and giving a complete and authoritative account of the historical changes of the past and present,” carried forward the vigor and boldness and the penetrating mind of the great thinkers of the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Period in probing into the secrets of the universe and passing judgments on worldly affairs. Li Bai and Su Shi of the Tang and the Song dynasties, great poets worthy of the line “Heaven has made us talents, we’re not made in vain,” talked and danced with the sun, the moon, the mountains and the rivers, yet they were burnt up with the agonizing grief and concern for the people when writing their poems of passion. All these are the great splendors in the tradition of Chinese literature.

Starting from the Yuan Dynasty, the morale of the Chinese people was seriously dampened. As a result, the pattern of Chinese literature altered too. Though the scholars before the Yuan Dynasty spoke for the people and concerned themselves with the life of the people, their words and writings were intended for the monarchs and the ruling class. However, from the Yuan Dynasty onwards, scholars went down to the entertainment circles, such as the theatre, and started to write plays and popular stories for the common people so that they could relax themselves when they were off work. At this point, the tastes and acceptability of the common people had to be taken into account. During this period, the “comic spirit” in Chinese literature made its first appearance, such as the playwright Guan Hanqing.



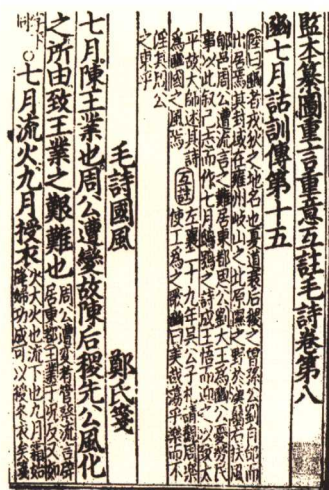
Aside from this, the direct influence literature exerted upon people's everyday life was also achieved when popular novels were widely read among the people. The Chinese people's understanding of "faithfulness" and "righteousness" even today comes mainly from *Three Kingdoms* and *Outlaws of the Marsh*. In the mid-eighteenth century, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, an independent and scholarly novel in the Western literary concept, came out. By unfolding the history of several families, the fate of women and the "all existence is void" concept herein expressed as "Life is but a dream," it arrested the attention of the readers of that time and the later generations. It is the greatest Chinese novel. No great master writers appeared since then. It was not until the early twentieth century when the May 4th New Cultural Movement broke out in China did Lu Xun, a great writer of a few stories and numerous prose works, draw portraits of the Chinese nation and cast self-visualizations of the Chinese individuals for the following several decades. But this subject will be covered in another forthcoming book.

The Book of Songs





The Book of Songs, the block-printed edition of the Song Dynasty, collection of National Library of China.



The tradition of Chinese literature is time-honored. *The Book of Songs*, the earliest anthology of poetry in China, is one of the most significant headstreams of Chinese Literature. It contains 305 poems written in a period of almost 500 years, starting from the early years of the Western Zhou through the mid-Spring and Autumn Period (c. 11th–6th century BC). Nowadays, Confucius is generally believed to be the compiler of the book. In terms of origin, the poems included in *The Book of Songs* come from the following three sources. The first one is called “advice poems.” When the king of the Western Zhou Dynasty held court, the ministers and royal princes offered their poems to the king to make implicit remonstrance or to sing the praises of the greatness of the king. The second one is called “folk songs and ballads.” Official collectors of folk songs and ballads from the Western Zhou or other co-existing states, waving big bells with their hands, went into villages and narrow lanes to collect folk songs and ballads which were popular among the ordinary people. The rest of the poems included in *The Book of Songs* are songs that were specially used for sacrificial rites and on banquet occasions. These songs were written by “professional” writers such as court official musicians or sorcerers and official historians.

