

## VERSES FROM THE *BOOK OF POETRY*

The Book of Poetry appears to have been the first text to be identified as a source of wisdom so great that it needed to be learned by all the elite. It is the founding text of the standard “Canon” of the later Confucian eras. The Spring and Autumn Annals portrays its pivotal role in the discourse of patricians, and the Analects of Confucius presents it as a core of the syllabus that Confucius taught his followers - “If you do not study the Poetry,” said Confucius, “how will you have words to speak?”

The importance of the text to later generations produced elaborate interpretations of the meanings of the poems. Many of the poems were read as the works of noble men of the early Zhou, and they were taken to be oblique commentary on the events of that period. In fact, the poems seem to represent a wide variety of authorial origins and motives. They range from royal temple incantations dating from the late Shang and early Zhou, to rural chants that appear to have been early Zhou forms of very ancient peasant ritual songs. Some of the latest of the poems, dating from the early Spring and Autumn period, are frankly political in nature--complaints about the immorality of rulers and the indifference of Heaven--but a great many of the poems in the book are simply love poems or literary accounts of the trials of everyday life. These poems form important sources for our understanding of the nature of early Chinese society.

Originally, all the poems were set to music, and the music was considered as central to the aesthetic meaning of each poem as the words. By the Han Dynasty, however, the music had been lost. In other texts that we will encounter, we will see references to the singing of these odes by courtiers employing them in diplomatic discourse and we will encounter instances of the poems “performed” by an orchestra of musicians.

There are altogether 305 poems in the text. Those below are a somewhat representative collection, illustrating the variety of topics and voices that appear. Some of the translations are based on those of Arthur Waley.

### Songs of Love and Marriage

A very substantial number of the verses in the Book of Poetry concern the relationship between men and women. These are often very poignant. While it would not be prudent to assume that these poems provide direct insight into the minds of peasant poets--they are probably the products of court editors who revised songs collected from the villages of China or created their own “folk songs”--they surely reflect a type of public understanding of the psychology of young people, and are in this way important cultural artifacts.

#### **Ah, Zhong-zi!**

Ah, Zhong-zi!  
Don't climb our village wall,  
Don't break the willows we have planted.  
Not that I mind about the willows,  
I'm afraid of my parents.  
I long for you Zhong-zi,

But of my parents' words  
I am indeed afraid.

Ah, Zhong-zi!  
Don't climb our household wall,  
Don't break the mulberry-trees we have planted.  
Not that I mind about the mulberry-trees,  
I'm afraid of my brothers.  
I long for you Zhong-zi,  
But of my brothers words  
I am indeed afraid.

Ah, Zhong-zi!  
Don't climb into our garden,  
Don't break the sandalwood we have planted.  
Not that I mind about the sandalwood,  
I'm afraid of what people will say.  
I long for you Zhong-zi,  
But of all that people will say  
I am indeed afraid.

Many of the folk songs of the Poetry employ repetitive schemes, as "I Beg of You, Zhong-zi" does. What does this simple poem tell us about ancient China? Apart from the picture of the family compound, and the testimony of adventurous youth, the poem illustrates an intriguing tension between the values of chastity and a freer relationship between young lovers. While the girl who narrates is clearly constrained by the strict moral code explicit in her family, the very fact that this poem was a public expression of these ideas indicates a more playful or ambivalent attitude towards sexual relations.

### **Cock Crow**

"The cock has crowed,  
It's daylight!"  
"That's not the cock's crow,  
It's the green flies' buzz."  
"The east sky glows,  
Dawn's broken!"  
"That's not dawn's glow,  
It's the rising moon's light.  
In this buzz of the flies,  
Let's share a sweet dream!"  
"Quick, quick! Go home!  
Lest I've good cause to hate you!"

The great French sinologist Marcel Granet believed that many of the poems in the Book of Poetry originated as antiphonal chants sung by choruses of young women and choruses of young men as part of spring rituals of group courtship in villages across China. The form of this poem conforms well to this theory, as does its risqué theme. The original text does not indicate the speakers, and it would be as logical simply to substitute “The women” and “The men,” in the spirit of Granet’s ideas, and to allow the portrait of secret lovers to emerge from the text itself.

