

CLASSIC OF POETRY

ca. 1000–600 B.C.E.

Standing at the beginning of China's three-millennia-long literary tradition, the *Classic of Poetry* (also known as *Book of Songs* or *Book of Odes*) is the oldest poetry collection of East Asia. Its poems reflect the breadth of early Chinese society. Some poems convey the history and values of the earlier part of the Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1045–256 B.C.E.), whose founding kings set a standard of ideal governance for later generations. Others treat themes familiar from folk ballads: courtship, marriage and love, birth and death, and the stages of the agricultural cycle such as planting and harvesting. Filled with images of nature and the plain life of an agricultural society, the *Classic of Poetry* offers a distinctive, fresh simplicity. Because of the collection's canonical status, centuries of commentary and interpretation have accrued around it, adding to its meaning and significance and endowing the simple scenes in the poems with moral or political purpose. The anthology has had a profound impact on the literatures of Korea, Japan, and Vietnam and was an important element of the traditional curriculum throughout East Asia until the beginning of the twentieth century.

THE ANTHOLOGY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

While other ancient literary traditions were founded on epics about gods and heroes, or sprawling legends about the origins of the cosmos, the *Classic of Poetry* provided a different sort of foundation for Chinese literature, made up of the compact and evocative

form of lyric poetry. Because Chinese literature originated with the *Classic of Poetry*, short verse gained a degree of political, social, and pedagogical importance in East Asia that it has not enjoyed anywhere else in the world.

The *Classic of Poetry* contains 305 poems and consists of three parts, the "Airs of the Domains" (*Guofeng*, 160 poems), the "Odes/Elegances" (*Ya*, 105 poems), and the "Hymns" (*Song*, 40 poems). The "Hymns" are the oldest part and contain songs used in ritual performances to celebrate the Zhou royal house. Next are the "Odes," narrative ballads about memorable historical events. The youngest poems are the "Airs of the Domains," based on folk ballads from some fifteen domains of the Zhou kingdom. (The early Zhou kings gave lands to their loyal vassals and gradually built a multistate system of "domains" extending from modern-day Beijing far beyond the Yangtze River in the south.) Tradition credited Confucius, the most important of the early philosophical masters, with the compilation of the *Classic of Poetry*. He allegedly selected the poems in the collection from three thousand poems he found in the archives of the Zhou kingdom. Therefore, the choice and arrangement of the poems were seen as an expression of Confucius's philosophy. Confucius believed that political order depended on the ability of individuals in society to cultivate their moral virtue and thus contribute to social order. We know from the *Analects*, a collection containing Confucius's sayings, that Confucius thought highly of the *Classic of Poetry*. He advised his own son to study the *Clas-*

sic of Poetry to enhance his ability to express his opinions, he praised disciples who quoted passages from the *Classic of Poetry* to make a particular point, and he saw a comprehensive educational program in the anthology: "The *Classic of Poetry* can provide you with stimulation and with observation, with a capacity for communion, and with a vehicle for grief. At home, they [the poems] enable you to serve your father, and abroad, to serve your lord. Also, you will learn there the names of many birds, animals, plants, and trees." Confucius's high opinion of the *Classic of Poetry* led to its inclusion in the canon of "Confucian Classics." The other classics are the *Classic of Changes*, used for divination; the *Classic of Documents*, a collection of sayings by early kings and ministers; the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a historical chronicle of Confucius's home state of Lu; and the *Record of Rites*, the most important of a few books on ritual. The Confucian Classics became the curriculum of the state academy that Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty founded in 124 B.C.E.

As a further sign of the *Classic of Poetry*'s canonization during the Han Dynasty, a "Great Preface" written for the anthology became the single most fundamental statement about the nature and function of poetry in East Asia. Written more than half a millennium after the anthology's compilation, the "Great Preface" claimed that there were "six principles" (*liu yi*) of poetry: the three categories in which the poems were placed ("Airs of the Domains," "Odes," and "Hymns") and the three rhetorical devices of "enumeration" (*fu*), "comparison" (*bi*), and "evocative image" (*xing*). Scholars and poets have debated the usefulness and precise meaning of these principles for the last two millennia, but on a basic level the principles illuminate rhetorical patterns that distinguish the *Classic of Poetry* and even later Chinese poetry. The concept

of *feng* is a good case in point: it refers to the "Airs of the Domains" section of the anthology, but it also contains a rich web of associations that grew up around its literal meaning, "wind": Like wind that causes grass to sway, the ruler can "influence" (*feng*) his people and instill virtuous behavior in them through poetry. For their part, his subjects can express their dissatisfaction with their ruler through "criticism" (*feng*). In reality, most poems in the anthology contain at best indirect criticism. But the idea that poetry and song can bridge the gulf between social classes, that they can serve as a tool for mutual "influence" and "criticism" and give the people a voice, helping them keep bad rulers in check, was central to the Confucian understanding of poetry and society. Poetry made room for social critique and created the institution of "remonstration," the duty of officials in the bureaucracy to speak out against abuses of power.

