



The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry

Arthur Waley (Translation) , Stephen Owen (Foreword)

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One of the five Confucian classics, The Book of Songs (Shijing) is the oldest collection of poetry in world literature and the finest treasure of traditional songs left from antiquity. Where the other Confucian classics treat “outward things: deeds, moral precepts, the way the world works,” as Stephen Owen tells us in his foreword, The Book of Songs is “the classic of the human heart and the human mind.”

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From Reader Review The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry for online ebook

Ryan Handermann says

This is one the Five Chinese Classics. I have been told that some of these are strikingly similar to the Psalms. Written somewhere between 1000-700BC.

Elias Vasilis Kontaxakis says

*Undergrowth in forest,
dead deer in the meadow,
all wound with white rushes,
a maiden white as marble.*

Interestingly, though not uncharacteristically, the oldest Chinese literature is not *that* cosmological in nature. *The Classic of Poetry*, also known as “The Book of Songs,” is a compilation of that ancient culture’s ancient writings. Falsely rumored to be assembled by Confucius, it became one of the five sacred books taught to all Chinese children for almost two-thousand years. Let me mention two things, 1.) I’ve only read ten or so poems from ‘Airs of the Domain,’ a collection of folk ballads dating from 1,000-600 BCE (youngest of the bunch); 2.) I have not read ‘The Great Preface,’ which is, as the name implies, the Chinese empire’s official interpretation of these poems. While I would like to know how China historically viewed these works, I did gloss through them and noticed comical corrupted conclusions: for example a simple piece about erotic love (the theme of 80% of the poems I read) was translated to mean that a woman should not be jealous of her husband’s other lovers. Yea...let’s not.

Back to the point. Most ancient cultures create cosmologies that explain how the universe came to be. The Chinese have always been unique in that, while not secular per se, they seem to take those things axiomatically and instead focus on pragmatic issues: ritual observances and proper behavior. It gives the people a noble, enigmatic charm that mystifies a child of the West. There’s so much going on beneath the surface that their writing is at worst obscure, and at best ripe with possibilities. ‘Contextual opportunities’ might be a better phrase to explain them, though I’m sure some scholar has put it better. I complained about this vagueness with Confucius, but in the poetry I sampled it was quite good. Comparing Chinese with Egyptian poetry (both erotically charged, though I have not measured it against Israelite or Greek stuff), the Chinese are less audacious, more disciplined, more rhythmically repetitive, and more suggestive. They rely heavily on minimal imagery to convey meaning, which makes the poems efficient, a very important benchmark to me of strong poetry. But sometimes indulgence is more fun.

Two things stand out: first their use of juxtaposition is superb. The quote above is a good example, where feelings or situations that can’t be appropriately articulated are instead communicated with stark, but obscure images that give us room to think. While not always the case (in one poem the corrupt emperor is portrayed as a fat rat), often the relationship between an image and a setting aren’t immediately obvious, compared to something like Greek writing. Rather than being a mere simile the image casts a tone or imaginative aid to the emotions the poet is struggling with. This leads to my other observation: the conflicts of these stanzas are represented by distance. The creative Chinese mind constantly bounces back and forth between particulars in reality and the interior dilemmas of the individual. In this space the artistic creation hovers, not bridging both as in Western thought, but bestowing new meaning to each. If you doubt me I encourage you to read these poems and notice the importance of the spatial dimension. I suspect, at the heart of the culture’s

conservativeness, is a critical question of when to respect and when to cross certain gaps. I'll study Chinese literature more to see if this proves correct, but in the meantime enjoy these delightful poems as the sacred precursors to all profound Chinese thought. The consistency in quality makes me smile.

James Violand says

This book reminds me of the Ancient Greek Hesiod's Works and Days - a nearly contemporary work with The Book of Songs. A composite work of ancient Chinese peasants and poets, it harkens to a time of planting and the mankind's suffering due to nature's and the ruler's capricious ways. Though the weakest first part of the work consists of songs (by nature redundant and their melodies long forgotten) if the reader plows through it, he will perceive a humanity that has changed very little in 3000 years.

Sheri Fresonke Harper says

This is one of the Chinese Classics so I wanted to read it. The poems paint scenes of culture, love, love lost, war, told to hit the road. The translation is the easy way to read them. The text offers explanations about the times, who was in charge, and the importance of people. It also offers coherent details about how poems interconnect metaphorically or via images or words.

Jennifer says

If along the highroad
I caught hold of your sleeve,
Do not hate me;
Old ways take time to overcome.

Kadiatu says

Veerry interesting, to learn about Chinese, namely Confucian philosophy. Every other line I read, you wouldn't believe, is very closely related to our Islamic teachings. Just read, and you'll be able to compare.

