

Poetry and Personality



READING, EXEGESIS,
AND HERMENEUTICS IN
TRADITIONAL CHINA

Steven Van Zoeren

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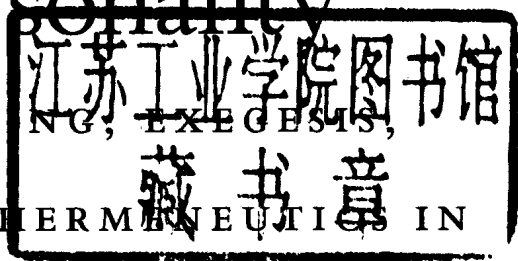
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The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and summer night
Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The words were spoken as if there was no book,
Except that the reader leaned above the page,
Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be
The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom
The summer night is like a perfection of thought.
The house was quiet because it had to be.
The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:
The access of perfection to the page.
And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself
Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

—Wallace Stevens

I shall read very carefully (or try to read, since they may be partly obliterated, or in a foreign language) the inscriptions already there. Then I shall adapt my own compositions, in order that they may not conflict with those written by the prisoner before me. The voice of a new inmate will be noticeable, but there will be no contradictions or criticisms of what has already been laid down, rather a "commentary." . . . My "works" . . . will be brief, suggestive, anguished, but full of the lights of revelation. And no small part of the joy these writings will give me will be to think of the person coming after me—the legacy of thoughts I shall leave him, like an old bundle tossed carelessly into a corner!

—Elizabeth Bishop, "In Prison"

The Odes have no perfect interpretation.

—Dong Zhongshu

Acknowledgments

In writing about an approach that constantly reverts to questions concerning earlier texts, authorities, and teachers, one is led to reflect on the sources of one's own ideas and concerns. Most of these sources are, I hope, documented at the end of this volume, but there are a few individuals whose contributions cannot be summed up in the confines of an endnote. In my first years at Harvard, I profited from the teaching of Professors James Robert Hightower, Patrick Hanan, and Ronald C. Egan. To the last I am indebted for many insights concerning the *Analects* and the *Zuo Tradition*. Roberto Mangabeira Unger of the Harvard Law School inspired me with the example of his intellect and his commitment; moreover, he first suggested to me the idea of working on exegetical tradition. Professor Benjamin Schwartz introduced me to the study of Chinese thought and was a supportive and insightful reader of the dissertation from which this study grew. Stephen Owen was a friend when I needed a friend and a teacher when I

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S. V. Z.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This is a history of the hermeneutics of China's earliest classic, the *Odes*. Neither a reading of the *Odes* as such, nor yet a history of their interpretation, this study attempts, rather, to trace the principles that guided the interpretation of the *Odes* over some two thousand years of Chinese history. In particular, it focuses on the style of reading associated with the Mao school of *Odes* scholarship, an approach that became orthodox in the early imperial period, informed the influential general hermeneutic of the Song Neoconfucians, and affected the understanding and composition of literary texts, painting, and music. This hermeneutic had a long and complex history, and it differs in some interesting and important ways from the dominant hermeneutic traditions of the West.

A consideration of hermeneutic context has been largely absent from most studies of Chinese thought; but it was not, for all that, unimportant. Perhaps more than any of its historical counterparts, China's civilization was preoccupied with

problems of interpretation. The earliest Chinese thought and religion were mantic: the world was alive with portents and omens, of which the signs on the oracle bones of the Shang kings are only the most famous examples.¹ Moreover, for much of its history Chinese civilization focused upon and revered the study of the canonical texts of the past. Adherents of all the great “teachings” (*jiao*) of China—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—closely studied their various classics (*jing*) and exegetical traditions (*zhuan*), and the interpretation and exegesis of canonical texts were occasions for normative, political, and speculative teaching and thinking. In this respect, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism more nearly resembled the doctrinal cultures that grew up among “the peoples of the Book”—Jews, Christians, and Moslems—than they did what we call philosophy in the West,² and their concerns and controversies are often impossible to understand apart from their hermeneutic context.