Granet was particularly anxious to demonstrate that the elaborate ethical and political interpretations that had come to be bestowed on the poems obscured their origins in simple popular rituals. In his brilliant and witty book, Festivals and Songs of Ancient China [on Library Reserve], he gives a striking illustration of the divergence of late scholarly interpretations from what he himself identifies as the original meanings of the texts.

The following poem, which celebrates the isolation of a tree, was traditionally understood to be a satire directed against a particular evil patrician ruler. So hard was his rule on the common people, that they wished to be free of friends or family, isolated from the pain of a society that only trampled on loved ones. For example, one line of the poem reads, “What joy, to have no awareness!”

Granet noted that the word “awareness” also carried the meaning of “acquaintance,” and making only this one change in the interpretation of the words of the poem, he suggested a far more satisfying non-political background for the poem. This is how he read the poem:

### **The Carambola Tree**

In the valley is a carambola tree.  
Charming, the grace of its branches;  
How vigorous in tender beauty.  
What joy! You have no acquaintance.

In the valley is a carambola tree.  
Charming, the grace of its flowers;  
How vigorous in tender beauty.  
What joy! You have no husband.

In the valley is a carambola tree.  
Charming, the grace of its fruit;  
How vigorous in tender beauty.  
What joy! You have no wife.

For Granet, the sense was simple. This was a song sung between young men and women courting. The first stanza, sung together, expressed mutual admiration and pleasure to learn that each was unmarried. The following two stanzas were sung by the woman and man in turn. What could be simpler? Ever since Granet wrote his book in the 1920s, it has become customary to read many of the verses of the Poetry on two levels, both in terms of their original folk origins, and also in terms of the political and moral interpretations which were, after all, what motivated the elite to preserve them and enshrine them as canonical.

The longer poem that follows is a retrospective account of marriage. While the speaker is a woman, it is hard not to suspect that the author was a man.

### The Simple Man

You seemed a simple man,  
 Bringing cloth to trade for silk.  
 But you had not come to buy silk;  
 You had set your mind on me.  
 We sent you back off past the River Qi,  
 Walking you to Beacon Hill.  
 It was not I who had put it off;  
 You had found no match-maker.  
 "Please don't be angry;  
 We'll fix autumn as the time."

I climbed a high wall  
 To glimpse Fu-guan where you lived,  
 But I couldn't see to Fu-guan,  
 And my tears flowed as a flood.  
 Then I caught sight of Fu-guan,  
 How gaily I laughed, how gaily talked!  
 You threw the yarrow-stalks,  
 And they showed no baleful omens.  
 You came with your cart  
 And brought away my dowry and me.

Before the mulberry sheds its leaves,  
 How soft and glossy they are!  
 Oh dove, turtle-dove,  
 Don't eat the mulberry fruit!  
 Oh my young girls,  
 Don't take your pleasure with men!  
 A man takes his pleasure  
 And still he may be free.  
 When a girl takes her pleasure  
 She can never escape.

The mulberry leaves have fallen,  
 All yellow and sere.  
 Since I came to you,  
 I've eaten poverty three years.  
 The Qi was in flood then,  
 The carriage curtains wet through.  
 It is not I who am at fault.  
 It is you who have changed,

It is you who are unfaithful,  
Your favors cast this way and that.

Three years as your wife,  
Never slack in my work.  
Rising early, late to bed,  
Never idle, never idle;  
First you found fault,  
Then you grew rough.  
My brothers disowned me  
With chortles and laughter.  
And when I think of it calmly,  
I brought this upon myself.

“I’ll grow old with you,” I vowed,  
But age brings only grievance.  
The Qi has its banks,  
The lakes have their shores.  
With hair looped and ribboned  
How gaily you laughed,  
How solemnly you swore to be true.  
I never dreamed of a change,  
Of no change did I dream.  
It’s over indeed, all done!

