After Confucius

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The Reception of the \textit{Odes} in the Warring States Era

A thick description of Chinese philosophy requires, in addition to the desiderata outlined in the Introduction, the breakdown of certain anachronistic disciplinary boundaries. Ancient Chinese thinkers did not have to choose among fields such as philosophy, history, or literature; they were equally conversant with all these branches of learning and produced works that cannot be comprehended by focusing merely on their philosophical, historiographical, or literary contributions. The early reception of the \textit{Canon of Odes} (\textit{Shijing 詩經}) is a case in point. Students of Chinese literature have long recognized the towering status of this text in all periods of Chinese literary history, but accounts of Chinese philosophy rarely consider its use in philosophical disputation. The reason is that the typical academic curriculum treats the \textit{Odes}, because they are poems, as literature, not philosophy. But Chinese philosophers continually found philosophical meaning in the \textit{Odes} in a manner so peculiar and alien to modern tastes that a reader today cannot appreciate the character of early Chinese philosophy without seriously investigating the place of this text in their world.

Traditional commentators to the \textit{Odes} were known for their attempts to explicate the abstruse moral and political import of that collection. For centuries, their efforts were considered respectable, but some twentieth-century critics, both in China and the West, vilipended such commentary as “exegetical debris” obscuring the supposed simplicity of these songs. Herbert A. Giles, for example, complained: “Early commentators, incapable of seeing the simple natural beauties of the poems, which have furnished endless household words and a large stock of phraseology to the language of the present day… set to work to read into country-side ditties
deep moral and political significations. Every single one of the immortal
Three Hundred has thus been forced to yield some hidden meaning and
point an appropriate moral.”

Presumably, the “early commentators,” whom Giles declined to iden-
tify more closely, are to be understood as the author or authors of the so-
called Minor Prefaces (xiaoxu 小序) preceding each piece in the canon.
The attribution of these prefaces is another disputed matter, but it is
widely accepted that the later portions of these prefaces (the houxu 後
序) were written either by “Master Mao” 毛公—a reference to Mao
Heng 毛亨 or Mao Chang 毛苌 (both second century B.C.), who redacted
the received version of the text—or perhaps by Wei Hong 衛宏 (A.D. first
century). The fact that all of these figures lived during the Han dynasty
raises a crucial point: revisionist commentators like Giles, who fault ear-
lier interpreters of the Odes for reading too much into what appear to be
straightforward poems, seem to view this hermeneutic tradition as an ob-
jectionable phenomenon of imperial times. The idea is that the ancient
poems were originally mere “country-side ditties,” which the ancients un-
derstood as such but which imperial commentators, for political or per-
haps doctrinal reasons, distorted and misrepresented.

One important area of research that has been neglected is the recep-
tion of the Odes in pre-imperial times. While no complete and systematic
exegesis of the Odes like that of the Prefaces has been transmitted from
Zhou times, the extant texts still contain many interpretations, both im-
licit and explicit, of particular pieces. A survey of pre-imperial citations of
the Odes demonstrates that already in Zhou times these poems were
normally interpreted in the politicized manner that the later tradition en-
thusiastically adopted (and eventually ossified). These Zhou texts, which
contain the oldest readings of the Odes available to us, do not always agree
with the later Prefaces on specific details, but there is strong evidence of
a consensus that a thoughtful and persuasive interpretation of a canoni-
cal ode was one that elucidated its moral or political dimensions. If we
are to believe that the traditional commentators have misunderstood the
Odes, then we must acknowledge that this kind of “misunderstanding”
goes back to high antiquity—perhaps even as far back as the time of the
Odes themselves.

The following pre-imperial texts (listed roughly in chronological order)
contain references to or quotations from the Odes: Analects, Mozi, Mencius,
Xunzi, Zuo Commentary to the Springs and Autumn (Zuozhuan 左傳), Discourses of the States (Guoyu 國語), Canon of Filial Piety (Xiaoqing 孝經),

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Springs and Autumns of Master Yan (Yanzi Chunqiu 晏子春秋), Springs and Autumns of Mr. Lü, Han Feizi 韓非子, Guanzi 管子, Application of Equilibrium, and Stratagems of the Warring States (Zhanguo Ce 战国策). There are as yet but two archaeologically excavated texts that make substantive use of the Odes: The Five Forms of Conduct (Wuxing 五行) and Jet-Black Robes (Zyi 缫衣).⑨

Altogether, these works include some 520 references—⑧a considerable total to be sure, but not an astonishingly large one given that a single Han text, the Outer Commentary to the Hán Odes (Han-Shi waizhuan 韓詩外傳), contains approximately 315. Moreover, the vast majority of these 520 references are not helpful to the project of reconstructing the Zhou understanding of the Odes. This is because references to the Odes come in various conventional forms. Most commonly, a speaker will simply borrow a well-known phrase or apposite line from the canon, and while these quotations can be rhetorically effective (when not overused), they rarely shed any light on the author’s interpretation of the Ode itself.

