

Yao Dan

# CHINESE LITERATURE

Great Tradition since *The Book of Songs*

Translated by Li Ziliang, Gao Xiaoyan, Li Guoqing & Zhao Feifei



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Translators: Li Ziliang, Gao Xiaoyan, Li Guoqing & Zhao Feifei

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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 (960–1279) 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 (1046–221 BC) 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





A painting scroll of Chinese poets through the ages.

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 (770–221 BC) 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 (206 BC–220 AD), 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 (618–907) 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 (1206–1368), 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-18<sup>th</sup> 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.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the outburst of the “May 4<sup>th</sup>” New Culture Movement in China. An omni-directional transformation of Chinese literature at this historical key point took place, including transformation of literature ideas, literature content and literature language, and even the relationship between Chinese literature and world literature. From then on, the traditional literature that had lasted for several thousand years in China came to the decline, and a new period of modern Chinese literature unfolded. The modern literature idea of reshaping “national character” brought forward and promoted by Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren ran through the entire course of modern Chinese literature. By writing a few short stories and numerous essays, Lu Xun created portraits of the Chinese nation, moulding the self-imagination of the Chinese people within a few decades afterwards. After this, a multitudinous of novelists, essayists, dramatists, poets, literary theorists and critics that differed from one another carried out continuous explorations and practices centering on the themes of cultural innovation, national liberation and class warfare of the times, giving responses to social reality with different literary forms.

In the 1940s and 1950s, significant changes in Chinese society both affected and boosted important changes in the Chinese literature pattern. Literature was given more prominence in social and political life. Cherishing the ideal of building an independent nation, most writers greeted the “New Times” with great warmth. To write out epic works that would reflect the “great times” became the lofty responsibility of writers with lofty ideals, which is of great significance both in the history of literature and current politics. With the ending of the ten years (1966–1976) of barren and lopsided literature development during the “cultural revolution,” a new historical period of contemporary literature



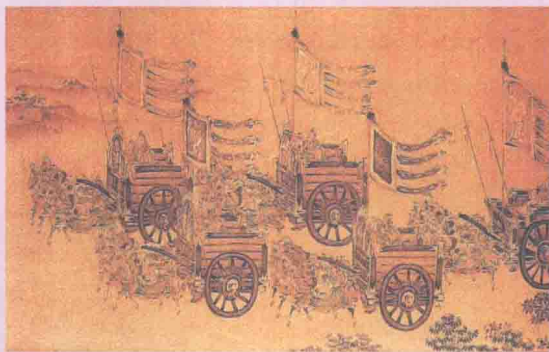
was ushered in. The movement of bringing order out of chaos and emancipating the mind in the whole society provided a new development opportunity for contemporary literature and the basic policy of “letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend” was restored as the guiding principle in literary writing. The literary circumstance in the new era was completely changed. Contemporary Chinese literature waddled back on its normal course after a nightmare-like period of ten years. With the wide introduction of China’s market economy, China’s consumption culture began to boom and popular culture became people’s essential cultural need. Under the impact of market economy, writers began to be aware of the commodity properties of literary creation, publication and distribution. As a result, many writers began to take part in the more profitable writings of “sub-literature.” As an important branch of “sub-literature,” China’s movie-TV literature and cyber literature has become an important wing of Chinese literary creation and is developing speedily.





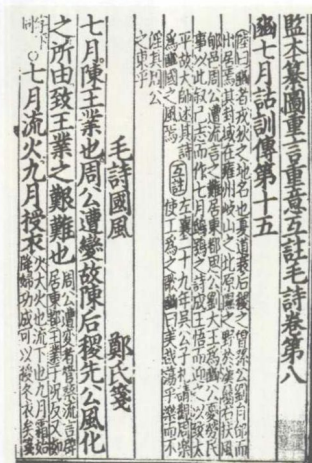
# *The Book of Songs*

The Earliest Anthology of Poetry



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. 11<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> 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”



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





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

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*. 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-

#### Ospreys

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 “are 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, 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 or to commit suicide 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.





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.



*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.

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