The hermeneutic disposition also shaped the political, social, and cultural institutions of traditional China. The study of the classics was seen as one of the central tasks—indeed often *the* central task—of one engaged in the Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist project. The imperial patronage of Confucianism (and, more rarely, Daoism and Buddhism) and especially the examination system in which candidates for state office were tested on their knowledge of the canon made questions concerning the interpretation of the canon prominent in public as well as in private life. The court debates over the content of the orthodox canon and its correct interpretation, the great scholarly projects by which the state attempted to specify doctrinal orthodoxy, and the perceived links between doctrinal and political iconoclasm testify to the importance of hermeneutics. The study of texts and their authoritative commentaries—“classics study” (*jingxue*), as it came to be called in the case of Confucianism—permeated the intellectual and

religious life of China, from the most public uses of state power to what may have been the paradigmatic instance of a private, internal (*nei*) activity: silent, individual reading.³

The reconstruction of the hermeneutics of traditional China thus has an inherent historical interest, but the project attracts our attention for other reasons as well. Recent literary criticism and theory have shown a deepening appreciation of the fact that reading is not a simple or passive process, that it is, rather, one in which the reader plays an active and constructive role.⁴ What is more, it has become apparent that the codes readers use to construct meaning are social, learned phenomena that are, their apparent inevitability notwithstanding, provisional and historically specific.⁵ The study of Chinese hermeneutics offers a perspective from which we may learn to understand the codes by which traditional Chinese texts were written and read. We may thus learn to read them better—to understand them in ways that remove their obscurities and allow them to speak again. We may hope, moreover, that an understanding of traditional Chinese hermeneutics will highlight and make more available our own deeply ingrained assumptions concerning texts, meanings, and minds.

So far, I have spoken of hermeneutics as if it were a simple and readily identifiable phenomenon. In fact, as many writers on the subject have noted, the term “hermeneutics” is and has been applied in the Western tradition in a wide and somewhat confusing variety of ways.⁶ We can distinguish several types. In the first case, we may speak of a kind of “textual” hermeneutics. In this, perhaps the earliest sense of the term, “hermeneutics” is used to refer to the rules or principles that guide the interpretation of texts (as opposed to interpretation or exegesis itself). Such hermeneutics were present from an early date in the exegesis of both sacred and secular texts in the ancient and medieval West, as they were also in China.⁷ Although they were only rarely explicitly stated, their tacit rules

and principles can be reconstructed; indeed, in much of what follows, I give just such a reconstruction of the hermeneutics of the Odes.

Or “hermeneutics” may be used to refer to a theory or body of teachings concerning interpretation, either descriptive or (more commonly) normative. Although there were relatively early obiter dicta concerning interpretation in China and the West, it was not until relatively late in both traditions that systematic and comprehensive attempts were made to specify the principles which should govern reading. In the Western case, hermeneutic theory arose from a reaction on the part of Reformation theologians against the Catholic church’s claim that scripture could not be understood apart from the church’s teaching; in response, Flacius and others like him attempted to specify the principles by which any reader could interpret and understand the scriptures.⁸ In the Chinese case as well, the general hermeneutics developed by the Song Neoconfucians was both a response and an incitement to the breakdown of exegetical authority. The development of this Song general hermeneutic is the subject of the second half of the present work.

In still another sense, “hermeneutics” refers to a methodology, program, or approach in the human sciences. In its various forms, this kind of “programmatic” hermeneutics has been advocated as the privileged method of historiography, literary study, philosophy, and social science.⁹ There is no single set of criteria common to all versions of programmatic hermeneutics, but we can distinguish a number of shared concerns: an emphasis on the recovery of the animating intentions behind literary and other cultural texts; the idea that such a recovery is made possible by some bond of common experience and sympathy between the interpreter and those whose works are being interpreted; and the rejection or discounting of methods and approaches that fail, by their devotion to a scien-

tistic methodology, to do justice to the complexities of human experience.¹⁰

Finally, at the most general level, we can speak of the philosophical hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Paul Ricouer has pointed out how the notion of hermeneutics has shown a tendency to become progressively more general and universal in its application.¹¹ In the thought of Heidegger, this tendency is taken to its extreme: for the German thinker, humanity's very Being (*Dasein*) is hermeneutical, for it always possesses and seeks to expand upon what Heidegger calls a "preontological" understanding of Being.¹² Moreover, since this preontological understanding cannot simply be taken over into ontology, the phenomenology of *Dasein* must itself be hermeneutical, since it seeks to restore and expand upon *Dasein*'s preontological understanding.¹³ Thus both the content and the method of philosophy are hermeneutical for Heidegger.

