The Book of Odes: A Case Study of the Chinese Hermeneutic Tradition

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The Book of Odes (Shijing or Shi) is a collection of 305 poems, presumably compiled over a period spanning from the early Zhou dynasty (1100 B.C.E.) to the Spring and Autumn period (722 B.C.E.-481 B.C.E.). Considered to be both poetry and scripture, the Shijing is not only the fountain of Chinese literature but also one of the five most sacred Confucian classics.

Sima Qian wrote in the Shiji, “Confucius personally sang all the three hundred and five songs (poems) and played the music on the string instrument to ensure that they fitted into the score of shao, wu and ya, song. Through his efforts, the tradition of ancient rites and music was therefore rescued from oblivion and handed down to posterity, as they may help in carrying out the ideal of the King’s Way (wangdao) and in teaching the Six Arts.” Confucius’ view and his interpretation of the Shijing signified the beginning of the Shijing hermeneutic tradition.

Based on methodology and emphasis the history of the Shijing hermeneutics can be divided into four phases: (1) The Spring and Autumn period to the Qin (722 B.C.E.-206 B.C.E.); (2) Han to Tang (206 B.C.E.-907 C.E.); (3) Song to Ming (960-1644); and (4) Qing (1644-1911) to the present. During the first phase, poems in the Shijing were frequently cited and discussed in many of the pre-Qin texts, indicating that the Shijing was important in education before, during, and after the time of Confucius. In the second phase, moralistic and political elements, part of Confucian teaching promoted by the Han scholars, were introduced into interpretations of the Shijing and had a long-lasting impact on traditional Shijing hermeneutics. In the third phase, Song scholars raised doubts about the validity of strict moralistic and political interpretation of the Shijing. Nevertheless, the Song-Ming hermeneutics of the Shijing was
still confined within the framework set by Han scholars. It was not until much later that the great successes of Qing scholars in textual research (kaoji), glyph analysis (xanguard), and phonology ushered Shijing hermeneutics into the modern era.

Throughout the history of the Shijing hermeneutics, the question of the authorship of the Shijing was never seriously discussed. Li Chendong (1906-1983), a modern literary scholar, published his pioneering study Shijing Tongshi (General Discussion on the Shijing) in 1964, wherein he proposed that most, if not all, of the poems in the Shijing were composed by the noble Yin Jifu during the reign of King Xuan of the Zhou dynasty (827 B.C.E.-782 B.C.E.). As expected, Li’s book was received with little enthusiasm and sometimes with downright hostility from his contemporaries. However, Li’s hypothesis was formulated based on a set of well-defined hermeneutic rules. Careful examination of these rules would suggest that Li’s hypothesis has merit and deserves serious scholarly debate. In this paper, the history of the Shijing hermeneutics will be reviewed and Li’s work on the Shijing will be presented within this context.

The Beginning of Shijing Hermeneutics

The Zuo Zhuan (Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals) records major historical events that occurred during the Zhou dynasty in the state of Lu and other neighboring states over a period of 238 years. It is probably the most valuable source for us to appreciate how people viewed the Shijing before the time of Confucius. Over one hundred poems from the Shijing were cited or mentioned in the Zuo Zhuan. It appears to have been a common practice for members of the elite to quote poems from the Shi to make a subtle point or to show off their literary grace and ability. For example, the Zuo Zhuan records that “[in 546 B.C.E.], the Duke of Zheng invited the Duke of Zhao to a banquet held at Chuliong [Zhengzhou, Henan Province]. The Duke of Zheng was accompanied by [his ministers] Zizhan, Boyou, Zixi, Zichan, Zidashu, and the two Zishi. The Duke of Zhao said, ‘It is a great honor to have a company of you seven distinguished gentlemen. Please sing to complete your favor so that I can also discern your aspirations.’” Each of these seven ministers then sang a poem selected from the Shijing, and the Duke of Zhao complimented them for their performance. From this and many other examples, it is apparent that citing or singing poems was a popular practice that served certain official functions, particularly in diplomatic circles, during the Spring and Autumn Period. Thus, nobles and elite members cited or sang the poems from the Shijing to express their aspiration, emotion, or feeling, and the poems were clearly understood by these men so that no further interpretation was necessary. One has to conclude, then, that the Shijing was part of the education for the elite class.

