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An Investigation of Tangtaizong's Engagement with Poems 'Ban' and 'Dang' from Shijing

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Introduction:

'It is only by fierce wind that the grass of strong strength can be identified, it is only in trouble times that the loyalty of a minister can be recognised.'¹ These two verses are from a poem written by Emperor Taizong of Tang to commend Xiao Yu. Xiao Yu was the brother-in-law of Emperor Yang of Sui, but he later pledged allegiance to the Prince of Qin, Li Shimin, who had not yet ascended the throne at the time. He had always been loyal to Li Shimin, even in times of adversity; Xiao Yu had always shown his support, especially during the battle for the throne when Li Shimin was excluded by his brothers. Li Shimin commended Xiao Yu's loyalty by stating that neither can substantial profit tempt him, nor can punishment and death frighten him; Xiao Yu is truly the kind of minister who is capable of leading the country to prosperity.² Therefore, under this context, Emperor Taizong of Tang wrote these verses to praise Xiao Yu's loyalty. Among the two verses, the first verse is relatively easy to interpret; the emphasis is on the second verse. In the second verse, the characters '板', '蕩' originate from two poems from the chapter 'Greater odes of the kingdom' 大雅 in the Book of Poetry 詩經, they were used to describe the circumstances of social unrest and disorder during the reign of King Li of Zhou. My presentation aims to further explore the meaning of the two poems and to justify Tangtaizong's reason for using them in his poem to commend Xiao Yu.

The Interpretation of the Poem "Ban" 板 :

¹ Translated by Taiyu Cao . Original text: '疾風知勁草，板蕩識誠臣。' Liuxu 劉昫: *Jiutangshu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975)Vol.63, p.2402.

² Translated by Taiyu Cao . Original text: '不可以厚利誘之，不可以刑戮懼之，真社稷臣也。' Liuxu 劉昫: *Jiutangshu* 舊唐書, p. 2402.

According to Maoshi Zhengyi, the poem “Ban” is about Fan Bo’s admonition to King Li.³

For the poem “Ban”, my analysis consists of four aspects

Firstly, it is the author’s description of the circumstances at the time. The first passage states: ‘the Divine One has gone against the conventional practice, and the people below are engulfed by distress. The words spoken are not rational, and the plans proposed are not influential. He is self-indulgent and does not follow the teachings of the sages; the virtues of honesty and sincerity are neglected. Thus his plans cannot be visionary, so I am here to strongly admonish.’⁴ At the beginning, the terms ‘the Divine One’ and ‘the people below’ are used to make a clear comparison. The superior does not apply benevolent governance, such as not keeping one’s words, not having influential plans for the long-term; and not taking the advice of the sages into consideration when governing the state; as a consequence the people suffer and live in distress. The first two verses of the poem illustrate the fact that the situation of the state had already reached a critical point, so Minister Fan Bo abode by his duties and admonished his king.

Secondly, it is on his words of admonition. When the state is facing calamities 天之方难, riots and social disorder 天之方蹶, as well as oppression 天之方虐,⁵ the verse ‘do not’ 無然 was used three times for the purpose of remonstrating to the king that under those circumstances, you should not be so self-absorbed, talk nonsense or remain idle about the situation. He exerted much effort during the admonition. It is said in the poem that ‘my words are appropriate for the current affairs in our state, please do not regard them as materials for laughter. We shall remember what the ancients once said that it is even of great benefit to consult with the woodcutters.’⁶ Furthermore it said: ‘Do not ridicule my old age and think I

³ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘板，凡伯刺厲王也。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p. 1344.

⁴ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘上帝板板，下民卒瘵。出話不然，為猶不遠。靡聖管管，不實於宣。猶之未遠，是用大諫。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p. 1344.

⁵ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p. p. 1345-1349.

⁶ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘我言維服，勿以為笑。先民有言，詢于芻蕘。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p. 1348.

am unreasonable, do not make fun of what is said.’⁷ These are very sincere words from the minister in trying to persuade the king to make adjustment in his way of governing, and thus the verse “I, an old man, in all sincerity”⁸ is used ‘老夫灌灌’. However, it is possible that the king is unwilling to accept the advice from his loyal minister, hence the minister anxiously says that the troubles could develop and ignite like flames until they are beyond remedy and become incurable.⁹ Evidently, the state was already in chaos and the people were living in turbulent times; if under such circumstances, the King continues to refuse taking advice from his loyal subordinates and finds such admonition irritating and bothersome, then the state is truly at risk.