For example, in the midst of a disquisition on ritual, the philosopher Xunzi wishes to prove that “when a feudal lord summons his ministers, the ministers do not wait for their horses to be yoked but rush off, having donned their clothing upside-down” 諸侯召其臣，臣不俟駕，顛倒衣裳而走.⑩ Ode 100 in the Mao sequence (“Dongfang wei ming” 東方未明) furnishes a matchless precedent for this argument, and Xunzi does not hesitate to recite it:

顛之倒之 I was donning my clothing upside-down;
自公召之 there was a summons for me from my lord.

This kind of quotation tells us nothing about how Xunzi interpreted Mao 100 (which happens to be a particularly enigmatic poem). He is merely invoking the canonical status of the text in order to buttress an argument to which it is not otherwise germane.

This manner of citation is very common. In the same passage, Xunzi quotes Mao 168 (“Chuju 出車) in order to prove that when the Son of Heaven summons his vassals, they drag their carriages to their horses (rather than waiting for the horses to be brought to them):⑨

我出我車 We went out with our carriages
于彼牧矣 to that pasture ground.
自天子所 From the seat of the Son of Heaven
謂我來矣 we were called to come.
Some other typical examples:

Mencius and Xunzi both cite the same lines from Mao 154 ("Qiyue" 七月) to describe the life of the common folk:11

晝爾于茅
The days you spend among the mao grasses;
宵爾索絃
at night you twist it into cord.
亟其乘屋
Quickly mount the roof!
其始播百穀
Start sowing the many grains!

Mencius cites Mao 179 ("Jugong" 車攻) to demonstrate that even a charioteer must drive according to the right protocols:12

不失其聶
They do not fail as they drive [the horses] to a gallop;
舍矢如破
they loose their arrows and13 crush [the game].

In the Zuo Commentary, the Marquis of Jin 晉侯 cites Mao 193 ("Shiyue zhi jiao" 十月之交) as a preamble to a question about the significance of eclipses:14

此日而食
Now that the sun has been eclipsed—
于何不臧
Oh, what discord!

A different portion of the same poem is quoted elsewhere in the Zuo Commentary in an argument on the futility of prognostication in the absence of virtue:15

下民之孽
The depravity of the base people
不降自天
does not descend from Heaven.
噂舌背憎
Jabbering and babbling, hatred behind the back—
職艱由人
strife simply arises from people.

Considering that this poem articulates an attitude toward Heaven and human beings comparable to the view later defended by Xunzi, it is not surprising that he too quoted these lines.16

The narrator of the Zuo Commentary cites Mao 198 ("Qiaoyan" 巧言) to illustrate the principle that treaties are of no use when there is no good faith.17

君子屢盟
The gentleman makes frequent covenants;
亂是用長
this is only an occasion for the growth of disorder.
Mencius quotes Mao 212 (“Datian” 大田) in order to prove that hereditary emolument was the custom in antiquity.¹⁸

雨我公田 Let it rain on our communal fields,
熑及我私 and then extend to our private ones.

Mozi is said to have cited Mao 235 (“Wenwang” 文王) with the intention of proving one of his favorite tenets, namely, the existence of ghosts.

文王在上 King Wen is above;
於昭于天 oh, how he shines in Heaven.
周雖舊邦 Although Zhou was an old nation,
其命維新 its mandate has renewed it.
有周不顯 Is the possessor of Zhou not illustrious?
帝命不時 Is the mandate of Di not timely?
文王陟降 King Wen ascends and descends,
在帝左右 on the left and the right of Di.

Mozi observes that King Wen, long dead, could hardly be “on the left and the right of Di”—unless he were a ghost.¹⁹

In an anecdote included in both the Springs and Autumns of Mr. Lü and Springs and Autumns of Master Yan, Yan Ying 晏婴 (d. 500 B.C.) cites the following lines from Mao 239 (“Hanlu” 閩麓) before declaring that he will not seek fortune by betraying his lord:²⁰

英英葛蔓 Lush are the dolichos and lei creepers,
施于條枚 spreading²¹ among the branches and stems.
豈弟君子 The serene gentleman
求福不回 will not seek fortune by crooked means.

