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The Study of Confucius Revision of *The Book of Poetry*

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1. Introduction

The Book of Poetry is the earliest collection of poetry in Chinese history, as it is very extensive and provides an authentic, comprehensive and multifaceted record of the social aspects of the Zhou Dynasties and Spring and Autumn Period, such as politics, economics, military affairs, folklore, culture, literature and art. It is for this rich historical and literary value that later scholars have devoted so much effort to the study of *The Book of Poetry*. In addition, *The Book of Poetry* was originally a collection of poems scattered among the people, which was later collated by Confucius, thus becoming the mainstream version we see today, and profoundly influencing the development of poetics in later times. As to whether or not Confucius was involved in redacting *The Book of Poetry*, the author follows the prevailing academic viewpoint and endorses the authenticity of Confucius actions. The focus of this essay is on the process by which Confucius compiled the poetry collection and then redacted it into a book, with the aim of understanding the reasons why Confucius compiled the poetry sutra and the methods and principles by which he did so, and thus providing a useful contribution to the in-depth academic study of *The Book of Poetry*.

2. Reasons for Collating *The Book of Poetry*

Some poems were created by officials for political or diplomatic purposes, others were used by the emperor for rituals or feasts, and some were written by the people. At regular intervals a special official would collect the poems and present them to the emperor, after they had been

compiled by the musicians, to help him understand the situation of the people. For example, some of the poems praise the virtues and merits of the Duke of Zhou and previous emperors, and the content of these poems has a strong political propaganda effect, emphasising the political ideology of the Divine Right of Kings and reinforcing the supremacy of the Zhou dynasty, which also had an invisible effect on the people of the time. At the same time, *The Book of Poetry* also contain a number of praises for the gentleman and the virtuous, which also had an impact on the moral education of the people. On the other hand, *The Book of Poetry* contains a great deal of basic knowledge, and Confucius also observed: "From them we become largely acquainted with the names of birds, beasts, and plants."¹ chapter 17.9 translated by James Legge. In summary, poetry was very important at the time, playing an important role in the movement of society and the lives of the people. However, in the time of Confucius, the circulation and preservation of poetry was under great threat.

Firstly, during the Spring and Autumn Period, the old system gradually disintegrated, the royal family lost its former power and was replaced by wars and rivalries between the lords, and the decline of the human spirit as a whole. According to *the Zuo Tradition of Commentary*, counted as *the Spring and Autumn*, there are no records of poems recited by the ministers of various states since 506 BC, when Confucius was 46 years old. The poems that had been popular were gradually dispersed. This is what Mencius considered to be The traces of sovereign rule were extinguished, and the royal odes ceased to be made² *The Mencius- Li Lou B*. At the time, it would have been a major loss to human civilization if these poems of great cultural value had been mutilated and not preserved.

In addition, the records were mainly kept on wooden and bamboo scripts or silk, but these were not easy to preserve, and because each lord had a different script and a different cultural

¹ Confucius, 'The Analects of Confucius', *Chinese Text Project* (2006) < <https://ctext.org/analects/yang-huo/zh?en=en> > [accessed 9 June 2023].

² Mencius, 'The Mencius', *Chinese Text Project* (2006) < <https://ctext.org/mengzi/li-lou-ii> > [accessed 9 June 2023].

background, the same word could be interpreted differently by different people, and the same word could be used differently by different lords, which could lead to misunderstandings of *The Book of Poetry*. On the other hand, each region had a different dialect, and although the poems were read in the official language of the time, there were inevitable errors in the reading and transmission of the poems due to accents, which could lead to misinterpretation of some of the important messages in the poems. As time passes, the differences in script and language between countries and regions will only increase. If no absolute uniformity of language and script emerges, or if no fixed, corrected version of the poem is passed on, the demise of the poem will be foreseeable and inevitable.

Lastly, and most importantly, the meaning and education that poetry represents is very important. Poetry was not only used in official contexts, but was also used frequently by the people and had a constant influence on their lives. Because of its breadth and depth of meaning, poetry was also used for educational purposes, as it was used to learn official language, to name objects, to improve one's moral and literary qualities, and to give people emotional guidance. Confucius, however, faced with the scattering of poems and their gradual absence, was aware of the major challenges to the transmission of human spirituality, and it was therefore a matter of great urgency to redact the poems and compile them into a book, *The Book of Poetry*.