### Agricultural Life

The following poem was composed about 700 and is perhaps the most vivid description we possess of mid-Zhou village life. The poet, for reasons that are unclear, weaves together two different calendars in this description of the peasant’s year. The corresponding periods of the Western calendar year are noted at right.

#### **The Seventh Month**

In the seventh month the Fire star ebbs.	[August]
In the ninth month we hand out the jackets.	[October]
In the first month after the solstice, the wind is sharp. [Christmastime]	
In the days of the second, the winds chill you through: without jackets or coarse clothes how could we live out the year?	[Jan.-Feb.]
In the third month after the solstice, we ready the ploughs.	[Feb.-Mar.]
In the fourth we stir our feet to step out: with my wife and children, carrying hampers of food to the southern plots	[Mar.-Apr.]

where the field hands are glad as can be.

In the seventh month the Fire star ebbs.  
 In the ninth month we hand out the jackets.  
 When the spring days grow bright  
     and the oriole calls,  
     the girls carry deep baskets  
     and walk along the narrow paths  
 there to gather the tender mulberry leaves.  
 As spring days grow longer  
     they pluck crowds of white aster.  
 The girls' hearts will be breaking  
     till they go home with young gentlemen.

In the seventh month the Fire star ebbs.  
 In the eighth month we gather rushes.  
     [September]

In the month of the silkworm pluck the mulberry leaves,  
     grip that axe by the handle  
     and chop off the distant branches,  
     pulling in the tender leaves.

[April]

In the seventh month the shrike cries.  
 In the eighth month they twine the thread,  
     black thread, yellow thread,  
     and with my deep red so bright,  
     I'll make skirts for my young gentleman.

In the fourth month the milkwort plant blooms.  
 In the fifth month the cicada cries.  
 In the eighth month the harvest is gathered in.  
 In the tenth month the leaves fall.

[May]

In the first month after the solstice we follow the raccoon,  
     we capture the fox and the wildcat  
     and make fur jackets for our young gentlemen.  
 In the days of the second comes the great meeting  
     where we drill in the arts of war:  
     the small pigs that we kill we keep as our own,  
     and the great boars we give to our Master.

[Oct.-Nov.]

In the fifth month the locust moves his leg.  
 In the sixth month the grasshopper shakes its wing.  
 In the seventh month they are in the wilds,  
     in the eighth they are under the eaves,  
     in the ninth they are within the door.  
 In the tenth month the cricket creeps below my bed.

[May-June]

[June-July]

Plug up the holes and smoke out the mice,  
 cover the windows, plaster the door;  
 I sigh to my wife and children,  
 “The change of the year is at hand;  
 let us go inside to our room.”

In the sixth month we eat plums and wild grapes.  
 In the seventh month we boil mallows and beans.  
 In the eighth month we skin the dates.  
 In the tenth month we take in the rice  
     and use it to make the spring wine  
     that will bring us to great old age.  
 In the seventh month we eat melons.  
 In the eighth month we cut down the gourds.  
 In the ninth month we pluck the seeds of the hemp,  
     and we pull up bitter plants and make firewood of the ailanthus  
     so that our farmers will have food to eat.

In the ninth month we make ready the threshing grounds.  
 In the tenth month we harvest the grain:  
     millet, wine-barley; the early ripening and the late;  
     wheat and hemp, beans and oats.  
 “Ah, my farming man,  
     our grain is all in,  
     start the work on our house--  
     in the morning gathering reeds for thatch,  
     in the evening twisting ropes--  
     quick! on up to the rooftop:  
     for how soon you must begin to sow the grains once more!”

In the second month after the solstice we chop the ice with freezing blows.  
 In the days of the third we store them in the ice house.  
 Early in the days of the fourth, [Jan.-Feb.]  
     we offer up lambs and garlic grasses.  
 In the ninth month come the solemn frosts.  
 In the tenth month we wash clean the threshing grounds,  
     and with twin pitchers of wine hold the great village feast,  
     killing the young lambs,  
     and we climb up to the halls of the Master;  
     “Raise high the rhino-horn goblet--  
     May he live to old age without end!”

