



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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An Introduction of Two Poems from *the Book of Poetry*

Word Count: 2,280

Respected Provost, Miss Deng and my classmates, good afternoon. My name is Siyao Zeng. The topic I would like to share with you today is ‘An Introduction of two poems from *The Book of Poetry*’. The presentation is separated into four parts: first I would give you a brief introduction of the background of the poems. Second, I would introduce and explain two poems separately. Third, is my personal understanding. After that is my conclusion.

Introduction

The two poems I am going to introduce today, are *Cutting Hardwood* and *Big Rat*, which is *Fatan* 伐檀 and *Shuoshu* 碩鼠 in Chinese. They come from *the Book of Poetry*, the *Airs of the States*, *Airs of Wey* 魏. The poems in the poetry are presented in three forms, they are: the *Airs of the States*, the *Odes*, and the *Hymns*. The *Airs of the States* were the popular songs in different feudal states during Zhou dynasty. The *Odes* were the songs of royal states. The hymns were the songs about sacrifice in ancestral temple. The melodies of those songs had been lost for thousands years while the lyrics remained have become the poetry we see today, this is *the Book of Poetry*, and it is also known as *the Book of Songs*. For popular songs can always reflect the situation of a state, the two poems I introduce today can bring us back to the politics and people’s feelings in the state of Wey at ancient times.

At the beginning, one thing I shall mention is the angle of my introduction. I will show the two poems from the perspective of *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* which has also included these two poems. This is very important because this perspective is very meaningful to incumbents and leaders. *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* was edited by official adviser Wei Zheng, Chu Suiliang and other official scholars during the early period of Tang dynasty, compiled from the Hundred Schools of Thought, classics and history before Tang dynasty. The book aimed to draw lessons from the past dynasty and politics, offer warning and advice to emperor Taizong of Tang to benefit his governance and

improve national politics. This aim had made this book become an important textbook for the later emperors of the Tang dynasty and even all levels of officials. The whole poems are always long and it is often repetitious in the *Airs*. While leaders are always busy, therefore, for delivering the main idea and implication of the selected poems to the emperor as soon as possible, Wei Zheng tended to pick and compile one paragraph or a few sentences from one poem. This means the text I show on the screen is not the whole poem, they are only the selected part. This is a typical edition feature of *The Governing Principles of Ancient China*, it can help us to focus on the purpose of choosing it, and guide us to see the influence on an emperor.

Introduction of Two Poems

For these two poems come from the *Airs* of Wey, I would like to give a brief account about the state of Wey. Wey was a small state in the eastern part of present-day Shanxi, which was adsorbed into the large state of Jin to the east in the seventh century B.C. According to the annotation of Zheng Xuan, he said, ‘The state of Wey borders the states of Qin and Jin, they were so powerful that Wey was invaded by them and its territory was shrinking gradually, the people of Wey were worrying.’¹ This worry and fear had generated *Bianfeng* 變風 and *Bianya* 變雅 in the state of Wey during the reign of King Ping and King Huan of Zhou dynasty. The concept of *Bianfeng* and *Bianya* means songs produced in domestic chaos times.’ Therefore, we can see the *Airs* of Wey were produced in chaos so that most of its poems show strong emotion of resentment and anger.

*Cutting Hardwood*²

Chop, chop they cut the hardwood

And lay it on the river bank

By the waters so clear and rippling.

If we did not sow, it we did not reap,

How should we get corn, three hundred stack-yards?

¹ Pei Puxian 裴普賢, *Textbook of Shijing Annotation* 《詩經評註讀本》, (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 2020), p. 249.

² Translated by Arthur Waley, edited by Joseph R. Allen, *The Book of Songs*, (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. 86.

If you did not hunt, if you did not chase,
One would not see all those badgers hanging in your courtyard.

No, indeed, that lord
Does not feed on the bread of idleness.

The prologue of *Fatan* said, ‘This poem is to satirise corruption. At that time, officials were greedy and mean, they profited from ordinary people's toil, making no chance for those worthy person to secure an official position.’ From this statement we can see, the aim of *Fatan* is to criticise the King of Wey and his officials for profiting from ordinary people's toil and ignoring the welfare of their people.

*Big rat*³
Big rat, big rat,
Do not gobble our millet!
Three years we have slaved for you,
Yet you take no notice of us.
At last we are going to leave you
And go to that happy land.

The prologue of *Shuoshu* said, ‘This poem is to satirise levying heavy taxes. People was satirising their King for his excessive accumulation of wealth, nibbling at his people's hard work, disregarding national affairs. These made him greedy and fearful of people like a big rat.’

