

Early Interpretations of the *Book of Poetry*: the "Prefaces"

The earliest systematic interpretations of the odes in the *Book of Poetry* date from the end of the Classical period. These appear as "Prefaces" to each individual poem. The Prefaces are said to have been composed by Zixia, a disciple of Confucius, but probably date from the fourth or third century B.C. They appear, however, to preserve much older readings of the poems, readings that contributed essentially to their cultural preservation as a sacred canon of ancient understanding.

Below, you will find translations of the Prefaces for some of the poems in your reading on the *Poetry*. If you compare these to the poems themselves, you will see in many cases why the French sinologist Marcel Granet was viewed as such a radical thinker when he first published his interpretations (see page 4 of the reading). [The numbers in brackets refer to the standard index numbers of the poems.]

Oh Zhongzi, Please! This poem satirizes Duke Zhuang of Zheng. He was unable to overcome the influence of his doting mother and thus harmed his younger brother. When his younger brother first fell from moral conduct, the Duke did not control him. The minister Ji Zhong remonstrated with him, but the Duke would not listen. He had no scruples about allowing small transgressions, and this led his brother to great misdeeds. [76]

Cock Crow Expresses longing for a worthy mate. Duke Ai of Qi was lascivious and dissolute, hence the poet portrays a chaste woman who would be a worthy mate. Day and night she would caution him concerning the way of accomplishment. [96]

The Simple Man A satire on the times. When Duke Xuan of Wey ruled, ritual and righteousness were in decay and lascivious customs prevailed. Men and women mixed without restraints and lured one another on. But the women lovers found that when their beauty began to decline they were cast off, while the men fell into difficult straits and regretted the loss of their proper mates. The poet therefore set matters forth to show his disapproval of this situation, to praise a return to uprightness, and to attack lasciviousness. [85]

The Seventh Month This poem describes the enterprise of kingly government. The Duke of Zhou encountered rebellion, and so he set forth the transforming customs established by Prince Millet and the former lords of the Zhou people, emphasizing the difficult task of kingly rule. [154]

Climbing the Wooded Hill The filial son on conscript duty longs for his parents. His state is small and harried, and has frequently been invaded. Now he has been conscripted by a large state. His parents and brothers have been separated and scattered, hence he composes this poem. [110]

The Sixth Month This recounts King Xuan's campaign in the North. [King Xuan, in some accounts of the early Zhou, was a virtuous ruler who arrested for a time the decline of the Western Zhou royal house. The *Preface* lists at great length the evils that had befallen China prior to King Xuan's reign because the lessons of various poems had been discarded. The Preface ends as follows.] When the entire section of the Lesser Court Odes had been discarded, the four barbarian groups invaded China from all directions and China grew weak. [177]

Blind Men This describes how one joins together with the ancestors when the music is begun. [280]

When the Guests Are First Seated This poem was composed by Duke Wu of Wey to attack the decline of the times. King You was dissolute and associated with immoral people. They drank without measure and the people of the empire followed their example. Rulers, ministers, those in high places and low all drowned in their lust for drink. Hence Duke Wu entered the court and delivered himself of this poem. [220]

Lucky Day This poem praises the hunts of King Xuan. He was able to care for the lowly and receive them with grace, hence none did not exhaust themselves in pursuit of gifts to offer up to him. [180]

The Magic Tower This poem describes how the people first began to attach themselves to King Wen. King Wen received the Mandate and the people took joy in his magical virtue, which was so great that this extended even to the birds and beasts, fish and shelled animals. [242]

The Ding Star in Mid-Sky (The sense of the Preface is conveyed in the reading introduction.) [50]

The Northern Hills This poem is by a lord who is criticizing the fact that under King You there is an uneven distribution of labors for the state. The poet labors hard in his duties, such that he cannot even care for his parents at the close of their lives. [205]

The Oriole A dirge for the Three Good Men. Through this poem, the people of the state of Qin attacked Duke Mu for ordering these men to be buried along with him. [131]