FIFTEEN LECTURES ON CHINESE LITERATURE

中国文学十五讲

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PREFACE

In ancient time,China was famed the land of poetry. There were the ancient forms of peotry. During the Tang Dynasty,there were the forms of Wuyanshi (五言诗) and Qiyanshi (七言诗). During the Song Dynasty, there were the forms of Ci (词) poems. During the Yuan Dynasty,there were the forms of Sanqu (散曲) poems. Each dynasty has its own forms of poetry and style. The reason for this book is to provide a kind of map by which interested readers can find their way along some of the main roads of Chinese literature . I hope it is simple enough information to serve as a point of departure for further research . I hope it would be useful as a foundation on which newcomers to the subject can begin building a better knowledge of Chinese Literature from the time of the ancients to the contemporary.

Cai Han-ao

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Lecture I

China's Earliest Anthology of poetry

The *Book of Songs* (诗经) is the earliest anthology of poetry in China. The three hundred and five songs in this collection date from between the eleventh and the sixth century B. C. and were probably compiled into one book in the sixth century B. C. According to the *Zuo Zhuan* (左传), when Lord Ji Zha of Wu went to the state of Lu (鲁) in 544 B. C. to hear music, the ancient songs sung for him were arranged in the same order with similar titles for the different categories as in the *Book of Songs* which we have today. In the year 544 B. C., Confucius was only eight years old, and later he too referred to this collection as the *Three Hundred Songs.* From this it is clear that in the time of Confucius there was already an anthology known as the *Three Hundred Songs* which was much the same as our present *Book of Songs.* Some later Scholars claimed that the *Book of Songs* was compiled by Confucius himself, and that he cut out certain songs; but there is little ground for this claim.

Since all the songs in this anthology were set to music and kept by the royal musicians of the House of Zhou, it is likely that the earliest compiler of the collection was a professional musician. The book is divided according to the type of music into four main sections: *guofeng* (国风), *xiaoya* (小雅), *daya* (大雅) and *song* (颂). The *guofeng* or songs of the city states which were fiefs of the House of Zhou, include folk-songs from fifteen different localities. The *ya* are set to another type of music; and with few exceptions both *xiaoya* (lesser *ya*) and the *daya* (greater *ya*) were composed during the Western Zhou period between the eleventh and the eighth century B. C. and came from the vicinity of Western Zhou. There is on satisfactory and reliable explanation for the difference between the *xiaoya* and *daya*. Possibly the *ya* was one form of ceremonial of festive music, and when a newer type influenced by folksongs came into fashion the earlier variety was called *daya* and the newer *xiaoya* . The *song* (颂) are songs of praise or hymns used during sacrifices, and this section is subdivided into the Hymns of Zhou, the Hymns of Shang and the Hymns of Lu, of which the Hymns of Zhou are the oldest , dating from between the eleventh and the ninth century B. C. during the early part of the Zhou Dynasty. The Hymns of Shang from the state of Song (宋), founded by the descendants of the House of Shang, were written in the eighth and seventh centuries B. C. The Hymns of Lu were composed in the state of Lu in the seventh century B. C.

Most of the *guofeng* songs and some of the *xiaoya* are folk-songs and they make up the most important part of the anthology. The early records do not tell us how these folk-songs came to be collected and kept by the royal musicians of the Zhou court, and we may surmise that they were first gathered together by the minstrels of the vassal states, who looked for folk-songs to enrich their repertoire. Then the music of the vassal states was presented to the Zhou overlord and kept by the royal house. Some scholars of the Han Dynasty (206 B. C. - 220 A. D.) claimed that during Zhou Dynasty certain officials travelled the country to collect songs and present them to the royal musicians. Others said that the government paid old musicians who had no families to go and seek out for the royal court the songs of the various states. These later accounts differ because they were simply conjecture.

A number of the songs were composed by members of the ruling class. Probably most of the hymns and poems embodying advice to the ruler were written by officials to present to the Zhou court, while the songs used in ancestral sacrifices and the feasts given to guests, or before going to war and hunting, were composed by official diviners and historians. Other songs were made by minor officials, not at the order of the government or to be presented at court but to express personal indignation; and these were very likely collected with folk-songs by the royal musicians.