Accordingly, all the poems included in *The Book of Songs* fall into different sections—the poems that come from the folks belong to the section of “Feng” (ballads or folk songs), the poems dedicated to the king of Western Zhou for the purpose of making implicit remonstrance or singing praises of the king belong to the section of “Ya” (court hymns or odes), and those used on sacrificial rites and banquet occasions belong to “Song” (sacrificial songs). Originally, “Feng,” “Ya” and “Song” were different genres of music. “Feng” referred to the local music of different states. “Ya,” meaning orthodox, referred to court music. “Song,” along with singing and dancing, was slow tempo dance music mainly used for sacrificial ceremonies. Due to the differences of the music and its purposes, the three sections of *The Book of Songs*, “Feng,” “Ya” and “Song,” bear some inconsistencies both in content and aesthetic style. “Ya” and “Song” are solemn and over-elaborate, while “Feng,” also known as “Guofeng” (folk songs of 15 regions), is soul-stirring and passionate. It looks as if the former is part of the shrine and the court and the latter part of the folk. However, taking into

consideration of the time of the Western Zhou Dynasty when *The Book of Songs* was written, the politics and culture of the time were centered on the aristocrats. The non-aristocrat common people had very little personal freedom, let alone had the time to write. For this reason, the poems in the section of “Guofeng” in *The Book of Songs* were still works written by the aristocrats, though sometimes these aristocrats served as spokesmen for the rustic and common people.

“Folk Songs of 15 Regions” (“Guofeng”)

When talking about *The Book of Songs*, the Chinese readers are actually referring to the section of “Guofeng” in *The Book of Songs*. The love poems included in “Guofeng” are rather diversified and colorful: some are impassioned, some unbridled, and some simple and unadorned but refreshing. But, all these love poems are the “true voice of the mind” with the least sign of affectations and decadence.

The opening poem of *The Book of Songs*, “Crying Ospreys · Zhou and the South” in “Guofeng,” is about love. It reads:

*Merrily the ospreys cry,
On the islet in the stream.
Gentle and graceful is the girl,
A fit wife for the gentleman.*

These lines are perhaps among the most famous ones in Chinese poetry. All people will naturally come up with these lines when talking about *The Book of Songs*. It was believed that ospreys are a kind of water birds. Zhu Xi, a Confucian scholar of the Song Dynasty, said that this kind of water birds “is noted for their faithfulness in love. If one of a couple dies, the other will be so overwhelmed with anxiety and depression that it will starve itself to death.” As a Confucian scholar, Zhu Xi focuses on the “faithfulness” of the ospreys—once one of the couple dies, the other will cease to be too. In the light of the accepted opinion reached by the orthodox school of Confucianism ever since the Han Dynasty that “Crying Ospreys · Zhou and the South” is a poem extolling the virtues of Queen Consort of Western Zhou,



Serial bells are the main ceremonial musical instruments for sacrificial ceremonies and banquet occasions of Pre-Qin kings and aristocrats.



Zhu Xi is actually demanding women to be faithful to their husbands. It is a major feature of the Confucian school of the Song Dynasty that women are demanded to remain unmarried after their husbands' death or to commit suicide after their husbands' death in defense of their chastity. Of course, the faithfulness of the ospreys in "Crying Ospreys" is nothing but strained "transitory interpretation" made by later generations. The original intention of the poet is more likely just to express a kind of longing and affection for the one he is deeply in love with. Though it is still very hard for us even today to ascertain what "ospreys" really look like, we can imagine that the male and female of this kind of birds are always in each other's companion either when they are in flight or when they are on the ground, and always they are deeply in love. The sight of these love birds naturally touched off the poet's longing for his sweetheart. Subsequently, he began to chant:

*Merrily the ospreys cry,
On the islet in the stream.
Gentle and graceful is the girl,
A fit wife for the gentleman.*

Through these lines, the poet expresses his longing for a girl. Unable to sleep and eat well, the poet only hopes that one day he can win over the girl's heart.