## Poems About War

The following poem is a lament concerning the hardship of military service to the lord. This is followed by a more boisterous military poem (only the first half appears here).

### **Climbing the Wooded Hill**

I climb the wooded hill  
 And gaze towards my father's land.  
 My father is saying,  
     "Alas, my son is off serving;  
 Day and night, never ceasing.  
 May he be careful of himself,  
 So that he may come back and not be left behind!"

I climb the bare hill  
 And gaze towards my mother's land.  
 My mother is saying,  
     "Alas, my young one is off serving;  
 Day and night, never sleeping.  
 May he be careful of himself,  
 So that he may come back and not be cast away."

I climb the ridge  
 And gaze towards my brother's land.  
 My brother is saying,  
     "Alas, my young brother is off serving;  
 Day and night, always toiling.  
 May he be careful of himself,  
 So that he may come back and not die."

### **The Sixth Month**

In the sixth month, all is bustle,  
 We put our war-chariots in order,  
 Our four steeds are in good fettle,  
 We load our bow-cases and quivers.  
 The Xian-yun nomads are ablaze,  
 We have no time to lose.  
 We are going out to battle,  
 To set aright the king's lands.

Our team of blacks is well-matched,  
 A pattern of perfect training.

It is the sixth month;  
 We have finished all our field-work,  
 We have finished all our field-work  
 Throughout the thirty leagues.  
 We are going out to battle  
 To help the Son of Heaven.

Our four steeds are tall and broad,  
 Hugely high they stand.  
 We fall upon the Xian-yun,  
 We do great deeds,  
 So stern, so grim  
 We fulfill the tasks of war,  
 Fulfill the tasks of war  
 That the king's lands may be at rest.

-- tr. Arthur Waley

### **Music, Banqueting, and Hunting**

The next poem describes the preparations for a ritual dance, apparently a dance of war in which past triumphs were acted out. Musicians in ancient China were often blind men, and that is the explanation for the title and opening line, and the reference to the sightless in the poem "The Magic Tower" poem below.

#### **Blind Men**

Blind men, blind men  
 In the courtyard of Zhou.  
 We have set up the cross-board, the stand,  
 With the upright hooks, the standing plumes.  
 The little and big drums are hung for beating;  
 The tambourines and stone-chimes the mallet-box and scraper.  
 All is ready, and they play.  
 Pan-pipes and flute are ready and begin.  
 Sweetly blend the tones,  
 Solemn the melody of their bird-music.  
 The ancestors are listening;  
 As our guests they have come,  
 To gaze long upon their victories.

-- tr. Arthur Waley

Not all poets saw musical celebrations as joyous occasions. The following satire on patrician banqueting provides an unusually vivid picture of the conduct of the elite. Note in particular how it portrays a variety of attitudes towards conduct, picturing both restrained and raucous elements among the nobility.

### **When the Guests Are First Seated**

When the guests are first seated  
 They sit left and right, left and right.  
 The baskets and bowls are in their rows,  
 The meats and nuts laid out.  
 The wine is smooth and good,  
 All drink most peacefully.  
 The bells and drums are set,  
 The brimming pledge-cup raised.  
 The great target is hung,  
 The bows and arrows stretched,  
 The bowmen are matched.  
 "Show your shooting skills,  
 Shoot at the mark  
 That you may be rewarded with the cup."

Fluting they dance to reed-organ and drum,  
 The instruments played in concert,  
 An offering to please the glorious ancestors,  
 That the rites may be complete.  
 For when all the rites are perfect,  
 Grandly, royally done,  
 The ancestors bestow great gifts  
 And sons and grandsons rejoice,  
 And rejoicing make music.  
 "Let each of you display his skill!"  
 The guests receive the pledge-cup,  
 Follow host back to the hall.  
 Fill the empty cup,  
 To toast and be toasted.