When I was reading the translation of this poem, I noticed that there is an interesting translation: Waley translated ‘三岁贯女，莫我肯顾’ as ‘Three years we have slaved for you, yet you take no notice of us.’ He used the word ‘slaved’ to explain ‘Guan 贯’. This word however in Chinese is interchangeable with ‘Guan 慣’, which literally means ‘spoil and

³ Translated by Arthur Waley, edited by Joseph R. Allen, *The Book of Songs*, (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. 87.

pamper’. In general, this sentence is suggesting that people were spoiling their King like spoiling mouse, or feeding mouse. But somehow it looks uncomfortable if we translate it like this directly, like ‘big rat big rat, three years we have spoiled you’. While this is where Waley’s excellence shows. He used the word ‘slaved’, which indicates a background that people were slaving to satisfied their king’s order and an emotion that they were unwillingly slaving. Perhaps Waley was thinking it is too offensive to describe the actions of complying king’s command as ‘spoil’, so he just used ‘slaved’ to present people’s situation and feelings, which was telling the truth, and blaming directly as well.

There is a two-way significance in this poem. Fuguang 輔廣, a scholar of Song dynasty, pointed that, ‘Through “Three years we have slaved for you” we can see people’s perfect loyalty to their king; “Yet you take no notice of us” shows that the king was too cruel to his people. Under a circumstances like this, it is not a guilty that people wanted to leave and go to “that happy land”.’⁴ Niu Zhenyun 牛震運, a scholar of Qing dynasty, he stated, ‘Calling ‘big rat’ twice shows how deep their pains were. “Three years we have slaved for you” is really a grudge tone, however, this is also a point to prove their loyalty.’⁵ I think he would have say so is because the people were only blaming or complaining, but they were still tolerating and complying king’s order, instead of betraying. From these two statements we can see the significance to both king and his people. The poem warns the ruler should not ignore his people, instead, he should work hard on his position and take overall responsibility for his people on one hand, and on the other hand, this poem sets a good example to people of behaving properly in a tough time, cultivates people to be sincere and honest. They can complain, criticise, give suggestions, but still try everything to accomplish ruler’s command, for this is a respectful and proper way to express their deep wish on their position. Through this two poems and its annotations, we can see how was the chaos like in the late moment of Wey: the state was invaded, territory was shrunk, the king and his officials were greedy, the people was unbearable. This is why people would complain like ‘You take no notice of us’, ‘At last we are going to leave you’ in *Shuoshu*, and question ‘If we did not sow, it we did not

⁴ Pei Puxian 裴普賢, *Textbook of Shijing Annotation* 《詩經評註讀本》, (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 2020), p. 262.

⁵ Pei Puxian 裴普賢, *Textbook of Shijing Annotation* 《詩經評註讀本》, (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 2020), p. 263.

reap, how should we get corn, three hundred stack-yards?’ This is an attack on the rapacious government, while the invocation of ‘happy land’ is an elegy of the crumbling Wey. These two poems vividly show the consequences of a rapacious government and its influence on a state, which can be a good lesson to King Taizong of Tang, and his officials. Wei Zheng chose to include *Fatan* and *Shuoshu* in *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* is to set them as an alarm, to advise King Taizong about being hard working, self-controlled and considerate to his people.

Personal Understanding

From the perspective of *The Governing Principles of Ancient China*, these two poems provide a good lesson that the government should put people’s welfare first and do their best to take care of their people, no matter the king or officials, all the government should keep away from self-indulgence and material enjoyment, so that they could pay attention to their people, put their heart on their people. This implication is related to a teaching of Mencius, that ‘民為貴，社稷次之，君為輕.’ It means ‘the people are the most important element in a nation; the state is the next; the sovereign is the lightest’.⁶ It is translated by James Legge, and modified by myself. The thought behind is that, people is the root of a country, when root is good and strong, the country could then be safe and stable. Therefore, as a ruler or official, one should regard loving and serving his people as the most important mission, for this is the essential way to stabilise a country.

From another point of view, though these two poems are satirising the greedy king and corrupt officials in Wey, it is also meaningful to our self-cultivation at present. This is something related to greed in our heart. Greed is an inborn habit of human being which can hardly be eliminated. There is no wrong of it. But the thing we should mind is to control it and guide it to the right way. ‘Big rats’ were not only existing in the poem, but in everyone’s heart. Some love cheese and some love gold. Some are cowardly and some are bold. I have heard a statement that, ‘Sometimes we have not yet commit a crime is just because we didn’t

⁶ James Legge, *The Works of Mencius*, (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhouguji Press, 2016), p.518.

have a chance.’ Therefore, it is important to establish right views, right values to help us to judge right from wrong and guide us to the right path. For example, Confucius’s attitude towards profit is, ‘不義而富且貴，於我如浮雲’ which means ‘Riches and honors acquired by unrighteousness, are as a floating cloud to me’,⁷ Translated by James Legge, and also modified by myself. This is what Chinese say, ‘君子愛財，取之有道’, it means a good man would make money by appropriate means. This is one of the right view to treat profits, and a noble self-cultivation that can bring us peace in mind as well.

Conclusion

These two poems reflect the politics and situation of the state of Wey in ancient times, and from educational value, readers, especially who are leaders or incumbents, would draw lessons from the rapacious king and officials of Wey, restrain ones’ greed and pay more attention to the people. It is also of great value for ordinary people to believe that one should make profits by appropriate means, which is a basic but noble principle of human conduct and a foundation of social stability, as well.

⁷ James Legge, *The Confucian Analects*, (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhouguji Press, 2016), p.82.

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