Several early passages dealing with the construction of towers or pleasure parks make use of the ready canonical precedent in Mao 242 (“Lingtai” 霧臺), wherein it is recorded that King Wen did not oppress his populace when he built his magnificent tower.²²

Similarly, both the Discourses of the States and the Mencius cite the last lines of Mao 255 (“Dang” 蓋) when they wish to refer to an age of doom preceding the transference of Heaven’s Mandate:²³

殷靉不遠 The mirror of Yin is not distant;
在夏后之世 it is in the age of the lords of Xia.
One could go on rehearsing such cases. But these ten examples suffice to show that citations of this sort, however skillful, do not necessarily disclose anything about the speakers’ interpretations of the poems themselves. Yan Ying’s anecdote is instructive. The first line of the quotation “Lush are the dolichos and lei creepers” 莫萎葛藟 is usually taken by commentators to have some kind of metaphorical or allegorical meaning: one must cling to the virtuous example of one’s forefathers as a creeper clings to a tree.24 But Master Yan is interested only in the aphorism that a gentleman does not seek fortune by crooked means.25 One might argue that the dolichos and lei creepers constitute a meaningful image for Master Yan as well: for example, one could say that just as a vine cannot survive without its host, Master Yan cannot prosper if he betrays his lord. But his utterance would still be comprehensible without a creative reading along those lines. He might simply be taking advantage of the coincidence that Mao 239 contains a line providentially relevant to his own condition. In that respect, the example imparts no definitive hermeneutical information whatsoever.

The vast majority of pre-imperial references to the Odes are of this genus: because the text is cited as a canon or apophthegm rather than as a poem, the speaker simply does not reveal his personal interpretation—if he even has one. Moreover, such citations could become banal. For example, thinkers of various backgrounds intoned the famous lines from Mao 205 (“Beishan” 北山) when describing the supremacy of the Son of Heaven:26

薄天之下 Under billowing Heaven,
莫非王土 there is nothing that is not the king’s land.
率土之濬 Along the sea boundaries of the land,
莫非王臣 there is no one who is not the king’s servitor.

But few writers seemed to bear in mind that in the original poem the references to the king’s power are bitter and ironic. Mencius stands out for rebuking an interlocutor who cited this ode as though it were simply a formulaic exaltation of the king’s position; the real meaning of the ode (shi zhi wei 詩之謂), Mencius declares, is that “in toiling at the king’s business, [the speaker] was unable to nourish his parents” 勞於王事，而不得養父母也.27 Nevertheless, in remembering the original context of the odes that he quoted, Mencius was decidedly in the minority; most pre-imperial texts disregarded such concerns entirely.28

There is another inhibiting feature of the evidence: the distribution
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of the cited poems is significantly uneven. Specifically, there is a pronounced tendency among Zhou texts to cite poems in the sections of the *Odes* called “Elegantiae” 雅 (especially the “Greater Elegantiae” 大雅) and “Hymns” 頌 rather than those in the “Airs of the States” 國風. The most frequently quoted “Air” is Mao 152 (“Shijiu” 鳥鈜), which is cited ten times in the literature. By contrast, the most frequently quoted “Elegantiae,” namely, Mao 235 (“Wenwang” 文王) and Mao 256 (“Yi” 母), are cited twenty-five and twenty-six times, respectively; together, these two poems account for almost 10 percent of all the references. Moreover, only 107 of the 520 total references are from the “Airs,” even though that section contains more poems than the others combined. (The “Airs” make up the first 160 of the 305 poems in the collection.) This means that a given poem in the “Elegantiae” or “Hymns” is roughly four times more likely to be cited than one in the “Airs.”

Sometimes it is suggested that because the “Elegantiae” and “Hymns” deal with loftier themes than the “Airs,” they were considered more suitable for citation. On the one hand, there may be some merit to this explanation: it would be understandable if an author thought it perhaps safer to quote a grandiloquent paean titled “King Wen” (Mao 235) than an aubade called “The Girl Said, ‘The Cock Croweth’” (Mǔ yue ji míng 女曰雞鳴, Mao 82). There must be more to the issue, however. Pre-imperial texts still refer to the “Airs” regularly and without any hint of pudency. While they acknowledge the frank nature of the poems, they do not assert that the “Airs” are shameful or inappropriate to elegant discourse. The attitude expressed by Xunzi is characteristic: “There is a tradition about the lustfulness of the ‘Airs of the States’: ‘They are replete with desire but do not seep beyond the [correct] stopping-point’ 國風之好色也，傳曰：盈其欲而不恱其止.”