Among Confucian texts, the Lunyu (Analects) is probably the most reliable source for us to examine how the Shijing was viewed by Confucius himself. The Shijing was mentioned nineteen times in the Analects. The significance of the Shi education in Confucius’ mind is illustrated well by his comment, “Young men, why don’t you study the Shi? The Shi can xing (induce or stimulate), yu (observe), and yan (interact in a group), and yu (complain). The Shi can be used at home to make the family harmonious, and can be used to serve the superior in official functions. Moreover, it helps you to learn the names of trees, flowers, birds, and animals in nature.” Confucius considered the Shijing as a valuable educational tool, which was to be accompanied by and integrated with rites (li) and music (yu), so that together they could govern personal conduct individually and within the context of family, society, and state. The emphasis on the educational value of the Shijing was reflected in almost all other major Confucian texts of the Warring States period, particularly Mencius and Xunzi.

In Mencius, Mengzi (372 B.C.E.-289 B.C.E.) and his disciples mention the Shijing thirty-nine times. Mencius emphasized the importance of searching for the original intent of the poems. When Mencius discussed with his student Wan Zhang on how to learn from the ancient sages, he said, “If you recite their poems, read their writings, how could you not know them? Thus, by reading the sages’ work you may be able to befriend the ancient sages.” To Mencius, words are merely messengers, and the ultimate goal of studying the Shi is to be able to learn the deeds of the ancient sages directly from their own words. In short, the Shijing was a scripture with profound educational value.

Similarly, Xunzi (fl. 298 B.C.E.-238 B.C.E) quoted and discussed Shi many times. Xunzi also believed that the Shijing reflected the sages’ intentions and that devoted study could allow one to discern them. It was Xunzi who formalized the Confucian teaching by indicating why and how to study each Confucian classic. He frequently discussed the study of the Shi together with the other five classics and admonished his students that without reciting or studying the Shi, one cannot be considered learned. Xunzi has been credited as a major figure who passed along the teaching of the Shijing for posterity.

Educational Function of the Shijing

It is certain that the elite during the Spring and Autumn Period was well versed in the Shi. Thus high officials, diplomats, and scholars at that time were able to cite (or sing) the poems (jushu) when and where appropriate. This suggests that the Shi were taught as an important subject in the official school (guanxue). The official school was limited only to the aristocratic class and members of the royal house and was aimed at the officialdom of that time. Thus, Confucius commented, “[If a person] who has learned all three hundred
poems, [is] given administrative duties and fails; [if he is] given a diplomatic mission and cannot converse [with foreign dignitaries], what then is the purpose of learning so much?"

One of the major reasons that Confucius was considered a sage is because of his pivotal role in opening up the guanxue to a wider public without consideration of their family background. According to the Shiji, "Confucius taught poetry (the Shi), history (the Book of Documents), ceremony (li), and music (yue) to 3,000 or so students. Among them, seventy-two had truly mastered the six arts." With the establishment of sixue (private school or private learning), as opposed to guanxue, Confucius, together with his disciples, was responsible for transmitting almost all the ancient scriptural knowledge to future generations. The Shijing, together with other classics, became an integral part of Confucian teaching. Through the effort of two great molders of Confucian tradition, Mengzi and Xunzi, Shijing hermeneutics during and after the time of Confucius was characterized by the emphasis on its educational function, manifested at both the individual and the societal level. As a medium or vehicle for human interaction, the major concern was whether the poem cited was appropriate and whether it could generate resonance from the audience. Thus, the Shijing hermeneutics in the first phase was concerned not so much with how to find the true meaning of a particular glyph, word or sentence in a poem, but rather with how to use them in one's life, either private or public.

The Second Phase of Shijing Hermeneutics

After the suppression of Confucianism in the Qin dynasty (221 B.C.E.-206 B.C.E.) and the great turmoil that followed the collapse of the Qin Empire, Shijing study went underground. Fortunately, this hiatus did not last long. After the establishment of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220), Confucian teaching was revived with the establishment of the Academic Chairs for Confucian Studies. Han Wudi (r. 140 B.C.E.-87 B.C.E.) formally installed the Doctors for the Five Classics in 136 B.C.E. by appointing top scholars for these prestigious positions.

Three endowed chairs were given to three different Shijing commentary schools, those of Lu, Qi, and Han. Together these three schools were known as the New Text Schools (Jiwen Shijing). Another commentary school, founded by Mao Heng, known as the Old Text School (Guwen Shijing), however, was excluded from the Academy. These four prominent commentary schools originated in different states: Lu from eastern Shandong, Qi from western Shandong, and Han from Hebei. Mao's school was said to be directly derived from Zixia, a well-known disciple of Confucius. What were the differences in their interpretation of the Shijing? How did these differences come about? Are these differences related to regional history, regional dialects, or other factors? These competing commentary schools on the Shijing in the early Han dynasty could have offered a unique window of opportunity to study the comparative

hermeneutics at that time. Unfortunately, these questions are difficult to answer now since the last of these three New Text Schools survived only until the Tang dynasty. In contrast, the Mao school survived outside the Academy and became quite popular.