When the guests first take their seats,  
 How decorous they are, how reverent!  
 And while sober still,  
 So dignified, so punctilious;  
 And now they are drunk,  
 Their dignity grown light.  
 They leave their seats and roam,

Such strange twisted dancing.  
While sober still,  
So dignified, so grave;  
But when they are drunk,  
Unseemly and rude;  
For the drunk  
Know nothing of order in conduct.  
When guests are drunk  
They howl and shout,  
Knock down baskets and bowls,  
With their strange lurching dances.  
When people are drunk  
They are blind to their blunders.  
Unsteady, cap crooked,  
Such twisted lewd dancing.  
If they took leave when drunk  
They'd be blessed with the rest.  
But when the drunk stay,  
They flaunt their bad character.  
Drinking wine is auspicious,  
But only with decorum.

It is always the same with wine;  
Some get drunk, some do not.  
So we appoint an overseer,  
And perhaps an assistant.  
“That drunk one is rowdy;  
The sober embarrassed!  
Stop him from babbling,  
Stop his stupidity.”  
Stop saying what should not be said;  
Stop urging what should not be done!  
Your drunken nonsense  
Is like hornless rams.  
After three cups you're witless--  
Yet you cry for more!

A very different voice animates the next poem, which depicts preparations for a patrician hunt. Hunts were not just sporting events, they were important rituals which symbolized the elite's control over territory, and provided the delicacies served at great banquets and at religious ceremonies of sacrifice.

### Lucky Day

A lucky day, fifth of the week;  
 We have made the sacrifice of propitiation,  
     we have prayed.  
 Our hunting chariots so lovely,  
 Our four steeds so strong,  
 We climb that high hill  
 Chasing the herds of game.

A lucky day, seventh of the cycle;  
 We have picked our steeds.  
 Here the beasts congregate,  
 Doe and stag abound,  
 Along the Qi and Zhu,  
 The Son of Heaven's domain.

Look there, in the midst of the plain,  
 Those big ones, very many!  
 Scampering, sheltering,  
 Some in herds, some two by two.  
 We lead hither all our followers,  
 Anxious to please the Son of Heaven.

We have drawn our bows;  
 Our arrows are on the bowstring.  
 We shoot that little boar,  
 We fell that great wild ox,  
 So that we have something to offer, for guest, for stranger,  
 To go with the heavy wine.

-- tr. Arthur Waley

## Poems With Political Themes

The Magic Tower was the name given a ritual building constructed by King Wen, the greatest culture-hero of the Zhou people. The Moated Mound was another sacred precinct of the Zhou. It is often said to have been the place where the royal sons were educated, and to have been viewed as the location of the symbolic axis of the Zhou polity and the world.

### **The Magic Tower**

When they began the Magic Tower,  
They measured and planned it,  
The people all labored,  
And in no time they built it.  
They began with no goading,  
And the people came like children.

The king was in the Magic Park,  
Doe and stag lay within,  
Doe and stag fat and sleek,  
White herons gleamed bright.  
The king was by the Magic Pool,  
Where the fish sprang so lithe.

On posts and spiked beams  
Hang the big drums and gongs,  
The lines of drums and gongs.  
Merry is the Moated Mound.  
The lines of drums and gongs!  
The merry Moated Mound!  
Bang the lizard-skin drums;  
The blind play for all.

The next poem was composed after 658 B.C., the year in which the people of Wey, harassed by nomad tribes, transferred the site of their capital and their territorial lands eastward, under the protection of Duke Huan of Qi, the great hegemonic lord of that age. It is said that the duke presented the people of Wey with many horses to replace those that had been stolen or killed in their struggles with the nomads.

### **The Ding Star in Mid-Sky**

The Ding Star is in the middle of the sky;  
We begin to build the palace at Chu.  
Orientating them by the rays of the sun  
We set to work on the houses at Chu,  
By the side of them planting hazels and chestnut-trees,  
Catalpas, pawlownias, lacquer-trees  
That we may make the zithers great and small.