THE POEMS

Our selections come from the "Odes" section ("She Bore the Folk") and the "Airs" section (all other poems), and conclude with the "Great Preface." Although almost all poems in the *Classic of Poetry* are anonymous, they give voice to many different players in Zhou society, such as kings, aristocrats and peasants, men and women in love, and, collectively, to communities as they celebrate harvest or worship their ancestors. Poems put into the mouths of peasants or soldiers show considerable literary skill, which suggests that a member of the educated elite at the courts of the Zhou domains must have given them their final shape.

The constraints imposed by society and the conflict between individual desire and social expectations are important themes in the "Airs" section. Marriage is often praised as a sanctioned form of sexual relation, but some poems

also celebrate the pleasures of transgression. "Boat of Cypress" is a remarkable outcry of a heart that refuses to bend to society's wishes. Unlike the virtuous Zhou Dynasty, the domain of Zheng and its music were associated with sensual pleasures: "Zhen and Wei," for example, depicts a festival scene along two rivers. Although its frolicking man and woman do not go beyond politely exchanging flowers as courtship gifts, the scene is highly charged with eroticism.

The protagonists in the romantic plots that appear in the poems of the "Airs of the Domains" could be from any culture past or present, but the extensive tradition of commentaries endowed these poems with specific moral and historical significance. According to the canonical "Mao commentary," "Fishhawk," the first poem of the *Classic of Poetry*, in which a young man is tormented by his desire for a girl, is not a simple romantic folk song. Instead, the commentary claims that the poem praises the consort of King Wen for being free from jealousy when her husband takes a new consort, a typical situation in traditional Chinese society, where men could have several wives. This counterintuitive reading of the poem established "Fishhawk" as a model of exemplary female behavior for all times and embedded it in the history of the early Zhou kings.

The central stylistic device of the *Classic of Poetry* is repetition with variation. Many of the poems consist of three rhyming stanzas of four or six lines with four syllables each. The stanza format encourages line repetitions, which give the poems melodic rhythm and, with the introduction of small variations, additional meaning. In "Plums Are Falling," the fruits become fewer with each repetition until the woman has finally decided whom among her suitors she wants to marry. In "Peach Tree Soft and Tender," the peach tree goes through the natural cycle of bearing blossoms, fruits, and leaves while a new bride, who

it is hoped will bear many descendants for the family line, is introduced into the household. Far from being a simplistic rhetorical device, repetition with variation gives compelling shape to a suitor's intrusive desire and his lover's fear of scandal in "Zhongzi, Please." As the insolent Zhongzi systematically advances stanza by stanza from the village wall to the family's fence and through the garden towards his lover's bedchamber, the helpless woman, fearing her parents' and brothers' reproach and society's disapproval, fends her lover off by promising to keep him in her thoughts.

Among the rhetorical devices listed in the "Great Preface" to the *Classic of Poetry*, "exposition" (*fu*) and "affective image" (*xing*) are particularly interesting. Exposition, the enumeration of sequences of events in straightforward narrative fashion, structures longer odes like "She Bore the Folk," a poem on the miraculous birth of Lord Millet, the inventor of agriculture and legendary ancestor of the Zhou people. Lord Millet's birth to a resourceful mother who steps into a god's footprint and his subsequent development into the Zhou's ancestor and cultural hero are recounted through vivid enumeration. The ritual acts that the Zhou people perform to celebrate the harvest and commemorate their ancestor are also related through "exposition." Poems from the "Airs" section, by contrast, mostly employ "comparisons" (*bi*) and "affective images." Comparisons are like similes: "Huge Rat" compares an exploitative lord directly to a voracious rodent. Affective images are much more elusive and do not easily translate into any rhetorical trope in the Western tradition. *Xing*, the term rendered as "affective image," literally means "stimulus" or "excitement." *Xing* brings natural images into suggestive resonance with human situations, stimulating the imagination and pushing perception beyond a simple comparison of one thing to another. Often, the

animals or plants used to evoke human situations appear in the same scene with the human protagonists, but the relation between the animals or plants and the humans is mysterious. For example, in "Dead Roe Deer" the reader sees a landscape in which a girl, a "maiden white as marble," who has just been seduced by a man, hovers next to a dead deer "wrapped in white rushes."