The official musicians were the first to teach these songs, for songs and music formed the major part of the education of young nobles in the Zhou Dynasty. By the time of Confucius in the sixth century B. C., education was in the hands of private tutors, but the songs were still the main part of their teaching. The Zhou-dynasty nobles put songs to a practical purpose, using them during ceremonies and to offer advice on state policy, while in daily life they added distinction to a man's conversation and helped to express his feelings. Young lovers used them to tell their love, and through them envoys were often able to convey their ideas diplomatically. Confucius attached so much importance to the study of the old songs that he said, "A man who does not study the songs cannot speak." Later Confucius also studied the *Three Hundred Songs* and had them set to music, quoting from them frequently in discussions on philosophy. Thus the study of the songs persisted amongst Confucians during the Warring States Period down to the third century B.C. and the *Three Hundred Songs* became one of the classical canons of Confucianism.

Positive chronology is out of the question for most poems in the *Book of Songs*, although approximate dates may be given for some. By and large, they can be attributed to three periods: the early part of the Western Zhou Dynasty from the eleventh to the ninth century B.C., the later part of the Western Zhou Dynasty during the ninth and the eighth century B.C. and the Eastern Zhou Dynasty from the eighth to the sixth century B.C. They reflect many aspects of the life of those periods.

Songs of the early Western Zhou period include all the Hymns of Zhou, a small part of the *daya* and a few of the *guofeng*. The majority of these are narrative or historical poems, the most outstanding being *In the Beginning Who Gave Birth to Our People?* (大雅・生民) *Stalwart Was Liu the Duke* (大雅・公刘) and *The Young Gourds Spread and Spread* (大雅・绵), which describe in verse the founding of the Zhou Dynasty.

In the Beginning Who Gave Birth to Our people? tells the story of Hou Ji (后稷), the legendary ancester of the Zhou people and reputedly the first farmer. Hou Ji's mother Jiang Yuan (姜嫄) conceived him after treading on the footprint of a god, but she dared not keep the child. This verse describes how Hou Ji was abandoned:

诞置之隘巷，
So she abandoned him in a narrow lane,
牛羊腓字之；
But oxen and sheep protected and nurtured him;
诞置之平林，
Then she abandoned him in a great forest,
会伐平林；
But it chanced that woodcutters came to this forest;
诞置之寒冰；
Then she abandoned him on the cold ice,
鸟覆翼之。
But brids covered him with their wings;
鸟乃去矣，
When the bird flew off,
后稷呱矣。
Hou Ji began to wail.
实覃实𬣙，
So long he wailed and loud,
厥声载路。
His voice was heard on the road.

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This shows vividly and concisely Hou Ji's uniqueness from birth and the divine protection he enjoyed. More wonderful still, as soon as he grew up he knew how to plough and grow grain and the song describes the abundance of his various crops; for this hero personifies the determination of the men of old to conquer nature, their inventiveness and ingenuity. Songs like this were obviously based on early legends, handed down by word of mouth.

Songs describing agriculture are important material for our study of early Zhou society. The best of this kind among the Hymns of Zhou is *In the Seventh Month* (豳风·七月) from *guofeng*, which describes the serfs' life and feelings throughout the year, and the countryside they live in. Each family has to work hard and is heavily exploited. They plough, weave, hunt, build houses and brew wine for their master, but go hungry themselves and complain:

无衣无褐；
But without a coat, with nothing warm to wear,
何以卒岁？
How can we get through the year?

But hunger and cold are not all they have to contend with, as we see from the second stanza:

春日载阳，
As the spring grows warm,
有鸣仓庚。

And the oriole sings,
女执懿筐，
The girls taking deep baskets
遵彼微行。
Go along the small paths
爰求柔桑。
To gather tender mulberry leaves;
春日迟迟，
As the spring days long then
采蘩祁祁。
They pluck artemisia by the armful;
女心伤悲，
But their hearts are not at ease
殆及公子同归。
Lest they be carried off by the lord's son.

Some poems of this period take war as their theme and voice the people's hatred of fighting. Thus *The Eastern Hills* （豳风·东山） was probably written by a soldier on his way home from a campaign. On the road he looks forward to reaching home and living as an ordinary citizen again;in imagination he sees his house sadly neglected,his wife longing for him far away;and he believes their reunion will be even happier than their wedding day. This poem with its stirring expression of men's longing for a peaceful life is a fine,compelling folksong.