*A couple examples:

-If you do not implement all that you have learned from reading [these Songs], it does not matter if you memorized a thousand of them.

-We need to have a balance between human beings and nature.

Leajk says

I loved the love poems, then skipped the war poems. Impossible to rate it due to the gap of translation and time gap. Read as a part of understanding the Japanese Heian period better as they were obsessed with Chinese poetry.

Rachel Robins says

Not bad for ancient Chinese poetry. Rather fascinating to read and speculate what life was like for these people. The poetry is different than Western culture but often the themes are issues we have today. Interesting read.

Rosie says

some of these are beautiful

D says

Excellent collection and interpretation of classic poetry written 2500 years ago.

The Chou were less confident: archaic Chinese writings, including many of the *Songs*, are filled with notes of anxiety lest the ruler stray and Heaven, in its wrath, withdraw its charge from Chou:

To begin well is common;
To end well is rare indeed.

'The anxiety is reminiscent of the caution that the house of Israel needed to show, always under the watchful eye of God; but the situation of the Chou was even more precarious: they were not, like the people of Israel, chosen forever, but merely given an office which they could keep only so long as they carried out its duties and remained successful. And the clearest evidence of Heaven's support was to be found in the voices of the common people. The Chou were constantly reminded of the fate of the dynasty they had conquered, the Yin or Shang Dynasty, which had in its day enjoyed Heaven's favor and then lost it.'

The Chou was an agrarian dynasty, and their sense of beauty and order is closely related to the cycles and abundance of the agricultural year. In a society of warriors, life is directed to a single intense and uncertain moment of decision, crisis; this plays a powerful role in understanding the structure of time and events, hence of narrative. Agrarian time is cyclical, a complete and repeating series of acts and events, all of which are equally necessary and all of which contribute to the whole.

The need for wholeness in poetry of the Chou goes far deeper than the dynasty's need for assurance of universal support: it embodies a larger sense of how the world and events in it are structured.

The anthology presents the full human share of unhappiness and pain, but usually the reasons behind suffering are quite clear: desertion by a lover, misgovernment, the hardships of forced military service. In the increasingly turbulent and violent centuries that followed the 7th century BC, much in *The Book of Songs* seemed indeed to come from a lost era in which the world was comprehensible; and the anthology contributed much to the Chinese myth of the Chou as the ideal polity.

The flight of birds, their cries, the movement of animals, the condition of flowers, dewy or rain-dabbled, the restlessness of insects, the sound of their wings, the fading of the stars -- all these play their part in early Chinese imagery; as symbols, illustrations, or omens according to the context. That the cries of birds should be interpreted as words with real meaning strikes us at first as odd. But remember that such cries as the caw-case, coo-coo, cluck-cluck, quack-quack, are typical of the sounds that actually existed in early Chinese vocabulary. It was difficult to believe that birds and beasts did not use them with the same intention as human beings.

Edward Rathke says

It's weird to rate something like this, because it's not really a book in a traditional sense, or even a poetry collection. It's more like a record of ancient China.

With regard to that, it's not especially fun to read. Some of the poems are great. They're simple and about simple things. Simple lives. These were my favorite poems in the book. The simple ones about life as a farmer, as a citizen, as a woman, as a lover.

I was less invested in the poems that were not about these kinds of simple things. Part of that is surely because my knowledge of ancient China is, at best, poor. I mean, I know big chunks of Chinese history fairly well, but what happened in China 2,500 years ago is just not something I know much about. Which is partly what made these poems so interesting. Life has not changed immensely since those times, excepting the obvious differences.

But people were still just people. Working, loving, singing, dancing.

My complete ignorance on the Chinese language or the Chinese originals of these poems means I'm also unqualified to even guess at whether these are good translations or not.

But I'd recommend it for people interested in foundational texts of China. Not so much if you're just looking for good poetry.

It's a text that's more important in its context. The poems themselves aren't always very good or appealing. But, I mean, how many poems can remain amazing after 2,500 years?

W.M. Driscoll says

Arthur Waley does his usual stand-up job translating an ancient Chinese classic and making it accessible and enjoyable to the modern reader. For anyone interested in Chinese history, culture, poetry in general or Confucianism in the specific, this is The Book of Songs translation for you.

Lexi says

Read for LIT 460

Tom says

I find myself randomly shouting 'Alas for the Zou-Yu!' when I drive home now (cf. 25). Thanks ancient Chinese poetry.

Emily says

I'm a lover of the Arthur Waley translation.

I return to it time and time again despite quite a few translation errors. His ability to render and preserve the spirit is once again, why he is considered one of the foremost scholars on Chinese literature.