The resonant, elusive imagery of the *Classic of Poetry* has enticed readers through the ages. The poet and critic Ezra Pound (1885–1972), attracted to and inspired by the use of imagery in Chinese poetry, spearheaded the new movement of "imagism" in the 1910s, experimenting with the poetic power that sparse juxtaposition of images whose relation remains obscure can produce. His adoption of such poetic techniques in turn profoundly influenced modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. Although Pound did not know Chinese, he eventually produced a poetic rendering of the *Classic of Poetry* in collaboration with the Harvard sinologist Achilles Fang. Because of their diver-

gence from the wording of the originals, Pound's versions might better be conceived as English poems in their own right than translations. Yet they can come close to the Chinese originals in other ways. In Pound's version, the second stanza of "Dead Roe Deer" reads, "Where the scrub elm skirts the wood, be it not in white mat bound, as a jewel flawless found, dead as doe is maidenhood." Death hovers ominously over the deer, the woman, and her maidenhood. Here we see the drama of the distinctive Chinese trope of *xing* in full play, transposed into the English language.

The *Classic of Poetry* has left deep traces in the literary cultures of East Asia into the modern period. Because its compilation was attributed to Confucius and its traditional interpretations emphasized Confucian values, it was part and parcel of the education of political elites. Yet, despite the dominant moralizing interpretations, the poems of the *Classic of Poetry* have retained their pristine simplicity and have lost nothing of their evocative power to voice fundamental human emotions and challenges.

CLASSIC OF POETRY¹

I. Fishhawk

The fishhawks sing *guan guan*
on sandbars of the stream.
Gentle maiden, pure and fair,
fit pair for a prince.

Watercress grows here and there,
right and left we gather it.
Gentle maiden, pure and fair,
wanted waking and asleep.

Wanting, sought her, had her not,
waking, sleeping, thought of her,

1. Translated by Stephen Owen.

on and on he thought of her,
he tossed from one side to another.

Watercress grows here and there,
right and left we pull it.
Gentle maiden, pure and fair,
with harps we bring her company. 15

Watercress grows here and there,
right and left we pick it out.
Gentle maiden, pure and fair,
with bells and drums do her delight. 20

VI. Peach Tree Soft and Tender

Peach tree soft and tender,
how your blossoms glow!
The bride is going to her home,
she well befits this house.

Peach tree soft and tender,
plump, the ripening fruit.
The bride is going to her home,
she well befits this house. 5

Peach tree soft and tender,
its leaves spread thick and full.
The bride is going to her home,
she well befits these folk. 10

XX. Plums Are Falling

Plums are falling,
seven are the fruits;
many men want me,
let me have a fine one.

Plums are falling,
three are the fruits;
many men want me,
let me have a steady one. 5

Plums are falling,
catch them in the basket;
many men want me,
let me be bride of one. 10

XXIII. Dead Roe Deer

A roe deer dead in the meadow,
all wrapped in white rushes.
The maiden's heart was filled with spring;
a gentleman led her astray.

Undergrowth in forest,
dead deer in the meadow,
all wound with white rushes,
a maiden white as marble. 5

Softly now, and gently, gently,
do not touch my apron, sir,
and don't set the cur to barking. 10

XXVI. Boat of Cypress

That boat of cypress drifts along,
it drifts upon the stream.
Restless am I, I cannot sleep,
as though in torment and troubled.
Nor am I lacking wine
to ease my mind and let me roam. 5

This heart of mine is no mirror,
it cannot take in all.
Yes, I do have brothers,
but brothers will not be my stay.
I went and told them of my grief
and met only with their rage. 10

This heart of mine is no stone;
you cannot turn it where you will.
This heart of mine is no mat;
I cannot roll it up within.
I have behaved with dignity,
in this no man can fault me. 15

My heart is uneasy and restless,
I am reproached by little men.
Many are the woes I've met,
and taken slights more than a few.
I think on it in the quiet,
and waking pound my breast. 20

Oh Sun! and you Moon!
Why do you each grow dim in turn?
These troubles of the heart 25

are like unwashed clothes,
I think on it in the quiet,
I cannot spread wings to fly away.

XLII. Gentle Girl

A gentle girl and fair
awaits by the crook of the wall;
in shadows I don't see her;
I pace and scratch my hair.

A gentle girl and comely
gave me a scarlet pipe;
scarlet pipe that gleams—
in your beauty I find delight.

Then she brought me a reed from the pastures,
it was truly beautiful and rare.
Reed—the beauty is not yours—
you are but beauty's gift.