From this brief account we can see that narrative poetry predominates in the songs of this period; but there are a few lyrics too in the *guofeng* which are more skilfully written than the hymns and court odes.

The songs in the later Western Zhou period include most of the *daya* and practically all the *xiaoya*, as well as a few from the *guofeng*. The best poems of this age are some of the *xiaoya*, quite a few of which are folk-songs.

The middle of the ninth century B. C. and the first part of the eighth were times of bad rule in Chinese history when the country was raided many times by northern tribesmen; hence a number of the songs of these periods express popular discontent and dissatisfaction with the government. One poem in the *daya* tells how whole families were driven from their homes to perish, while the survivors were like the dying embers of a fire and the state was tottering to its ruin. Another poem attacks the rulers for wilfully neglecting their duties in order to carouse and amuse themselves. Both these attacks on the royal house were written by nobles. An example on social injustice is *The Northern Hills*(小雅 · 北山), which points out that some officials led a life of leisure while others did all the hard work.

或燕燕居息，
Some men rest idle at home,
或尽瘁事国；
Others wear themselves out in the service of the state;
或息偃在床，
Some lie quiet in bed,
或不已于行；

Others are always on the move;
或不知叫号，
Some have never heard weeping or wailing,
或惨惨劬劳。
Others toil without rest;
或栖迟偃仰，
Some loll at ease,
或王事鞅掌。
Others are harassed working for the king;
或湛乐饮酒，
Some take pleasure in wine,
或惨惨畏咎。
Others have no respite from care;
或出入风议。
Some just go round airing their views,
或靡事不为。
Others are left with all the work.

This penetrating contrast between minor officials and the great shows the sharp difference between the higher and the lower ranks at court; and though the writer was expressing his personal resentment, he reveals a general inequality.

If these personal laments and satirical poems reflect the serious social contraditions of that time, there are odes in the *daya* and *xiaoya* which extol the military prowess of King Xuan of Zhou (周宣王), who reigned at the end of the ninth and the beginning of the eighth century B. C. and who led expeditions against the frontier tribes. One song describes his attack on the Xu(许) tribes in the east, another his northern expedition against the Huns(匈奴), yet another his campaign against Jing(晋) tribes in the south. These spirited, vigorous yet dignified odes were written by officials or historians. But although competent enough, they cannot be compared with soldier's songs like *We Gather Vetch*(采薇) in the *xiaoya*.

We Gather Vetch also dates from the reign of King Xuan and tells of the hardships of the garrison troops stationed at the distant frontiers to keep back the Huns. The last verse gives a moving and very human description of a soldier's misery when, bound home at last, he suffers from cold and hunger on the road.

昔我往矣，
When we left home
杨柳依依。
The willows were softly swaying;
今我来思，
Now as we turn back
雨雪霏霏。
Snow flakes fly.
行道迟迟，
Our road is a long one,
载渴载饥。
And we thirst and hunger.

我心伤悲，
Our hearts are filled with sorrow;
莫知我哀！
But who knows our misery?

The bulk of the songs of this period are in the *xiaoya*, and quite a number of them are satires or lamentations which reflect a large variety of social contradictions. Although not a few deal with the life of nobles, the tone is different from that in the *daya*, and there are lyrics too which are akin to folk-songs.

All the songs of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, apart from *the Hymns of Shang* and *the Hymns of Lu*, come from the *guofeng*. Since the majority are folk-songs, in them we can hear the authentic voices of those who were hungry and knew no rest, while a number of them reflect the struggle between rulers and the ruled more clearly than the songs of the proceeding period. *Chop, Chop, We Cut Elms* (魏风·伐檀) and *Field Mouse* (魏风·硕鼠) are examples of this. The former points out that although the nobles neither plough nor hunt, their storehouses are full of grain while game hangs in their countyards; and the poet asks sarcastically how they are able to eat without working. The second poem compares the exploiter to a field mouse, aptly exposing the true nature of the exploiting class. The longing to go to "a happy land", in other words a society free from tyranny and exploitation, was of course an empty dream at that time; yet it shows the author's rebellious spirit.

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