The love poems included in *The Book of Songs* are varied in content and form, but it is the love that one may aspire but can never attain that the poet repeatedly chants in many of his love poems. The love poems with this theme are also the most heart-touching and imagination-provoking ones. "Crying Ospreys" is an example of such poems, so is "The Reeds · The Social Mode of Qin," which reads:

*The reeds are luxuriant and green,
The white dew has turned to frost.
My beloved so dear to me
Is somewhere beyond the waters.
Upriver I search for him,
The way is arduous and long.
Downriver I search for him,
He seems to be in the middle of the waters.*

The poet's poetic thoughts start with the reeds. "Man is but a reed," said the French philosopher Blaise Pascal, "the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed." In the poem aforementioned, the reeds serve as a symbol of the fragility of human beings. The soft and gentle reeds by the waters swayed in the autumn wind. It looks as if the poet's sweetheart is right there across the water. But when she tries to get there and reach him, she finds that the way is arduous and long and, moreover, her sweetheart always seems to be in the middle of the waters, completely unattainable. This poem

vividly conveys the sadness caused by a person's vain longing for his or her sweetheart. They might have been in love with each other, but they are at present separated by the waters. The desolate and misty autumn scene is identical with the poet's feelings.

Of course, "Guofeng" covers a lot of ground in terms of content. There are also many poems concerning farming, war and corvée. "In the Seventh Month · The Social Mode of Bin" is a famous poem about the life of the farmers. It describes the farmers' assiduous work throughout the year.

In comparison with "Ya" and "Song," the language used in "Guofeng" is closer to the spoken language, and the four-character lines, which are more often grave and rigid in "Ya" and "Song," again become lively and dynamic in "Guofeng." In "Guofeng," there are many beautiful lines, which are either soul-stirring and broad-minded or profound and far-reaching in meaning.

The Epic of the Western Zhou People

Normally, scholars are able to notice the "epic quality and style" of *The Book of Songs*. So they hold some of the poems in "Da Ya" ("Greater Odes") in high esteem. The five poems in "Da Ya," namely "In the Beginning Who Gave Birth to Our People?" ("Shengmin"), "Duke Liu" ("Gongliu"), "In Long Trains Ever Increasing Grow the Gourd" ("Mian"), "Great Is God" ("Huangyi"), and "The Illustration of Illustrious (Virtue)" ("Daming") are regarded as the national epic of the Western Zhou people. In the West, the concept of "epic" was first put forth by Aristotle, and the representative works are the two epic poems entitled *Iliad* and *Odyssey* attributed to Homer. In terms of



The Social Mode of Bin (detail), a painting by Ma Hezhi of the Song Dynasty. "In the Seventh Month · The Social Mode of Bin" is a famous poem on farming, depicting the farmers' labor scenes during the four seasons. This painting is the artistic adaptation of the poem itself. It represents the joyful banquet scene of the farmers at the end of the lunar year.



Significant sites of the Western Zhou Dynasty.



patterns, these five poems cannot be mentioned in the same breath with any of the epics by Homer. However, by giving an account of the mythology of heroes, legends and historical tales happened at the beginning stage of the Western Zhou people, these five poems are imbued with epic quality and style. They tell about the stories of how the Western Zhou people, beginning from the tribal stage, fight against and finally triumph over the Yin Dynasty (the later period of the Shang Dynasty). These poems can be regarded as the national epic of the Western Zhou people, and each of the former kings and sovereigns has their own distinguishing features: Hou Ji is good at farming, Duke Liu is honest, simple and upright, Ancient Duke Danfu is a man of foresight with pioneering spirit, King Wen is renowned for his virtues, and King Wu unifies the whole country by force and meritorious military service. Though they were written in the early years of the Western Zhou Dynasty, these poems previously had been circulating among the Western Zhou people for quite some time and, consequently, the influence of mythology over these poems was still discernible. With simple and unaffected imagination of the world, the ancient sages portrayed their ancestors as half-humans and half-gods.

"In the Beginning Who Gave Birth to Our People?" tells the life story of Hou Ji, the first ancestor of the Western Zhou people. Jiangyuan, Hou Ji's mother, trod on God's big toe print, and was greatly moved in the large place where she rested, and then she conceived and gave birth to a child, and this child was Hou Ji. Of course, the most popular story in the West about virgins' becoming pregnant by the power of God is the story about Jesus' birth. When Jesus was about to be born, an angel of the Lord