XLIV. Quince

She cast a quince to me,
a costly garnet I returned;
it was no equal return,
but by this love will last.

She cast a peach to me,
costly opal I returned;
it was no equal return,
but by this love will last.

She cast a plum to me,
a costly ruby I returned;
it was no equal return,
but by this love will last.

LXXVI. Zhongzi, Please

Zhongzi, please
don't cross my village wall,
don't break the willows planted there.
It's not that I care so much for them,
but I dread my father and mother;

Zhongzi may be in my thoughts,
but what my father and mother said—
that too may be held in dread.

Zhongzi, please
don't cross my fence,
don't break the mulberries planted there.
It's not that I care so much for them,
but I dread my brothers;
Zhongzi may be in my thoughts,
but what my brothers said—
that too may be held in dread.

Zhongzi, please
don't cross into my garden,
don't break the sandalwood planted there.
It's not that I care so much for them,
but I dread others will talk much;
Zhongzi may be in my thoughts,
but when people talk too much—
that too may be held in dread.

XCV. Zhen and Wei

O Zhen and Wei together,
swollen now they flow.
Men and maids together,
chrysanthemums in hand.
The maid says, "Have you looked?"
The man says, "I have gone."
"Let's go then look across the Wei,
it is truly a place for our pleasure."
Man and maid together
each frolicked with the other
and gave as gift the peony.

O Zhen and Wei together,
flowing deep and clear.
Men and maids together,
teeming everywhere.
The maid says, "Have you looked?"
The man says, "I have gone."
"Let's go then look across the Wei,
it is truly a place for our pleasure."
Man and maid together
each will frolic with the other
and give as gift the peony.

CXIII. Huge Rat

Huge rat, huge rat,
 eat my millet no more,
 for three years I've fed you,
 yet you pay me no heed.

I swear that I will leave you
 and go to a happier land.
 A happy land, a happy land,
 and there I will find my place.

Huge rat, huge rat,
 eat my wheat no more,
 for three years I've fed you
 and you show no gratitude.

I swear that I will leave you
 and go to a happier realm.
 A happy realm, a happy realm,
 there I will find what I deserve.

Huge rat, huge rat,
 eat my sprouts no more,
 for three years I have fed you,
 and you won't reward my toil.

I swear that I will leave you
 and go to happy meadows.
 Happy meadows, happy meadows
 where none need wail and cry.

CCXLV. She Bore the Folk

She who first bore the folk—
 Jiang it was, First Parent.
 How was it she bore the folk?—
 she knew the rite and sacrifice.
 To rid herself of sonlessness
 she trod the god's toerprint
 and she was glad.

She was made great, on her luck settled,
 the seed stirred, it was quick.
 She gave birth, she gave suck,
 and this was Lord Millet.

When her months had come to term,
 her firstborn sprang up,
 Not splitting, not rending,

working no hurt, no harm.
 He showed his godhead glorious,
 the high god was greatly soothed.
 He took great joy in those rites
 and easily she bore her son.

She set him in a narrow lane,
 but sheep and cattle warded him.
 She set him in the wooded plain,
 he met with those who logged the plain.
 She set him on cold ice,
 birds sheltered him with wings.
 Then the birds left him
 and Lord Millet wailed.
 This was long and this was loud;
 his voice was a mighty one.

And then he crept and crawled,
 he stood upright, he stood straight.
 He sought to feed his mouth,
 and planted there the great beans.
 The great beans' leaves were bristling,
 the rows of grain were bristling.
 Hemp and barley dense and dark,
 the melons, plump and round.

Lord Millet in his farming
 had a way to help things grow:
 He rid the land of thick grass,
 he planted there a glorious growth.
 It was in squares, it was leafy,
 it was planted, it grew tall.
 It came forth, it formed ears,
 it was hard, it was good.
 Its tassels bent, it was full,
 he had his household there in Dai.

He passed us down these wondrous grains:
 our black millets, of one and two kernels,
 millets whose leaves sprout red or white,
 he spread the whole land with black millet,
 and reaped it and counted the acres,
 spread it with millet sprouting red or white,
 hefted on shoulders, loaded on backs,
 he took it home and began this rite.

And how goes this rite we have?—
 at times we hull, at times we scoop,
 at times we winnow, at times we stomp,
 we hear it slosh as we wash it,
 we hear it puff as we steam it.

Then we reckon, then we consider,
 take artemisia, offer fat.
 We take a ram for the flaying,
 then we roast it, then we sear it,
 to rouse up the following year.