The text used by the Mao school, the Maoshi guxun zhu, was later annotated by Zheng Xuan (127-200) and became known as Maoshi Zheng jian or Zheng Jian (Zheng Xuan's Annotation of the Maoshi). Zheng's annotation annotated the Maoshi guxun zhu as the only version of the Shijing to be transmitted to posterity.

In the Maoshi guxun zhu, each poem is introduced by a preface, known as Shixia (Prefaces to the Shi). There are two kinds of Shixia: the Major Preface (daxu), and the Minor Preface (xiaoxu). The Major Preface gives an overview of the Shijing based on the traditional view of Confucianism and also discusses the art of poetry writing in the Shijing. The Minor Preface introduces the historical background and provides annotations for each poem, suggesting the political and educational implication of the poem. During the early Tang dynasty, Kong Yinda (574-648) was commissioned to edit the Wujiang zhenyi (Orthodox Interpretation of the Five Classics). For the Shijing, Kong compiled the Maoshi zhenyi (Orthodox Interpretation of the Mao Shi), which included the original Maoshi zhu, Zheng Xuan's commentary, and additional comments and annotations made by scholars of the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, and Sui. Kong's Maoshi zhenyi completely retained the view of Mao Heng and Zheng Xuan that the goal of studying the Shijing was to make the family more harmonious, the king more benevolent, and the officials more diligent and loyal.

Why were the Han-Tang scholars so concerned with the historical context and political implication of each poem? One possible explanation is that the attempt of framing every single poem of the Shijing within a verifiable historical context probably signified the effort to consolidate the validity of the political interpretation of the Shijing.

From Relaxed Interpretation to the Canonization of the Shijing

During the first phase of Shijing hermeneutics, diplomats, nobles, and scholars freely cited poems from the Shijing to show off their literary grace, to facilitate communication, and to strengthen their arguments. Such a relaxed hermeneutic tradition persisted to the period of the Warring States, but soon disappeared with the canonization of the Shijing in the Han dynasty. The introduction of the historical element into Shijing hermeneutics not only justified the moralistic and political interpretation of the Shijing, but also codified the orthodox interpretation of each poem in the Shijing, making it almost impossible to interpret them otherwise. This trend certainly coincided with the recognition of Confucianism as the major moral and spiritual guid-
ance of nation building, and later as the foremost ideological platform for the imperial rule. The establishment of the national examination in the Tang dynasty formalized the official teaching and interpretation of all Confucian canons, including the *Shijing*.

Shijing Hermeneutics in the Third Phase

The third phase of *Shijing* hermeneutics was dominated by Zhu Xi, who led the revolt of Song thinkers against the strict *Shijing* hermeneutic tradition of Han and Tang dynasty. He started out with the debate on whether Confucius was responsible for deleting over 2,000 poems from the collection. As the Han historian Ban Gu wrote, "In ancient times, there were officials who were responsible for collecting poems [or folk songs] for Kings so that they could understand the customs, yearnings, and lives of commoners." This gathering process could represent how the *Shijing* came about. If this was the case, Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) reasoned that it would make sense that Confucius should have deleted many of them during the editing process. The corollary was that if most poems from the *Shi* were originally folklore, then their interpretation should not have to follow the orthodox official commentaries. The idea that many poems in the *Shijing* could be just folklore prompted Ouyang Xiu, Zhu Xi, and other Song scholars to doubt the validity of strict historical interpretation as advanced in the *Shixu* and promoted by Zheng Xuan. Instead, they believed that a new approach should be offered to interpret and to understand the *Shijing*.