In the thought of Gadamer, hermeneutics is concerned once again with historical understanding. In this sense, Gadamer's work is in the spirit of programmatic hermeneuticians like Wilhelm Dilthey, but with the crucial difference that in contrast to, say, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who hoped to overcome or efface historical distance through understanding, Gadamer points to the ineluctably historical nature of understanding. For Gadamer, the interpreter no less than the text studied is also a product of what he calls "effective history" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) and, as such, is necessarily always within a hermeneutic horizon. Indeed, the "prejudices" that are the result of effective history are not just an unfortunate obstacle to understanding, but rather its very preconditions. At the same time, interpreters are not hermetically sealed within these horizons, but enjoy the possibility of expanding and transforming their horizon through what Gadamer calls a "fusion" with that of the work studied.¹⁴ Although Gadamer

writes from a Eurocentric perspective, his work has rich implications for those engaged in the study of culturally or historically remote works, and this study has been influenced and in a sense inspired by his insights.

In this study I use the term “hermeneutics” in a sense narrower than any of those described above. We can say that hermeneutics comes into play when certain texts become authoritative within a culture and are treated as the privileged loci in which value is inscribed. Such texts become the centerpieces of their tradition, and they provide an ultimate justification and foundation for normative argument within that tradition. Studied, memorized, and explicated, their reading and interpretation are not of simply instrumental or historical interest, but rather are consequential both for the interpreter and for society.¹⁵ It is when certain texts become authoritative in this way that the peculiarly intense and careful reading that I call “hermeneutical” comes into being.

Hermeneutics thus defined clearly was a prominent feature of traditional Chinese civilization. What is perhaps less obvious, or perhaps so obvious as to be commonly overlooked, is the extent to which our own culture is likewise hermeneutical and text-centered. The authority and prestige once associated exclusively with sacred texts have not disappeared from the contemporary world but are now shared by literature and the arts, which have for many moderns become a kind of secular scripture. Within the university the close study of texts remains the privileged method of humanistic education, and one of the few assumptions uniting deconstructive theorists and their conservative opponents is the conviction that certain texts can pronounce authoritatively on the nature of the world, social life, or language.¹⁶ Even critics of the orthodox canons take as their preferred method the close reading of those texts they intend either to criticize or to promote. To study a hermeneutic culture like traditional China’s is there-

fore not only to undertake research into something remote, but also to learn about ourselves.

The Odes

The *Odes* (*Shi*), or, as it later came to be known, the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing*),* is on most modern accounts a collection of early songs and hymns, perhaps representing the repertoire of Zhou court musicians in the sixth or seventh century B.C.E. From an early date, it has been one of the centerpieces of the Confucian tradition and, at least since the time of Xunzi in the third century B.C.E., dignified with the title of “classic” (*jing*).¹⁷ We cannot be sure when most of the pieces that make up the collection were composed; some, most scholars agree, must go back to the earliest years of the Zhou (ca. twelfth century B.C.E.), whereas the composition of others may predate the compilation of the collection by only a few decades.¹⁸ As for the collection of the Odes into a canon, references in the *Analects* and other early texts suggest that the process had already begun in Confucius’s day, as does the use during the Spring and Autumn period (722–481 B.C.E.) of the Odes in the “recitation of the Odes” (*fushi*) practice (see Chapter 3). The sixth century B.C.E. seems a likely date for the fixing of the collection in more or less its present form.

The materials collected in the *Odes* are heterogeneous in nature. The “Lauds” (the “Song,” the last of the four major sections into which the Odes are divided in the received text) are mostly dynastic hymns and ceremonial pieces, possibly connected with, if not actually performed at, the ancestral sacrifices of the royal houses of Zhou, Lu, and Song.¹⁹ The second

*I italicize “Odes” when referring to the *Odes* as an integral text and cite them simply as “the Odes” when it is the poems themselves that are intended. Of course, traditional Chinese texts did not make this distinction, and in practice it is often difficult to say whether a passage in them refers to the Odes themselves or to their collection into a classic.

and third sections, the "Greater Elegantiae" and "Lesser Elegantiae" ("Daya" and "Xiaoya") contain more dynastic pieces, as well as hunting and banquet songs and some political complaints and satires.²⁰ These songs were quite likely composed at the Zhou court.²¹