We heap the wooden trenchers full,
 wooden trenchers, earthenware platters.
 And as the scent first rises
 the high god is peaceful and glad.
 This great odor is good indeed,
 for Lord Millet began the rite,
 and hopefully free from failing or fault,
 it has lasted until now.

The Great Preface

"Fishhawk" is the virtue of the Queen Consort and the beginning of the "Airs" [*Feng*, the first large section of the *Classic of Poetry*].¹ It is the means by which the world is influenced (*feng*) and by which the relations between husband and wife are made correct. Thus it is used in smaller communities, and it is used in larger domains. "Airs" (*Feng*) are "Influence" (*feng*); it is to teach. By influence it stirs them; by teaching it transforms them.²

The poem is that to which what is intently on the mind (*zhi*) goes. In the mind, it is "being intent" (*zhi*); coming out in language, it is a "poem."

The affections are stirred within and take on form in words. If words alone are inadequate, we speak it out in sighs. If sighing is inadequate, we sing it. If singing is inadequate, unconsciously our hands dance it and our feet tap it.³

Feelings emerge in sounds; when those sounds have patterning, they are called "tones." The tones of a well-managed age are at rest and happy; its government is balanced. The tones of an age of turmoil are bitter and full of anger; its government is perverse. The tones of a ruined state are filled with lament and brooding; its people are in difficulty.⁴

Thus to correctly present achievements and failures, to move Heaven and Earth, to stir the gods and spirits, there is nothing more appropriate than poetry. By it the former kings managed the relations between husbands and wives, per-

1. "The Great Preface" is attached to "Fishhawk," the first poem of the *Classic of Poetry*. In traditional Confucian interpretations, the poem was understood as celebrating the virtue of the queen consort of King Wen of the Zhou Dynasty.

2. *Feng*, a central term of "The Great Preface," literally means "wind." By extension, it means "influence" (like wind bending the grasses) and "Airs," the poetry in the first part of the *Classic of Poetry* that was understood as a means to positively influence people's behavior.

3. Although *qi*, "vital breath," is not directly mentioned, the psychology of poetic composition described here relies on the notion that a release of vital breath results in ever stronger forms of outward expression: words, sighs, songs, or dance.

4. Since the poems in the *Classic of Poetry* were performed to music, the "tones" that reveal the social and political conditions under which the poems were composed became manifest in both the words and the music.

fecting the respect due to parents and superiors, gave depth to human relations, beautifully taught and transformed the people, and changed local customs.

Thus there are six principles in the poems: (1) *Airs* (*Feng*); (2) "exposition" (*fu*); (3) "comparison" (*bi*); (4) "affective image" (*xing*); (5) *Odes* (*Ya*); (6) *Hymns* (*song*).⁵

By *feng*, those above transform those below; also by *feng*, those below criticize those above. When an admonition is given that is governed by patterning, the one who speaks it has no culpability, yet it remains adequate to warn those who hear it. In this we have *feng*.⁶

When the Way of the Kings declined, rites and moral principles were abandoned; the power of government to teach failed; the government of the domains changed; the customs of the family were altered. And at this point the changed *Feng* ("Airs") and the changed *Ya* ("Odes") were written. The historians of the domains understood clearly the marks of success and failure; they were pained by the abandonment of proper human relations and lamented the severity of punishments and governance. They sang their feelings to criticize (*feng*) those above, understanding the changes that had taken place and thinking about former customs. Thus the changed *Feng* emerge from the affections, but they go no further than rites and moral principles. That they should emerge from the affections is human nature; that they go no further than rites and moral principles is the beneficent influence of the former kings.

Thus the affairs of a single state, rooted in the experience of a single person, are called *Feng*. To speak of the affairs of the whole world and to describe customs (*feng*) common to all places is called *Ya*. *Ya* means "proper." These show the source of either flourishing or ruin in the royal government. Government has its greater and lesser aspects: thus we have a "Greater *Ya*" and a "Lesser *Ya*." The "Hymns" give the outward shapes of praising full virtue, and they inform the spirits about the accomplishment of great deeds. These are called the "Four Beginnings" and are the ultimate perfection of the Poems.

5. The "six principles" consist of the three main parts of the *Classic of Poetry* (the "Airs," "Odes," and "Hymns") and three modes of expression ("exposition," "comparison," and "affective image"). "Exposition" describes poems with a longer narrative of events, "comparison" describes poems that use similes, and "affective image" describes poems that use

natural imagery that parallels a human situation and should stir the emotions. The "six principles" became staple terms in discussions of poetry in East Asia.

6. A last addition to the many meanings of *feng*: ministers or simple people can "criticize" their rulers or superiors through this kind of poetry.