Revolution against the Shixu

The question on the validity of the *Shixu* led to the publication Zhu Xi's *Shi jizhuan* (Collected Annotations of the *Shijing*) in 1177. In this book, Zhu Xi attempted to remove almost all the influence of the *xiao* on his interpretation of the *Shijing*. Zhu Xi pointed out many inconsistencies in the *xiao* with regard to the citing of historical events and stated, "There are so many mistakes in the *Maoshi guxun*. People saw that each poem was capped with *xiao* as a foreword and dared not to question or challenge their truthfulness, even in the case that when [xiao] *xu* was complete nonsense, scholars still tried to justify it. *Shixu* corrupted *Shijing* scholarship tremendously!" Just imagine the orthodox status that the *Maoshi guxun* had enjoyed in the Han and Tang dynasties. Zhu Xi's *Shi jizhuan* broke new ground in *Shijing* hermeneutics and replaced the *Mao zhuan* and *Zheng jian* as the most influential and authoritative book on the *Shijing* for the next thousand years.

The driving force behind Zhu Xi's unrelenting attack on *Shixu* was his strong belief that the majority of the *Guofeng* in the *Shijing* were nothing but folk songs or countryside ditties, collected and compiled by officials in the various states during the period between 1100 B.C.E. and 600 B.C.E. Thus, he concluded, "I have heard [from elders] that all poems in the category of the *Feng* came from streets and alleys (lixiang) as folk songs. Youth, male and female, sang to each other, expressing their love and feelings." 13

Intuitive Hermeneutics

The *Shijing* hermeneutics in the Han-Tang period can be characterized by its penchant for using historical correlation to consolidate the educational role of the *Shijing*, either politically or morally. The *Shijing* hermeneutics in the Song dynasty, however, is characterized by an equally strong penchant for removing that correlation. Instead, the emphasis was on the intuitive reading of the poem itself: Zhu Xi describes how he studied and interpreted the *Shijing*: "When I studied the *Shijing*, I read [aloud] the poem itself forty to fifty times. By then, I understood about sixty to seventy percent of that poem. Then I looked back to see how other people explained this poem, and compared [that] with my own. With the consensus reached, I re-read the poem for another thirty or forty times, until I was confident that I fully understood the meaning, implication and subtlety of that poem." 14

Zhu's intuitive method and his belief that many *Shijing* poems were simply folk songs, however, led him astray many times. After all, the *Shijing* was composed at least 1,500 years before the time of Zhu Xi. Without the benefit of phonology, philology, archaeology, linguistics, epigraphy, and textual analysis, intuitive reading could very well lead to misunderstanding. His folk song theory also hindered any further quest for the authorship of the *Shijing*. Thus, Zhu Xi simply assigned many poems in the *Guofeng* as composed by licentious or promiscuous young women. Even in the most liberal society, which ancient China was unlikely to be, it is hard to imagine that so many songs made by licentious women would enter the official collection and become an orthodox scholarly text.

Shijing Hermeneutics from the Qing to the Present

The progress in the areas of phonology, philology, epigraphy, and textual research in the Qing dynasty has helped to bring new insights to the understanding of ancient texts, including the *Shijing*. The advance of sciences such as archeology, anthropology, biology, and astronomy in the nineteenth and twentieth century further broadened the scope of *Shijing* research and brought new perspectives to *Shijing* hermeneutics. The four representative scholars in *Shijing* hermeneutics during this phase are Wang Yinzhi (1766-1834), Ma Ruichen (1782-1853), Wang Guowei (1877-1927), and Wen Yiduo (1899-1946). Their contributions can be briefly discussed as follows.

Armed with a strong background in phonology, Wang Yizhi was very good in applying the inductive method to *Shijing* hermeneutics. For example, he compared all poems that contain the phrase: *zhong* + noun + *qie* + noun, and...
concluded that *zhong* is equivalent to *ji* (already, as well). Similar glyphic analysis has helped to clarify the meaning of many poems in the *Shijing*.

Ma Ruochen applied his considerable knowledge of Zhou cultural relics and institutions to the *Shijing* research. His work in the *Maoshi zhuangdian tongshi* (Comprehensive Study of Maoshi Zhuangdian) can be considered the bible for understanding the geography and institutions at the time of the *Shijing*. For example, in interpreting “*yiche qi xia*” in “Xishuai” (Shi 114), Ma argued, with considerable evidence, that *yiche* was a conscripted cart used for military purposes, not for farming as claimed in the *Zheng jian*.18

Wang Guowei is considered to be the last Chinese scholar in the true traditional sense; his contribution to the Classical Chinese studies were numerous, among them his *Shijing* scholarship. He was the first to point out the common practice of using idioms in the *Shijing*. These idioms could not be understood from reading the individual glyph in the idiom. For example, the idiom *shijiang* means “heaven and earth” instead of “ascending and descending” as the individual glyph *zhi* and *jiang* suggest. He was also the first to apply the knowledge of bronze vessel inscriptions to the study of the *Shijing*. For example, he demonstrated that the owner and maker of a well-known bronze vessel, the Xijia pan, was Yin Jifu, a name that appears in the *Shijing* and the *Bamboo Annals*. This finding provided an important clue for the authorship of the *Shijing* that we discuss later.