It is less commonly observed that the “Airs” are more difficult, from a hermeneutical point of view, than the “Elegantiae” and “Hymns.” The “Airs” are, after all, among the most opaque and powerful lyrics in world literature. While the later sections are brimming with stately and self-contained pronouncements on virtue and ritual, the “Airs” present quotidian themes laced with pregnant natural imagery. A citation of an “Air” in the course of an argument requires a degree of critical attention that might overwhelm the rest of the passage. Consequently, when a quotation from the “Airs” does appear in a pre-imperial text, it usually forms the centerpiece of discourse. Rhetorically speaking, the “Elegantiae” and “Hymns” are more versatile, because one can refer to them casually without having to fear that they may prove so profound as to lead the reader
astray. But for precisely this reason, we are most likely to learn about how early readers interpreted the *Odes* by studying their citations from the “Airs.”

For material with which to confront the view of Giles and readers of a similar mindset, one can begin with an anecdote in the *Springs and Autumns of Mr. Lü*:

晋人欲攻鄭，令叔嚢聘焉，視其有人與無人。子產為之詩曰：子惠思我，叔嚢涉滄，子不我思，豈無他土？叔嚢歸曰：鄭有人，子產在焉。不可攻也，秦。苟近，其詩有異心，不可攻也。子產曰：詩云：無競惟人。子產一稱而鄭國免。37

The men of Jin wished to attack Zheng, so they ordered Shuxiang to go there as an envoy and see whether there were any [formidable] people there. Zichan recited an ode for him: “If you think kindly on me, raise your skirts and ford the Wei; if you do not think on me, are there no other men?” [Mao 87, “Qianchang” 晋襄].

Shuxiang returned home and said: “There is a [formidable]38 man in Zheng; Zichan resides there, and [Zheng] cannot be attacked. It is near Qin and Chu, and his poem had a special intention. [Zheng] cannot be attacked.” The men of Jin then ceased their attack on Zheng.

Confucius said: “It is said in the *Odes*: ‘Is he not mighty, he who is humane?’ [Mao 256, “Yi”]. Zichan made one citation, and the state of Zheng was spared.”39

This passage is important for several reasons. First, despite the prominent reference to Confucius, the text in which this anecdote is found, namely, the *Springs and Autumns of Mr. Lü*, is neither Confucian nor orthodox,40 though the manner of citing and interpreting the *Odes* displayed by Zichan and Shuxiang may have been inspired by the Confucian tradition (more on this subject below). Furthermore, the text dates to the mid-third century B.C., several hundred years after the time of the *Odes* themselves but still long before those traditional commentators who displease modern critics. Finally, the two quotations from the *Odes* conform to the pattern of usage outlined above: the lines from Mao 87, a poem in the “Airs,” represent the heart of the entire episode, whereas the verse from Mao 256, sententious but ancillary, serves only to summarize a point after it has already been brilliantly earned.

The key to the passage lies in the phrase *jixin* 異心 (literally “differ-
ent heart”), the polysemous term that Shuxiang uses to characterize Zichan’s poem. Shuxiang is able to discern that Zichan is a formidable man because his poem has significance beyond its literal meaning—rendered above as “special intention.” So Shuxiang reports to his compatriots that Zheng cannot be attacked because it houses a gentleman who knows how to express himself in allusive verse. Someone as refined as that would surely be able to defend his homeland.

But in keeping with the amatory theme of Zichan’s poem, yixin can also mean “inconstant heart,” such as would be possessed by a lover who is about to confer his or her affections on someone else. In this affair of international diplomacy, Shuxiang deduces that the new mate would be either of two potent competitors: Qin and Chu. Zichan’s quotation, therefore, has a twofold function: it demonstrates that Zheng is home to some redoubtable statesmen and at the same time sternly warns Jin not to abandon its former ally when there are other suitors to contend with.41

The figure of Confucius praises Zichan to the skies in the coda to this anecdote, but the cultured reader is probably supposed to admire Shuxiang as well. To understand a message as dense as Zichan’s requires a schooled interpreter, and by correctly decoding Zichan’s statement of intent, Shuxiang evidently prevented Jin from undertaking a disastrous invasion. Furthermore, Shuxiang himself exhibits the same facility with implicative language by describing Zichan’s poem as having yixin, a phrase with two distinct, yet equally appropriate, senses.

