

## Foreword

The brilliant tradition of ancient Chinese literature is still being appreciated today. Music and painting were also highly developed in ancient China, but most ancient musical scores have been lost and most of the paintings surviving today are from the time of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and later. Only literature, the songs and myths our forefathers created, have been left. The world of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–221 BC) depicted in *The Book of Songs* remains vivid today. Reading *The Book of Songs* and works by Pre-Qin philosophers reveals principles and ethics which, over the span of three thousand years, have shaped the cultural identity of the Chinese people.

Relatively clear records survive from the Zhou Dynasty, articulating the ideals of Chinese society at that time, governed by classics, music, and a feudal codes of ethics - to which sages often aspired in later eras. The ideal political pattern in ancient China was not rule by force, but by the implementation of education. The scholars, a social stratum between senior officials and the common people in ancient China, played the role of educating commoners. According to the political system of the Zhou Dynasty, the nobles ranked below the emperor. The nobles of the upper stratum were senior officials. The nobles of the lower stratum were the scholars. The scholars were further divided into the upper scholars, the middle scholars and the lower scholars. The earliest literature in China was the literature of the scholars. Scholars collected folk songs from among the people, arranged them and polished them and presented them



## CHINESE LITERATURE



A painted scroll of Chinese poets through the ages.

to the emperor so that he could read the social customs and understand the aspirations of the people. These folk songs became the poems included in the section of “Guofeng” (“Folk Songs”) in *The Book of Songs*, the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry. Poems written for the ancestral shrine and sacrificial rites constituted the section “Song” (“Sacrificial Songs”) and historical records became the section “Ya” (“Court Hymns”). But Chinese literature concerned human relationships and everyday life as well as political education. Moreover, it was closely related to the spiritual life of the people.

Traditionally, the Chinese people strive for the harmony of man with nature, firmly believing that the foundation of human relationships and everyday life lies in communion with heavenly principles. Great writers concerned themselves with the whole universe, history, and the tribulations of the people. Great thinkers of the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Period (770–221 BC) cherished lofty aspirations of bringing prosperity to the country and a better life to the people. Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi traveled between various states promoting their views and thoughts on life and good government. By the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), Sima Qian, writing *Records of the Historian* with the aim of fully “exploring the interaction between Heaven and Man and giving a complete





and authoritative account of the historical changes of the past and present,” carried this forward. Li Bai and Su Shi of the Tang (618–907) and the Song dynasties, great poets worthy of the line “Heaven has made us talents, we’re not made in vain,” talked and danced with the sun, the moon, the mountains, and the rivers, yet they were agonized with concern for the people when writing their poems. These are among the great splendors of Chinese literature.

From the time of the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368), the morale of the Chinese people was seriously dampened. As a result, the pattern of Chinese literature altered too. Though scholars before the Yuan Dynasty spoke for the people and concerned themselves with the life of the people, their words and writings were intended for the monarchs and the ruling class. However, from the Yuan Dynasty onwards, scholars started to write plays and popular stories for the common people so that they could relax when they were not working. During this period, the “comic spirit” in Chinese literature made its first appearance, such as in the work of the playwright Guan Hanqing. Aside from this, the direct influence literature exerted upon people’s everyday life was also increased when popular novels were widely read among the people. The Chinese people’s understanding of “faithfulness” and “righteousness” even today comes mainly



## CHINESE LITERATURE

from the novels *Three Kingdoms* and *Outlaws of the Marsh*. In the mid-eighteenth century, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, an independent and scholarly novel influenced by Western literary concepts, was published. Following the history of several families, considering the fate of women and exploring the idea that “life is but a dream,” it captured the attention of the readers of that time and later generations. It is thought to be the greatest Chinese novel.

The early twentieth century saw the outburst of the “May 4<sup>th</sup>” New Culture Movement in China. An omni-directional transformation of Chinese literature took place, including the transformation of literary ideas, content and language, and even the relationship between Chinese literature and world literature. From this time a new period of modern Chinese literature unfolded. The modern idea of reshaping “national character” brought forward and promoted by Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren ran through the entire course of modern Chinese literature. By writing a few short stories and numerous essays, Lu Xun created portraits of the Chinese nation, moulding the self-image of the Chinese people within a few decades. After this, a multitude of novelists, essayists, dramatists, poets, literary theorists and critics explored the themes of cultural innovation, national liberation and class warfare, giving responses to social reality with different literary forms.