Wen Yiduo extensively and systematically applied the inductive method to the study of the *Shijing*. He discovered the frequent use of insinuating (or enigmatic) language in the *Shijing*. This turned out to be a fruitful approach. He was able to generate definitive interpretations of many ambiguous terms. For example, he pointed out the use of pepper to signify fertility in the “Jiaoliao” (Shi 117). He explained that the glyph *hong* in “Xintai” (Shi 43) referred to toad, not swan goose as all other scholars claimed.20

**Glyphic and Textual Hermeneutics**

*Shijing* hermeneutics in the fourth phase emphasized the precise glyphic interpretation based on scientific analysis. The importance of precise understanding of every glyph in a poem cannot be overstated. Many times, the meaning of a poem hinges upon a single word. The interpretation of the glyph *wei* illustrates this point well. In “Du renshi” (Shi 225), a couplet reads, “*Bi junzi nì, wei zhi Yin Ji.*” The glyph *wei* is commonly known as “to be called or to be told.” Thus, Arthur Waley translated this line as:

That lady his daughter
They called her Yin Ji.21

However, Wen Yiduo convincingly demonstrated that *wei* was used as a loan word here and should be read as *gui* meaning “return” or “to be returned.” Wen wrote, “*Wei* and *gui* were not clearly differentiated in archaic phonology. They were of the same meaning. Later, *wei* indicates the direction of the word or meaning whereas *gui* indicates the direction of body or other physical objects. The compound *wei zhi* in *Shi* 225 should read as *gui zhi.*”22 Thus the poem should be understood as:

That lady his daughter
To be married to Yin Ji.

Clearly, the correct interpretation of this particular poem hinges on a single glyph. The hallmark of the *Shijing* hermeneutics in this phase is the emphasis of precise understanding of the *Shijing* at the glyphic and textual level. Whether the poems were for political or educational purpose, or whether the poems were folk songs or not was no longer the concern.

**A Heretical Proposal by Li Chendong**

Modern literary scholar Li Chendong’s hermeneutic approach to *Shijing* research was basically similar to that of the four scholars mentioned above. What set him apart from them was his proposal that a single author composed the *Shijing*. Although his proposal is still considered heretical, it can be noted that Li devoted more than thirty years of his life to *Shijing* research and did not come to this conclusion lightly. Li received his academic training from Yanjing University and the University of Paris. In an essay about his scholarly career, Li describes how, from early on, he was fascinated by J. Spingarn’s *The Creative Criticism*, and later influenced by the work of Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869) and Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1828-1893). These scholars emphasized the importance of scientific analysis of the literary work in literary criticism, particularly how the author’s life and upbringing influenced the aesthetic content and artistic achievement of the literary work. Taine’s perceptive articles on Balzac in *Nouveaux essais de critique et d’histoire* became Li’s life-long guiding work. Li started his career as a professor of Chinese literature in the mainland and after 1949 continued to teach in Taiwan until his death. Early in his career, he applied Taine’s approach to analyze the work of several famous Chinese poets, including Tao Yuanming, Li Bo, Cao Zijian, and Du Fu. In each case, he found that the content and emotion in almost every single poem reflected closely the life of the poet at a certain stage. He then decided to use the same approach to examine the history of Chinese literature more systematically. Chinese literature arguably began with the *Shijing*, and it was natural that Li started his project with that work. Soon he found that *Shijing* research had become his single-minded endeavor and, to the end, he himself voiced surprise that his life-long work should have led to a conclusion that the *Shijing* was composed by a single author. To understand how this could happen, a brief review of Li’s hermeneutic approach is in order.
Li's hermeneutic approach emphasized accurate glyph and textual interpretation and can be summarized as follows:

1. For each word, idiom, or phrase, find out how many times it appears in the Shijing, and whether it has the same meaning in all poems. If there is an exception, ask why.
2. Precisely determine the location of places mentioned in the Shijing. For example, Jing Shan (Mount Jing) was only referred to as a big mountain in the Mao jiehuan. This is not acceptable. One should find out precisely the location of Jing Shan.
3. When a personage is mentioned in a poem, be sure to find out as much as possible about the background and story of that person from other textual sources.
4. For the events mentioned in the poem, try to find out the precise time, place, and persons involved in that event.
5. Repetitive phrases or sentences used in the same poem should refer to similar events. They should be interpreted accordingly.
6. Pay close attention to the usage of idioms in the Zhou dynasty.
7. Pay attention to terms related to the Zhou institutions. For example, the terms liangren, shishi, and xiaozhi should be interpreted not based on our current definition of each glyph, but based on their usage at the time of the Zhou dynasty.
8. Try to find out the nature of the plants mentioned in the poems. For example, when did they blossom, in what season did they grow, and where did they grow?
9. An interpretation of a glyph, idiom, sentence, or term in one poem should also be applicable to other poems in the Shijing.
10. Try to put all the glyph interpretation in context and be able to explain the complete text of the poem.
11. Poems containing similar or identical sentences, events, places, or persons could be related.

One good example of how these rules may lead to fresh insight is Li's identification of Nanshan (south mountain) as Mount Taishan. Nanshan, which literally means the "south hill" or the "south mountain," appeared in ten different Shijing poems. Traditional interpretation of Nanshan either said that the precise location was unclear, or referred to it as Mount Zhongnan (south of Xi'an, Shaanxi province). Arthur Waley translated Nanshan as the "southern hill." The question is whether Nanshan simply referred to a non-specified mountain in the south (south of what?) or whether it is the name of a specific mountain. Based on the Shuijing zhu (An Exegesis of the Book of the Rivers), Li argued that, since in the Zhou dynasty the area from Qi county to Jiuyuan county in Henan Province was known as Nanyang, which literally means "south of the South Mountain," and the only mountain in this area is the Taishan Mountain; therefore, Nanshan in the Shijing could only refer to Mount Taishan. Li's argument is further strengthened by the fact that in the Yulin, there is a phrase Nanshan Taishan, suggesting that Nanshan was still known as the name for Mount Taishan even during the Eastern Han dynasty (c. 200 CE). This argument is also consistent with the fact that a number of place names in the Shijing, such as "Fuguan" (Shi 58), "Qi River" (Shi 58, 59, 55, 63, 39), "Dunqiu" (Shi 58), "Jun" (Shi 32, 53), "Maoqiu" (Shi 37), "Jingshan" (Shi 305, 50), "Hanquan" (Shi 32), all can be found in this area. The identification of Nanshan as the Taihang Mountain provided a definite setting for many poems in the Shijing.

Li's hermeneutic rules listed above also reflect his desire to determine whether the Shijing poems were composed with definite purpose, emotion, time and settings or whether they were mostly generic in nature, written by some amorphous personality. If the former were the case, one certainly would ask who wrote these poems. In this regard, the influence of Taine and other European scholars on Li's approach is obvious. With few exceptions, the authorship of most poems in the Shijing was traditionally attributed to anonymous people. Those poems with authorship are known because (i) the author mentions his/her name in the poem; (ii) the author is mentioned in the Shixia; or (iii) the author is mentioned in other ancient texts, such as the Zuozhuan. With the exception of Yinjiu, Li was able to make an argument to repudiate the authorship of all the other putative authors. For example, he demonstrated that the term fushi in the Zuozhuan was strictly used to mean "to sing or to cite a poem," and not "to compose a poem." Thus the line "Lady Xumu fu Zaichi" that appears in the Zuozhuan simply indicates that Lady Xumu sang the poem "Zaichi" (Shi 54) and cannot be used to implicate Lady Xumu as the author of the poem "Zaichi."

Li applied his hermeneutic rules to every single poem in the Shijing and systematically compared the events mentioned in the Shijing (e.g., the war against the Xianyu, a northern tribe that came from central Asia) with that in the Bamboo Annals and bronze vessel inscriptions. Decades of research led him to conclude that: (1) the styles of poems in the Shijing are quite uniform and can be divided into feng (ode or ballad style), ya (or Song, narrative or chanting style), song (panegyric or eulogizing style); (2) there is a high consistency in language use; identical or similar phrases are used repeatedly in different poems; (3) there is a high consistency in the style and in the use of rhyme; (4) the description of the ritual, food, clothing, scenery, and other things in many poems was so realistic that it simply did not fit the generic nature of folk songs; (5) the places mentioned in the Shijing are consistent with places that Yinjiu spent his career; (6) the persons or people who appear in the Shijing were contemporaries of and related to Yinjiu; (7) the time period covered in the Shijing correlates with the life time of Yinjiu; (8) the events mentioned in the Shijing were also recorded in the Bamboo Annals where Yinjiu's name is mentioned, and (9) among all these putative authors the only verifiable one is Yinjiu, an aristocratic soldier/scholar living during
the later period of the Western Zhou (c. 853-775). With this conclusion as the basis, Li published a series of papers arguing that perhaps Yin Jifu was the author of most, if not all, of the poems in the Shijing.