We climb to that wilderness  
 To look down at Chu,  
 To look upon Chu and Tang  
 Upon the Jing hills and citadel.  
 We go down and inspect the mulberry orchards.  
 We take the omens and they are lucky,  
 All of them truly good.

A magical rain is falling.  
 We order our grooms  
 By starlight, early, to yoke our steeds;  
 We drive to the mulberry-fields and there we rest.  
 Those are men indeed!  
 They hold hearts that are staunch and true.  
 They have given us mares three thousand.

-- tr. Arthur Waley

The next two poems are protests against injustice. In the first, the poet adopts the persona of a loyal and hardworking officer of the king. Having sacrificed the pleasures of life in dedication to the king and the state, he laments how unfair it is that other without his sense of responsibility enjoy an easy life without suffering adverse consequences. The final poem is a scalding protest against events that followed the death of Duke Mu of Qin in 621. The duke, who was brutal, successful, and much admired, revived an ancient custom by ordering that upon his death, the greatest of his fighting men be buried along with him to provide him comfort and protection in the next life. The poet's view of the subsequent slaughter is expressed in acid verses.

### **The Northern Hills**

I climb those northern hills  
 And pluck the boxthorn.  
 Very strenuous are the knights,  
 Early and late upon their tasks;  
 The king's business never ends.  
 But for my father and mother I grieve.

“Everywhere under Heaven  
 There is no land that is not the king's.  
 To the borders of all those lands  
 None but is the king's slave.”  
 But the ministers are not just;  
 Whatever is done, I bear the brunt alone,

Like a team of steeds so strong  
 The king's business bears down upon me.  
 Everyone congratulates me on my youthfulness,

Is surprised I am still so strong,  
That with muscles still so tough  
I build the frontiers on every hand.

Some people sit quietly at home;  
Others wear themselves out in serving their country.  
Some lie peacefully in bed;  
Others are always on the move.

Some senselessly yell and bawl;  
Others fret and toil.  
Some loll about at their ease;  
Others in the king's business are engrossed.

Some sunk in pleasure swill their wine;  
Others are tortured by the fear of blame.  
Some do nothing but scold or advise;  
Others in every trouble must act.

-- tr. Arthur Waley

### **The Oriole**

“Jiao-jiao,” sings the oriole  
As it lights on the thorn-bush.  
Who went with Duke Mu to the grave?  
Yan-xi of the clan Zi-zhu.  
Now this Yan-xi  
Was the pick of all our men;  
But as he drew near the tomb-hole  
His limbs shook with dread.  
That blue one, Heaven,  
Takes all our good men.  
Could we but ransom him  
There are a hundred would give their lives.

“Jiao-jiao,” sings the oriole  
As it lights on the mulberry-tree.  
Who went with Duke Mu to the grave?  
Zhong-hang of the clan Zi-zhu.  
Now this Zhong-hang  
Was the sturdiest of all our men;  
But as he drew near the tomb-hole  
His limbs shook with dread.  
That blue one, Heaven,

Takes all our good men.  
Could we but ransom him  
There are a hundred would give their lives.

“Jiao-jiao,” sings the oriole  
As it lights on the brambles.  
Who went with Duke Mu to the grave?  
Qian-hu of the clan Zi-zhu  
Now this Qian-hu  
Was the strongest of all our men.  
But as he drew near the tomb-hole  
His limbs shook with dread.  
That blue one, Heaven,  
Takes all our good men.  
Could we but ransom him  
There are a hundred would give their lives.

-- tr. Arthur Waley

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. *What attitudes do these poets have towards love? What seem to be the prevailing social mores?*
2. *Taken together, do these poems seem to view the patrician state positively or negatively--or is there no prevailing view?*
3. *Go through the poems and identify the social classes that you think each poetic voice represents? Where do you find ambiguities that make it hard to say?*
4. *Which poems give us the most intimate pictures of Classical life? From which do you learn the most?*
5. *Based on these poems, construct a brief almanac listing a dozen or more seasonal activities in the life of a peasant, including farming tasks, household duties, and ritual events.*