In the 1940s and 1950s, significant changes in Chinese society led to important changes in the Chinese literature pattern. Literature was given more prominence in social and political life. Cherishing the ideal of building an independent nation, most writers greeted the “New Times” with great warmth. To write epic works that would reflect the “great times” became the responsibility of writers with lofty ideals. With the ending of the ten barren years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a new historical period of contemporary literature was ushered in. This provided a new opportunity for contemporary literature and



## FOREWORD

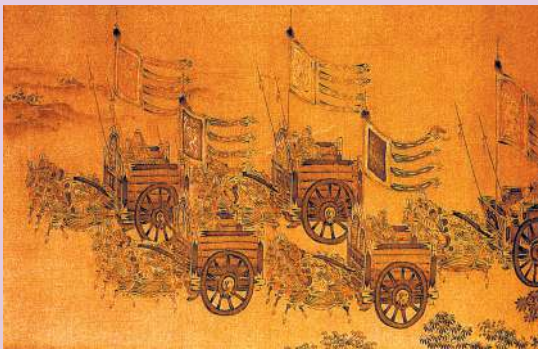
the policy of “letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend” was restored as the guiding principle in literary writing. Literary circumstances in the new era were completely changed. With the wide introduction of China’s market economy, China’s consumption began to boom and with it popular culture. Under the impact of a market economy, writers began to be aware of the commodity properties of literary creation, publication and distribution. As a result, many writers began to take part in the more profitable writings of “sub-literature.” As an important branch of “sub-literature,” China’s film and television literature and cyber literature has become an important branch of Chinese literary creation and is developing rapidly.



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# *The Book of Songs*

The Earliest Anthology of Poetry



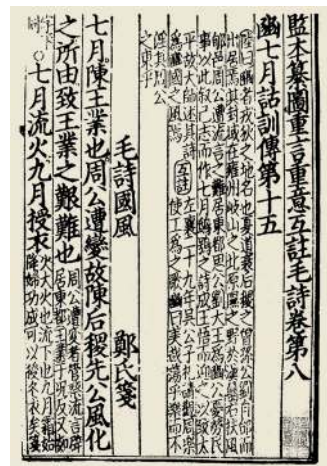


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## CHINESE LITERATURE

*The Book of Songs*, the earliest anthology of poetry in China, is one of the most significant survivals in Chinese literature. It contains 305 poems written in a period of almost 500 years, starting from the early years of the Western Zhou through to the mid-Spring and Autumn Period (c. eleventh to sixth century BC). Today, Confucius is generally believed to be the compiler of the book. In terms of origin, the poems included in *The Book of Songs* come from the following three sources: The first is called “advice poems.” When an emperor of the Western Zhou Dynasty held court, ministers and royal princes offered poems to him to make implicit remonstrances or to sing his praises. The second source is called “folk songs and ballads.” Official collectors of folk songs and ballads from the Western Zhou and other co-existing states went into villages to collect folk songs and ballads which were popular among the ordinary people. The rest of the poems included in *The Book of Songs* are songs that were specially used for sacrificial rites and on banquet occasions. These songs were written by “professional” writers such as court official musicians or shamans and official historians.

Accordingly, all the poems included in *The Book of Songs* fall into different sections. The poems that come from the people belong to the section of “Feng” (ballads or folk songs), the advice poems dedicated to the emperor belong to the section of “Ya” (court hymns or odes), and those used for sacrificial rites and banquet occasions belong to “Song” (sacrificial songs). Originally, “Feng,” “Ya” and “Song” were different genres of music. “Feng” referred to the local music of different states. “Ya,” meaning orthodox, referred to court music. “Song,” along with singing and dancing, was slow tempo dance music mainly used for sacrificial

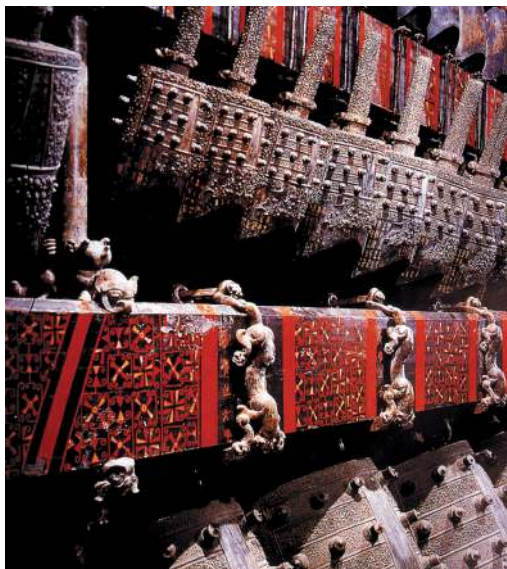


*The Book of Songs*, the block-printed edition of the Song Dynasty, collection of the National Library of China.