This kind of deep reading, informed by the conviction that the verses of the Odes, however terrene their ostensible subject, must contain latent and sage meaning, is reminiscent of the Minor Prefaces.42 The Minor Preface to Mao 87 is vague, but there can be no doubt that it too interprets the love relation in the poem as an emblem of a weightier matter of state:

象賢·思見正也·狂童恣行，國人思大國之正己也。43

In “Qianchang” there is yearning to be corrected. The “crazed boy” [the object of the speaker’s recriminations] was acting recklessly, and the citizens yearned for a great state to govern them.

One would assume that according to this exegesis, the “crazed boy” refers to the debauched ruler of Zheng. The citizens are threatening to transfer their loyalty to a more deserving sovereign.44 It is but a small step from the interpretive convention exemplified by Zichan and
Shuxiang to the systematic exegetical scheme that Giles detested: assigning “deep moral and political significations” to poems that do not seem to depict anything more remarkable than two lovers quarreling by a brook. As indicated above, only a small minority of the roughly five hundred references to the Odes in pre-imperial texts involve this degree of hermeneutic firepower. But where such references occur, the sources proceed consistently from the presupposition that the canonical poems lend themselves to multifaceted interpretations. No text ever claims that the poems are really just about work, love, and daily life.

Political interpretations of the “Airs,” as in the anecdote about Zichan and Shuxiang, are common in the Zuo Commentary. In 583 B.C., we are told, the state of Jin required its weaker neighbor Lu to return the lands of Wenyang 汾陽 to Qi in order to placate the latter, even though it had but six years earlier asked Qi to hand over this same territory to Lu. A representative of the beleaguered state of Lu then addressed his counterpart from Jin:

大國制義，以為盟主，是以諸侯懷德焉討，無有貳心。謂汾陽之田，蔽邑之舊也，而用師于齊，使歸諸敝邑。今有二命，曰：歸諸齊。信以行義，義以成命，小國所望而懷也。信不可知，義無所立，四方諸侯，其誰不解體？詩曰：女也不爽，士貳其行，士也罔極，二三其德。七年之中，一興一蕩，二三其德。士之二三，猶養貳匹，況貴主乎？霸主將德是以，而二三之，其何以長有諸侯乎？詩曰：猶之未遠，是用大簡。行父懼晉之不遠遠而失諸侯也，是以敢私言之。45

Your great state has come to preside over treaties by instituting righteousness; therefore, the feudal lords cherish your favors and dread your chastisements, without possessing a duplicitous heart. Regarding the fields of Wenyang: they were an old [territory] of our lowly fief; after you deployed your hosts against Qi, you brought about their return to our lowly fief. Now there is a second command; you say: “Return them to Qi.” Trustworthiness in carrying out what is right and righteousness in consolidating your mandate—these are what our minor state admires and cherishes. But if your trustworthiness cannot be known and your righteousness has no foundation, then who among the feudal lords will not dissolve [their bonds with you]? It is said in the Odes: “The girl has not erred, but the gentleman has been two-faced in his conduct. The gentleman is unrestrained; 46 variable is his character” [Mao 58, “Meng 蒙” 翻]. Within seven years, you have granted us [the land] once and taken it away once—what can be more variable than this? When the gentleman [in the poem] was variable, he lost his mate; how
much more do you have [to lose] as a hegemonic lord? A hegemonic lord must apply virtue, but you are variable in this respect; how can you long retain [the allegiance] of the feudal lords? It is said in the Odes: “Your counsels have not reached far, and I greatly expostulate with you on this account” [Mao 254, “Ban” 木]. Fearing that Jin may lose [the allegiance] of the feudal lords through counsels that “have not reached far,” I have ventured to speak to you privately about this.47

Whereas the quotation from the “Greater Elegantiae,” for all its elegance, is once again entirely dispensable, the quotation from the “Airs” is central. The plenipotentiary from Lu compares the relationship between his state and Jin to that between the wronged speaker in Mao 58 and her faithless, desultory lover.48 The consequence of dealing falsely with one’s dependent neighbors is the termination of a liaison that ought to be mutually rewarding.

While it is evident that a free and open-ended approach to the Odes is essential to the speech above, the implicit interpretations are not so arcane as to make the argument difficult to follow. If we are to believe the pages of the Zuo Commentary, this sort of rhetoric, adorned with artfully chosen lines from the canon, was commonplace and plainly intelligible to all but the crudest participants in elite culture.49 The disdain endured by those infamous characters who failed to comprehend the significance of an ode demonstrates that what we might term “Ode oratory” was considered to be a basic component of aristocratic education.50

Some of the more difficult citations of the Odes, in contrast, involve not political interpretations, which conform to familiar templates, but moral ones. A typical example is found in the Springs and Autumns of Mr. Lü:

詩曰：執善如絆。孔子曰：審此言也可以為天下。子貢曰：何其躁也？孔子曰：非謂其躁也，謂其為之於此，而成事於彼也，聖人修其身，而成事於天下矣。51

It is said in the Odes: “I grasp the reins as though they were ribands” [Mao 38, “Jian xi” 简兮].