With the belief that each poem may stand for a rich story of personal experience at a particular stage of the author’s life, Li felt that the duty of the literary critic is to uncover that story. To reach that goal, Li made serious attempts to uncover the stories told by the Shijing. He has provided a set of rigorous and testable criteria accumulated from many years of research. Based on these criteria, he has pointed out a new, albeit controversial, direction for Shijing research, namely, the possibility that the Shijing represents a body of work by a single author.

Conclusion

In reviewing the history of the Shijing hermeneutics from the Spring and Autumn period to the present, one is struck by its utilitarian nature, whether political, moralistic, or educational. With a few exceptions, one finds little discussion on authorship throughout this history. Indeed, because of the utilitarian nature of the Shijing hermeneutics, the question of authorship never was an important issue. By ignoring the question of the authorship, there is more room to interpret the poems and to draw conclusions as one sees fit. Thus, instead of using the poem to express the author’s emotion or aspiration, the poems can be used freely by the readers as a sophisticated vehicle to utter their inner feelings.

Traditional Shijing hermeneutics also rarely paid attention to geographic locations of places mentioned in the Shijing. For example, Nanshen in the Shijing can be any mountain because the true location of Nanshen would have no impact on the utilitarian function of the poem. Indeed, most of the places in the Shijing were simply considered as generic, not specific geographic location. Li Chengdong was vehement in emphasizing the importance of the association of place names in the Shijing with the geographic locations at the time of the Zhou dynasty. When a place mentioned in the Shijing was found to actually correspond to a specific geographic location within a historic context, this is bound to have an impact on the interpretation of the poem. It is interesting to compare Li’s approach with that of Mao Heng. The attempt of making historical correlations in the Shuxin by Mao appears to be arbitrary: in many cases, such correlations lack any supporting evidence and sometimes they run into direct contradictory evidence. In contrast, Li’s use of the Bamboo Annals and other ancient texts to correlate historical events described in the Shijing followed the good tradition initiated by Wang Guoqiu. The hermeneutic rules listed by Li for the Shijing research were built on the foundation of the earlier work of Qing/modern scholars from Wang Yinzi to Wen Youduo. However, his identification of Yin Jifu as the sole author of the Shijing and his attempt to correlate the Shijing with the life of Yin Jifu reflected his training in Paris. Based on Li’s study, it seems that many poems can be correlated with historical events that occurred during the reign of King Xuan. Like Zhu Xi’s folk song hypothesis, Li’s proposal that all of the poems of Shijing could be attributed to Yin Jifu is still a hypothesis. However, his hermeneutic approach is logical and scientific, and thus the validity of many of his arguments can be tested.

In sum, the history of the Chinese Shijing hermeneutics has gone through four distinct phases during the past 2,600 years. In the first phase, the Shijing was clearly used for educational purpose, whether in the guanxue or sishu. However, the interpretation of the Shijing poems appeared to be quite individual and relaxed. The second phase was marked by an increasingly strict interpretation of the Shijing and the use of the Shijing, along with other Confucian texts, to establish Confucianism as the national ideology. In the third phase, the strict official interpretation was replaced by the intuitive interpretation of the Shijing based on the belief that many poems were just folksongs. Finally, the fourth phase emphasized the use of scientific methods to interpret Shijing poems at the glyphic and textual level without any concern of the ideological or functional role of the Shijing, which had dominated Shijing hermeneutics from the beginning. Among the distinguished scholars in this phase, Li went one step further. In addition to stressing the importance of accurate reading of the Shijing, Li has introduced the discussion of authorship into the Shijing hermeneutics. His effort in uncovering the original meaning of each poem in the Shijing and his attempt to correlate the stories reflected in the poems led him to believe that there was enough evidence to suggest that the Shijing represents the literary work of one individual, that is, Yin Jifu. His proposal is indeed heretical, but does represent a fresh and alternative approach for Shijing hermeneutics. In this regard, Li’s work deserves further research and scholarly debate. If indeed Li’s hypothesis were proven true, the landscape of Shijing hermeneutics would be permanently changed.