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THE BOOK OF SONGS



Bells were the main ceremonial musical instruments for sacrificial ceremonies and banquet occasions of Pre-Qin kings and aristocrats.

ceremonies. Due to the differences between the music and its purposes, the three sections of *The Book of Songs*, “Feng,” “Ya” and “Song,” bear some inconsistencies both in content and aesthetic style. “Ya” and “Song” are solemn and over-elaborate, while “Feng,” also known as “Guofeng” (folk songs of fifteen regions), is soul-stirring and passionate. However, taking into consideration the time of the Western Zhou Dynasty when *The Book of Songs* was written, politics and culture

were centered on the nobility. The common people had very little personal freedom, let alone the time to write. For this reason, the poems in the section of “Guofeng” in *The Book of Songs* were still works written by the nobility, though sometimes they served as spokesmen for the rustic and common people.

## “Folk Songs of Fifteen Regions” (“Guofeng”)

When talking about *The Book of Songs*, Chinese readers are often actually referring to the section of “Guofeng” in *The Book of Songs*. The love poems included in “Guofeng” are rather diverse and colorful: some are impassioned, some unbridled, and some simple and unadorned but refreshing. But all these love poems are the “true voice of the mind” with the least sign of affectation or decadence.





## CHINESE LITERATURE

The opening poem of *The Book of Songs*, “Crying Ospreys: Zhou and the South” in “Guofeng,” is about love. It reads:

*Merrily the ospreys cry, / On the islet in the stream. / Gentle and graceful is the girl, / A fit wife for the gentleman.*

These lines are perhaps among the most famous in Chinese poetry. Assuming that the birds translated here as “osprey” mated for life and were always seen together, the sight of these love birds naturally touched the poet’s longing for his sweetheart. Subsequently, he began to chant: “Merrily the ospreys cry, / On the islet in the stream. / Gentle and graceful is the girl, / A fit wife for the gentleman.” Through these lines, the poet expresses his longing for a girl. Unable to sleep or eat, the poet only hopes that one day he can win over the girl’s heart.

The love poems included in *The Book of Songs* are varied in content and form, but unrequited love is a consistent theme. The poems with this theme are also the most touching and inspiring. “Crying Ospreys” is one example. Another is “The Reeds: The Social Mode of Qin,” which reads:

*The reeds are luxuriant and green, / The white dew has turned to frost. / My beloved so dear to me / Is somewhere beyond the waters. / Upriver I search for him, / The way is arduous and long. / Downriver I search for him, / He seems to be in the middle of the waters.*

The poet’s poetic thoughts start with the reeds. “Man is but a reed,” said the French philosopher Blaise Pascal, “the weakest in nature, but he is a

**Ospreys**

Ospreys, sometimes known as sea hawks, are water birds. Zhu Xi, a Confucian scholar of the Song Dynasty, wrote that ospreys “are noted for their faithfulness in love. If one of a couple dies, the other will be so overwhelmed with anxiety and depression that it will starve itself to death.” As a Confucian scholar, Zhu Xi focuses on the “faithfulness” of the ospreys - once one of the couple dies, the other will cease to be too. The orthodox school of Confucianism since the Han Dynasty has accepted that *Crying Ospreys: Zhou and the South* is a poem extolling the virtues of the consorts of the Western Zhou emperors. Zhu Xi is actually demanding women to be faithful to their husbands. A major feature of the Confucian school of the Song Dynasty was that women were expected to remain unmarried after their husbands’ death or to commit suicide after their husbands’ death or in defense of their chastity. Of course, the faithfulness of the ospreys in “Crying Ospreys” is a “transitory interpretation” made by later generations. The original intention of the poet is more likely to have been to express longing and affection for the one he loved.



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THE BOOK OF SONGS

thinking reed.” In the poem, the reeds serve as a symbol for the fragility of human beings. The soft and gentle reeds by the waters swayed in the autumn wind. It looks as if the poet’s sweetheart is right there across the water. But when she tries to get there and reach him, she finds that the way is arduous and long and, moreover, her sweetheart always seems to be in the middle of the water, completely unattainable. This poem vividly conveys the sadness caused by a person’s longing for his or her sweetheart. The desolate and misty autumn scene is resonant with the poet’s feelings.



*The Social Mode of Bin* (detail), a painting by Ma Hezhi of the Song Dynasty. “In the Seventh Month: The Social Mode of Bin” is a famous poem on farming, depicting scenes of farmers’ labor during the four seasons. This painting is an artistic adaptation of the poem itself. It represents a joyful banquet scene at the end of the lunar year.

Of course, “Guofeng” covers a lot of ground in terms of content. There are also many poems concerning farming, war and feudal labor. “In the Seventh Month: The Social Mode of Bin” is a famous poem about the life of the farmers. It describes the farmers’ assiduous work throughout the year.

In comparison with “Ya” and “Song,” the language used in “Guofeng” is closer to the spoken language, and the four-character lines, which are more often grave and rigid in “Ya” and “Song,” become lively and dynamic in “Guofeng.” In “Guofeng,” there are many beautiful lines, which are either soul-stirring and broad-minded or profound and far-reaching in meaning.