Confucius said: “Examine this saying, and you can govern the world.”

Zigong [i.e., Duanmu Si 端木赐, b. 520 a.c.] said: “Why is he so impetuous?”

Confucius said: “[The poem] does not refer to his impetuousness but to his acting on what is near and bringing refinement to what is far. The
Sage cultivates himself as though he were weaving ribands and brings refinement to the world.”

The lesson of this exchange is that the moral meaning of the *Odes* cannot be found without penetrating to a layer of the language deep beneath the literal veneer. Zigong tries to understand why his master reveres this quote from Mao 38 and assumes that it must have something to do with the driver’s evident haste. But Confucius replies that the fundamental meaning of the poem has nothing to do with the impetuousness of a charioteer: it lies instead in the basic Confucian notion that one influences the world by cultivating oneself.54 While the details of his explanation are not entirely clear—does he mean that the driver will go on to accomplish great things because of the care with which he tends the reins?—his larger point about reading the *Odes* is unmistakable: Zigong will not understand the full import of the quote until he has broken out of a literal frame of mind.

*Analects* 14.39 is one of the most famous examples of moral reading:

"子擊磬於衛，有荷蕘而過孔氏之門者，曰：有心哉，擊磬乎！既而曰：鄭哉擊磬乎！莫己知也，斯己而已矣。深則傷，淺則賖。子曰：果哉，末之難矣！"

The Master was playing chimes in Wei. Someone carrying a basket passed by Confucius’ gate and said: “There is heart in the way he strikes the chimes!” Then he said: “It is vulgar, this sound of pebbles clanging! If there is no one who knows you, then just be by yourself. ‘Where it is deep, they cross with their clothes on. Where it is shallow, they cross by lifting their clothes’ [Mao 34, ‘Pao you kuue’ 匪手有著].”

The Master said: “Indeed! There is no refuting that!”

This is a very dense passage. Commentators have debated its meaning for centuries (and there may also be some intractable problems of textual corruption).55 Still, the basic elements are clear. The person “carrying a basket” reveals himself to be no simple peasant but a perspicacious ancharite who is able to discern the emotions that Confucius expresses through his music. Confucius is evidently distraught that he has not found anyone who knows him (*jizhi* 已知), that is, one who understands his philosophical outlook and lofty intentions. Then the critic cites a passage from Mao 34, suggesting that Confucius’ anguish is comparable to
that of the speaker in the poem, an unwed girl left waiting by a riverbank. Probably the hermit means to say that Confucius should simply cross his intellectual ford without worrying about who might accompany him.\textsuperscript{58}

Another celebrated dialogue on the \textit{Odes} appears in \textit{Analects} 3.8:

子夏問曰：巧笑倩兮，美目盼兮，素以為絹兮，何謂也？子曰：繪事後素。 曰：禮後乎？子曰：起予者商也！始可與言詩已矣。\textsuperscript{59}

Zixia [i.e., Bu Shang 卜商, b. 507 B.C.] asked: “Oh, her artful smile is dimpled. Oh, her beautiful eye is black and white.\textsuperscript{60} Oh, a plain [background] on which to apply the highlights’ [Mao 57, “Shiren 硯人.”]\textsuperscript{61}

What does this refer to?”

The Master said: “In painting, everything follows the plain [background].”

[Zixia] said: “Does ritual follow [in similar fashion]?”

The Master said: “Shang, it is you who have inspired me. Finally I have someone to discuss the \textit{Odes} with.”\textsuperscript{62}

Here too the interpretation of the ode is rarefied and confusing. Presumably Zixia means to say that the rituals, significant though they may be, still constitute nothing more than a set of embellishments that are effective only if practiced by those who have prepared themselves for the task. It is not the lady’s makeup, but her pristine face, that makes her beautiful; by analogy, it is not our mastery of rituals, but the purity of our moral foundation, that indicates our moral worth. Devote yourself to self-cultivation, in other words, rather than to conspicuous propriety.\textsuperscript{63}

Critics may contend that there is no trace of such a meaning in the original poem; indeed, if a verse devoted to a woman’s cosmetics can be transformed into an epochal meditation on moral philosophy, what kind of reading would \textit{not} be called for?\textsuperscript{64} But Zixia is simply extending the liberal hermeneutic that was standard in his day and deriving a moral insight that even Confucius must applaud. If this example departs from the previous ones, the difference is only one of degree; what all these readings have in common is the idea that we have done the \textit{Odes} justice when we can articulate an interpretation that is both instructive and unapparent.