3. Methods and Principles of Collation

There is no doubt, first of all, that Confucius must have unified and comprehensively collated the existing versions of *The Book of Poetry*. Guo Moruo, a modern scholar, concluded that the Sutra had been compiled in a unified manner, based on the long age of its composition, the vast territory in which it was produced, and the internal evidence of its uniformity of form and rhythm. "*The Book of Poetry* is something that has been redacted," Guo Moruo argues. On the other hand, when Confucius collated the poems of his time, he must not have done so without

screening them, and so he must have had some method in the process of redaction. First of all, in *the Records of the historian*, it is recorded that "In the ancient period, there were originally more than three thousand poems, but Confucius deleted the duplicates." 古者詩三千餘篇，及至孔子，去其重。 In order to ensure the accessibility and simplicity of the poems, and in consideration of the importance of the content, Confucius would delete some of the similar content.

In the Spring and Autumn period, on the other hand, poetry was always performed in conjunction with music, similar to the relationship between lyrics and melody, but sometimes used separately and on different occasions. Usually, each poem was accompanied by a corresponding piece of music. For Confucius, he was an excellent musician in his own right, and might even be called a master of music. He was very particular about music. He disliked the music of Zheng, for example, and he himself says: "I hate the way in which the songs of Zheng confound the music of the Ya." from chapter 17.18. He believed that some musical connotations were immoral and needed to be removed, so there was necessarily a phonetic modification of the poems in the process of finishing them. *The Records of the historian* also records that "305 poems were set to music by Confucius." 三百五篇，孔子皆弦歌之。

In addition, when Confucius used *The Book of Poetry* as teaching material, he taught and spoke in the official language of the time. In order to ensure that the poems were read aloud smoothly and rhymed, Confucius had to correct any errors in wording and pronunciation that might have occurred in circulation, so as to make it easier to circulate the poems internationally and to facilitate the spread of learning and thought. It is worth noting that, although the pronunciation of human beings is now completely different from that of the ancients, the rhythms of *The Book of Poetry* have been preserved in writing. Modern phoneticians can attempt to recover the ancient pronunciation by back-calculation, making *The Book of Poetry* an important reference in phonology for the construction of ancient sounds.

Confucius had two other important principles for the compilation of *The Book of Poetry*, namely, having no depraved ideas 思無邪 and not making new changes 述而不作. Firstly, Confucius himself said: "In *the Book of Poetry* are three hundred pieces, but the design of them all may be embraced in one sentence - Having no depraved thoughts." ³ from chapter 2.2. Confucius appreciated the real, natural and pure emotions expressed in poetry, without the slightest hint of falsity. For example, although he was opposed to lascivious private life, he also admired the concept of love, and he kept most of the poems on love in his *The Book of Poetry*. He also kept many poems that satirised those in power at the time, showing Confucius open-mindedness and intent. This deliberate act allowed these poems, which expressed real emotions, to be passed on. On the other hand, Confucius followed the principle of not actively creating, as he himself said: A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients. ⁴ from chapter 7.1. In the process of collecting and revising these poems, Confucius also tried to ensure the integrity of the original source material as far as possible, merely paraphrasing and recording it, rather than adding to or innovating it. As a result of his work, the poems that we see today are essentially the original poems, allowing people to study them with a more realistic understanding of their original meaning.

4. Conclusion

In the face of the declining culture of the time and the depressed state of society as a whole, Confucius saw directly the direct cause of the scattering and loss of poetry and the danger it posed to human civilization. It was for this reason that he spent nearly half of his life collected *The Book of Poetry*, and eventually achieved great success in this field, leaving behind valuable

³ Confucius, 'The Analects of Confucius', *Chinese Text Project* (2006) < <https://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng> > [accessed 9 June 2023].

⁴ Confucius, 'The Analects of Confucius', *Chinese Text Project* (2006) < <https://ctext.org/analects/shu-er> > [accessed 9 June 2023].

material for human civilisation.

Confucius made it possible to preserve poems that might otherwise have been lost through the arrangement of *The Book of Poetry*. Confucius redacted the poems in three ways: by removing repetition, by setting them to music, by correcting the text and pronunciation, and by observing two principles: no false ideas and no creative changes. Through these methods and principles, the original 3,000 poems were streamlined to around 300. In this feat Confucius not only unified thought and culture, but also reformed and renewed it. The vast amount of documentary material preserved in *The Book of Poetry* has had a profound impact on later scholarship, and has become an important source of information for future generations in the study of the social, cultural, economic, military and humanistic spheres of the ancient period.

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