Notes

2. Zuozihua (Taipei: Xuanfeng shuju, 1964), 449. Unless indicated, the translation is mine.
6. See Lu Deming, Jindian shiwen, cited in Shijing xinshang yu yanjiu, 2,423. According to Lu, the learning of the Shi (i.e. Shijing) was passed from Zixia (one of Confucius’ famous students) to Zeng Sheng, then to Li Ke of the state of Wei, then to Meng Zhongzi of the state of Lu, then to Geng Mouzi, then to Sun Qinzi (i.e. Xunzi) of the state of Zhao, and Xunzi then passed the Shi on to the Great Master
Mao of the state of Lu. This long list would suggest that among the early Confucian scholars, Xunzi played a critical role in upholding the hermeneutical tradition from Confucius down to the Han dynasty.


8. Lanyu, 13.5.

9. The six arts are rites, music, shooting, driving, six classics, and mathematics. Alternatively, they refer to the six classics, namely, Shi (Book of Odes), Shu (Book of Documents), Li (Book of Rites), Yue (Book of Music), Yi (Book of Changes), Chunqiu (Spring and Autumn Annals).

10. The three schools were led by Master Shen Pei for the Lu School, Master Yuan Gushen for the Qi School, and Master Han Ying for the Han School. The Mao school was given a doctoral chair during the time of Han Findi (1 B.C.E.-6 C.E.).

11. According to the Major Preface, the art of poetry writing was based on six principles (liuyi; feng (folklore), zhi (related to official matters), song (celebrating), xu (expanding on a theme), bi (analogy), and xing (induction).

12. Sima Qian stated in the Shiji (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 1936, that “in ancient time, there were over 3,000 poems, Confucius deleted many redundant ones, compiled the poems from Qi, Houji (c.2000 B.C.E.), including the ones [made] during Yin (Shang dynasty) and Zhou, until the decadent Kings You and Li.”

13. Ban Gu, Yuren zhi (Treatise on Literature), Han shu, in Han shu zhiyi (Annotation and Translation of Han shu) (Hainan: Hainan guoji xiwen chuban zhongxin, 1998), 1892. Ban Gu also mentioned it in the “Liyue Zhi” (“Treatise on Rites and Music”), in Han shu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 1045, “Han Wudi established the sacrificial ceremony on the four outskirts. He also installed a Music Conservatory for collecting and composing poems. There were songs from Yue (Zhejiang province), Dai (Hebei province), Qin (Shangxi province), Chu (Hunan province).” Thus, the collection of folk songs from various regions of the empire appears to be a new practice in Han dynasty. Whether this was the case in the Zhou dynasty is completely unclear.

14. For example, many airs of the State of Zheng (Zhengfeng) were considered by the author of the Xiaoxia as composed by officials to humiliate and to demean Lord Zhao of Zheng. Zhu Xi commented, “Simply because of his loss of the lordship every poem in the zhengfeng was said to be a satire against him. This is not acceptable. Indeed, Jihu [i.e., Lord Zhao] was not the kind of wanton, violent, or licentious Lord.”


16. See Zhu Xi, Shijing yishuo, cited in Li Chendong, Shijing yanjiu (Taipei: Shunyiu chubanshe, 1982), 238.

17. The three chapters on the Shijing in his Jingshi shuwen provides many examples on how to use the inductive method to clarify the meaning of some difficult or controversial glyphs and idioms.

18. This interpretation is consistent with the status of liangshi, a term which also appears in Shi 114. Liangshi refers to officers in the royal army in the Zhou dynasty. Both Arthur Waley and James Legge, however, translate liangshi as a generic term, “good man.”

19. Wang Guowei’s argument is described in detail in the article “Postscript for Xi Jinping” (Xi jinping bao) which was cited by Li Chendong in Shijing yanjiu, 290.


24. Nanshan is mentioned in ten poems of the Shijing and in all cases it has been translated as “southern hills.” See Arthur Waley, The Book of Songs, 62, 67, 86, 98, 176, 179, 212, 282, 317.

25. Shijing zhu juan 9, cited in Ying Shao, Dili jingju ji, cited in Li Chendong, Shijing yanjiu, 17.


28. Li reached this conclusion in a series of papers compiled in Shijing yanjiu yanjiulan.

29. For example, Hanjuan has been translated as “cool spring” or “cold spring” (Shi 32), “Maqiu has been translated as “high and sloping mound” (Shi 37), and “Jingsheng” has been translated as “high hills” and “lofty elevations” (Shi 50). See Arthur Waley, The Book of Songs, 73, 114, 280.