This style of exegesis was congenial to the later Confucian Xunzi. For example, in the midst of excoriating sophists who enjoy perplexing people with paradoxes such as “Eggs have hair” 卵有毛, Xunzi declares:
君子行不貪苟難，說不貪苟察，名不貪苟傳，唯其當之為貴。詩曰：物其有幸焉，唯其時矣，此之謂也。⁶⁵

In his actions, the noble man does not esteem difficult acts if they are indecorous; in his speech, he does not esteem investigations if they are indecorous; in matters of reputation, he does not esteem traditions if they are indecorous. He esteems only what is appropriate. When it is said in the Odes, “The goods are in quantities, and yet they are timely” [Mao 170, “Yuî” 葉麗], this is what it refers to.⁶⁶

A review of Mao 170 will reveal that the “goods”—fish and wine, perhaps gathered for a sacrifice—do not, in the context of the poem, pertain even remotely to indecorous casuistry (or any of the other targets of Xunzi’s plentiful animadversions). Xunzi’s motivation in quoting this line has to do with the word “timely” (shi 時): his point is that timely and suitable actions can bring about great quantities of goods without violating any moral principles. So the tactics of sophists and cozeners are not only disgraceful, but also unnecessary. One cannot take Xunzi literally when he says that Mao 170 “refers to” (wei 謂) this teaching. Rather, he means to say that he can illustrate his argument through a deep reading of the poem.⁶⁷

In the same manner, he glosses the line “The crane squalls in the nine marshes; the sound is heard in the skies” 鶴鳴于九皋，聲聞于天 (Mao 184, “Heming” 鶴鳴) as a reference to the ability of a moral paragon to influence the world even if his social position is base.⁶⁸ Here too, the original poem contains no manifest allegorical or metaphorical meaning,⁶⁹ but Xunzi invests it with profound moral significance. Transforming the world through the perfection of one’s character is the highest aspiration of the early Confucian school.

The genius of the early Confucian masters for discovering complex moral attitudes in the formally simple language of the Odes is nowhere exhibited more fully than in The Five Forms of Conduct, a text that was lost in antiquity and remained utterly unknown until it was discovered at Mawangdui in the 1970s. Another manuscript of the work has recently been excavated in an elite tomb at Guodian, and most scholars now regard it as a revered Confucian document from the fourth century B.C.⁷¹

The Five Forms of Conduct weaves quotations from the Odes into its sustained moral discourse in a manner unparalleled by any other text.
不仁，思不能清；不智，思不能長。不仁不智，未見君子，憂心不能懸懸，
既見君子，心能不悅。詩曰：未見君子，憂心懸懸，亦既見之，亦既觀之，
我心則悅。此之謂。不仁，思不能清；不賢，思不能貯，不仁不賢，未見君
子，憂心不能忡忡，既見君子，心不能降。72

If one is not humane, one’s thoughts cannot be clear. If one is not wise, one’s thoughts cannot be extended. One will be neither humane nor wise. If one’s “concerned heart cannot be agitated, not having seen one’s lord,” then one’s “heart cannot be delighted, having seen one’s lord.” This is what is meant when it is said in the Odes: “Indeed when I have seen him, indeed when I have joined him, then my heart will be delighted” [Mao 14, “Caochong” 草蟲]. If one is not humane, one’s thoughts cannot be clear. If one is not sage, one’s thoughts cannot be light. One will be neither humane nor sage. If one’s “concerned heart cannot be sorrowful, not having seen one’s lord,” then one’s “heart cannot be calmed, having seen one’s lord.”

This argument is constructed around a series of intentional misquotations from Mao 14.73 The poem, ostensibly a plaint of longing by an ardent woman, is typical of its genre:

哽哽草螽  Yao, yao, chirp the insects in the grass.  
躍躍螽螽  The hoppers jump about.  
未見君子  I have not seen my lord,  
憂心忡忡  and my sorrowful heart is agitated.74  
亦既見之  Indeed, when I have seen him,  
亦既觀之  indeed, when I have joined him,  
我心則頹  my heart will be calmed.  