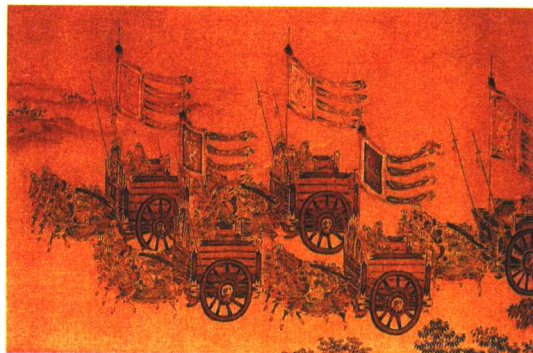


A portrait of Hou Ji, ancestor of the Zhou people.

came to Joseph's dream with the message of Jesus' identity. Moreover, Jesus' mother Mary and Joseph didn't give him the cold-shoulder. However, after Hou Ji was born, his mother thought that this child of dubious background was kind of an ill omen. She came up with the idea to abandon him. First she abandoned him on the road, hoping that oxen and sheep would tread on him. But the oxen and sheep made a detour with extreme caution to avoid treading on him. Then she abandoned him on the cold ice. But birds covered him with their wings to prevent him from dying of cold. Miraculously, this son of "God" survived and grew up. When Hou Ji grew up, he became an expert at farming and taught his clansmen how to plough and sow. It was not until then did his clansmen make their home in Tai. Hou Ji's great grandson Duke Liu, a kind and honest man, then led his clansmen to move to Bin. After this, King Wen was born. By this time, the Western Zhou people had become an extremely powerful nation. "Great Is God" tells about the story of how King Wen leads an expedition against the state of Mi and the state of Chong. "The Illustration of Illustrious (Virtue)," written in a lively style, focuses on King Wu's expedition against the Shang Dynasty. King Wu defeats the Shang troops which are superior in number. The war is graphically portrayed in as few as dozens of word. The lines "The troops of Yinshang, / Were collected like a forest" give a vivid description of the multitude and menace of the Shang regular troops. The following lines,

*The wilderness of Muye spread out extensive;
Bright shone the chariots of sandal;
The teams of bays, black-maned and white-bellied, galloped along;
The Grand-master Shangfu,
Was like an eagle on the wing,
Assisting King Wu,
Who at one onset smote the great Shang.
That morning's encounter was followed by a clear bright [day].*

can serve as a description of King Wu's army ready for fight and his tension and vigilance when facing the enemy troops. The spectacular image of Grand-master Shangfu, who is portrayed as an eagle on the wing, forebodes the irresistibility and final victory of the Western Zhou troops.



Scroll on the Departing Chariot, by Ma Hezhi of the Song Dynasty, represents the triumphant returning scene of the Zhou armies.



It can be stated that the poems in “Da Ya” of *The Book of Songs* indeed make up the epics about the Western Zhou heroes’ pioneering work. It goes without saying that these poems in “Da Ya” cannot be mentioned in the same breath with Homer’s monumental works in terms of patterns. There is a world of difference between the two: the epics attributed to Homer are more of a narrative style, while the epics in “Da Ya” are more of a lyric style. Homer’s epics were widely circulated and sung among the people by minstrels and were handed down by word of mouth with frequent modifications, whereas the epics about the Western Zhou people were written by official historians and musicians and were to be chanted when they offered sacrifices to their ancestors, and the basic content of the Western Zhou epics remained more static.

As regards their pursuit for the poetic spirit, there are also some differences between *The Book of Songs* and Homer’s epics. Homer’s epics were imbued with the spirit of adventure and explorations. Though Odysseus’s return of home was the main plot of *Odyssey*, Homer gave a more elaborate description of Odysseus’s adventurous experiences, which can be conceived as men’s struggles against and adventures in nature. Nevertheless, what is recorded in *The Book of Songs* is how the Western Zhou people built up a civilization of their own through their cordial and harmonious coexistence with nature. What the Western Zhou people were more sentimentally attached to was not to make external expansions on their own initiative, but to have a peaceful, friendly and harmonious rural life. The sole aim of the warfare, which happened to come to them some time later, was either to drive out the invading enemies or to revolt against tyranny.



Gui Vessel of Heavenly Conquer, Western Zhou, with 78 posies inscribed at its bottom, depicts the sacrificial ceremony hosted at “Heavenly Chamber” after King Wu of Zhou exterminated the Shang Dynasty.