The Odes collected in the first section of the *Classic*, the "Airs of the States" ("Guofeng"), hold the greatest interest for the history of hermeneutics as well as for that of literature. These pieces, some one hundred and sixty in number, derive ultimately from the folk songs, spells, and omen-sayings of early China; they include songs of community life, farming, feasting, and, above all, love.²² Although these songs were modified during their career at the Zhou court, they retain a remarkable and beautiful freshness, songs, it has well been said, from the morning of the world.²³

A good deal of the charm and also of the historical interest of the Airs derives from the fact that they preserve something of a society which was as yet largely "pre-Confucian," if I may use such a term. They present a world of seasonal festivals, assignations, and infatuations that was, if not untouched by the concerns and strictures which were to coalesce into the system of values we call "Confucianism," at least not totally controlled by it.²⁴ Take, for instance, the first Ode in Arthur Waley's 1937 translation, *The Book of Songs*, traditionally entitled "Ye you mancao" (Mao #94):*

Out in the bushlands a creeper grows,
The falling dew lies thick upon it.
There was man so lovely,
Clear brow well rounded.
By chance I came across him,
And he let me have my will.

Out in the bushlands a creeper grows,
The falling dew lies heavy on it.

* Scholars identify the 305 Odes by their numerical order in the received "Mao text" of the *Odes* (my "Mao #").

There was a man so lovely,
Well rounded his clear brow.
By chance I came upon him:
'Oh Sir, to be with you is good.'²⁵

The structural symmetry of the two verses, along with the repetition of whole lines and of formulas, suggest the song origins of this Ode. As Bernhard Karlgren comments in a note to his translation, it is difficult if not impossible to specify whether the "person" of the third line is male or female and to which sex the poem's speaker must belong.²⁶ In any case, however, although the liaison may seem to us pastoral and innocent, for later interpreters it posed a thorny problem, for it articulated an attitude and suggested circumstances unconfined by and even subversive of conventional Confucian morality. Rather like the *Song of Songs* in the Bible, this Ode and others like it seemed out of place in a work endowed with an aura of sacrality and antiquity, and as with that work, they tested the ingenuity of later interpreters.²⁷ It was out of the apologetic exegesis of these pieces that the traditional hermeneutic of the Odes developed.

In the chapters that follow, I trace among other themes some of the ways in which later exegetes accounted for these Odes. Still, given their "subversive" character, we may wonder how they were collected and why they were in the repertoire of Zhou court musicians. We can, I think, distinguish three possibilities. First, it would be a mistake to project back onto Spring and Autumn society the more schematic and puritanical morality advocated and even occasionally enforced by later Confucians upon princes. Not only the Zhou kings, but monarchs throughout Chinese history, sought in music and dance pleasures that could not be accommodated within the relatively austere ethos of Confucianism. If, as we suppose, the *Odes* represents a "snapshot" of the repertoire of the Zhou court musicians in the sixth or seventh century B.C.E., we should not be surprised to find there the words to songs

that seem incompatible with the sacred character later ascribed to the collection as a whole.²⁸

Moreover, at the Zhou court the Odes were first and foremost music, not texts; indeed I argue in Chapter 2 that the historical Confucius, insofar as we can reconstruct his teachings from the *Analects*, was still primarily concerned with the Odes as the musical adjuncts to ritual rather than as texts.²⁹ It may well be the case that the words of the Odes were a relatively unimportant element of their musical performance or even that they were preserved simply as a mnemonic device. It was only when the music of the Odes had been largely displaced by newer, more seductive sounds that the words became prominent, and an embarrassment to the Confucian ritualists in charge of their teaching.

Finally, certain songs in the present text of the *Odes* suggest that there was already at work in the age while the Odes were being created and altered an accommodating hermeneutic that served to naturalize and defuse the most subversive implications of the Odes. This hermeneutic, which may be reflected in the later practice of recitation of the Odes, seems clearly presupposed by certain of the *Elegantiae*. The Ode “Gufeng” (*Mao* #201), for instance, which by its placement among other more manifestly “political” complaints suggests the manner in which it is to be read, is in the form of the plaint of a discarded lover. It is likely that others of the *Airs* employing the language and imagery of disappointed love were either composed by members of the Zhou court or performed by them as indirect and tactful complaints or remonstrances.³⁰ It may well be the case that in their life at the Zhou court the Odes had already begun to accrue the associations that would eventually be canonized and mythologized in the *Mao* school interpretations.

In fact these explanations are not incompatible. There are numerous examples from later Chinese literary history of texts whose supposed didactic character served to justify or