陟彼南山  I ascend that southern mountain,  
言采其薺  yea, and pick the ferns.  
未見君子  I have not seen my lord,  
憂心懸懸  and my sorrowful heart is sad.  
亦既見之  Indeed, when I have seen him,  
亦既覩之  indeed, when I have joined him,  
我心則悅  my heart will be delighted.  

陟彼南山  I ascend that southern mountain,  
言采其薺  yea, and pick the thorn-ferns.  
未見君子  I have not seen my lord,
我心傷悲 and my heart is wounded with grief.
亦既見之 Indeed, when I have seen him,
亦既觀之 indeed, when I have joined him,
我心則夷 my heart will be at peace.

Even traditional commentators acknowledge the unvarnished eroticism of this song, but *The Five Forms of Conduct* elevates it to the august plane of Confucian moral psychology by emphasizing that one would not be capable of feelings such as agitation and delight without the virtues of humanity and wisdom. To an uninitiated reader, the subject of the poem may appear to be amorous passion, but *The Five Forms of Conduct* advances a deeper interpretation: the poem is a statement of the power of properly stimulated emotions. (This attitude may remind us of Xunzi’s assertion that the “Airs” are “replete with desire but do not seep beyond the [cor-rect] stopping point.”) The vivid affections of the speaker, far from being shameful, testify to the fervent development of her moral sense. A person who does not experience violent emotions—and struggle to keep them in check—must have stunted moral faculties. The technique of deliberately misquoting the lines of the canon has a striking effect: it allows the text to refer more forcefully to the putative spirit rather than the letter of the *Odes*.

The hermeneutical approach displayed by the texts surveyed above may not be unfamiliar to readers of Chinese literature, because, as we have noted, they rest on the same conviction that guided traditional critics and commentators into the twentieth century: a satisfactory interpretation of an ode must reveal its embossed wisdom. What is noteworthy, then, is not the nature of these interpretations, but their date: the latest texts examined above date to the third century B.C., while some of the oldest go back at least to the fifth. This is not yet the world of the *Odes* themselves—assuming that they are as old as the tradition holds them to be—but it is as close as we can come with the sources available today. We may never be able to discover what the *Odes* meant to the men and women in distant antiquity who composed them and first recited them, but at least we have some idea of how they were received by readers only a few generations later.

An instructive passage delineating the right way to read an ode appears in *Mencius* 5A.4 (the same scene, discussed above, in which Mencius admonishes his partner in dialogue for misapplying the lines “Under billowing Heaven, there is nothing that is not the king’s land”).
One who interprets the *Odes* does not take the words to distort the lyric or the lyric to distort [the poet’s] intention. To engage this intention with one’s own faculties—that is to comprehend it.77

The exhortation to avoid literalism would probably find favor among sophisticated readers today, whereas the duty to “engage the poet’s intention” would be dismissed as a manifestation of the intentional fallacy.78 But the aporia of the *Odes* renders Mencius’ hermeneutic fruitfully indeterminate in practice.79 To take the example of the crane calling in her paludal habitat: Xunzi’s unique interpretation—that the sound of the crane symbolizes the noble man’s transformative influence on the universe around him—emerged naturally from the culture of reading that flourished in his time. In that world, to insist that the poem had no larger significance would have been tantamount to diminishing the author’s stature; for any poetaster can write a few lines about a bird calling in the wild, but only a sage can transmute such an ordinary image into a diurnal instruction. No early reader would have dared to suggest that when the venerable authors of the *Odes* sang about a lovers’ squabble, they did not expect us to infer a sublime moral.

Finally, when Confucius repeatedly accentuates the value of the *Odes* (as in *Analects* 16.13 and 17.9), his opinion is not to be taken lightly.80 The intensity of the Confucian school’s devotion to the *Odes* is revealed by their studied citations of that text. The overwhelming majority of pre-imperial references to the *Odes* appear in Confucian works, and it is to the Confucian tradition that we owe not only some of the most memorable examples of tropological reading but probably the very concept of interpreting the *Odes* in this manner. Participating in Confucian culture meant more than simply professing a congeries of ethical beliefs; Confucianism was also a distinct form of expression. Since Confucianism as an intellectual movement has been notoriously difficult to define, perhaps we might try a novel tack: the Confucians were philosophers who pondered the *Odes*. Other groups, such as the Mohists, may also have accepted the *Odes* as canonical, and writers with no partisan loyalties, such as the compilers of the *Liùshì chünqiú*, may have adopted the art of referring suggestively to the *Odes*, but it was the Confucians who made it the hallmark of their discourse.