Thirdly, it is about the proposals to the king on the ways of adjustment. The minister proposed that the king should lead his people on a path of kindness and benevolence. As stated in the poem that ‘the Heaven guides the people as the bamboo flute responds to the porcelain wind-instrument, as the two jade tablets join to form one whole, and as you take one thing and carry it on you. The education of the people is just as easy.’¹⁰ These verses are intended to remind the governor that the people should be governed through guidance, and for this guidance to be effective, the ruler needs to be a role model to his people. Hence, the next verse states that there is existent perversity among the people, so if the ruler himself shows perversity, then all the guidance would be a mere waste.¹¹ It is true that every person has his/her unique nature, if the king himself is not mindful of his words and deeds, then he inevitably leads his people and state to an unpleasant position. The stability of a state or country relies on the power of the masses, just as said in the verse: “People of good character are like a fence, multitudes of people are like a wall. Grand states are like protective screens,

⁷ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘匪我言耄，爾用憂謔。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p. 1348.

⁸ James Legge, *Book of Poetry*, <https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/ban/ens?searchu=%E6%9D%BF&searchmode=showall>, 07/12/2020

⁹ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘多將熇熇，不可救藥。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p. 1348.

¹⁰ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘天之牖民，如璫如篴。如璋如圭，如取如攜。攜無日益，牖民孔易。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p. 1351.

¹¹ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘民之多辟，無自立辟。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p. 1351.

people who belong to the same clan are like the pillars. Good virtues can secure peace and the people of the clan can remain inside the fortified wall. We must not let the fortified wall be destroyed and we must not let one be filled with fear in solitude.”¹² Here, Minister Fan Bo advises the King to have close interactions with his military officials, ministers, relatives of the same clan and offer them favours, so as to gain their support. As a result, the condition of the state will be as strong as the fortified walls and the pillars.

Finally, it is the minister’s advice to the king on self-cultivation. The eighth passage of the poem says: “To revere the signs of anger from Heaven, and should not dare to be playful and make fun; to revere the signs of change from Heaven, and should not dare to be unruly and arrogant.”¹³ The anger from Heaven implies possible disasters, so when the signs appear, we shall be mindful of our deeds, the people should stop indulging themselves in different forms of amusement, such as hunting. Towards the end of this poem, the minister tries to be encouraging and states that the king is free to travel and can have some forms of enjoyment when his state is in a more peaceful and harmonious condition. What this truly connotes is that the king should not put his focus on seeking pleasure and indulgence when his state is in disorder and chaos.

The Interpretation of the Poem “Dang” 〈蕩〉 :

According to Maoshi Zhengyi, “Dang” was a poem written by Minister Shao Mu Gong to express his grief and sorrow at the social disorder and chaos in the state. This situation was mainly a result of poor governance led by the corrupt king Li of Zhou.¹⁴

The first verse says that every person is born with a good nature but only a small number can

¹² Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘价人維藩，大師維垣。大邦維屏，大宗維翰。懷德維寧，宗子維城。無俾城壞，無獨斯畏。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p. 1351.

¹³ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘敬天之怒，無敢戲豫。敬天之渝，無敢馳驅。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1352.

¹⁴ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘敬天之怒，無敢戲豫。敬天之渝，無敢馳驅。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1354.

maintain this good nature till the end;¹⁵ this can imply that all states or countries have enjoyed great prosperity at the beginning, but all decline eventually. In most cases, it is due to the corrupted government run by an incapable governor who leads his state to a declining end. What are the causes of such phenomenon? Shao Mu Gong used four terms ‘彊禦、掊克、在位、在服’¹⁶ to describe this. ‘彊禦’ and ‘掊克’ are to describe the oppressive and extortionate court officials; “在位” and “在服” indicate their high status in the government. These descriptions truly coincide with the behaviour of King Li of Zhou who appointed Rong Yi Gong 榮夷公 to gather wealth for the use of his own enjoyment and indulgence.¹⁷

However, though the ruler is surrounded by treacherous court officials, if there are loyal ministers by the side of the ruler to assist with governing matters, the state will not descend into chaos. For instance, although Duke Huan of Qi was surrounded by deceitful ministers such as Yi Ya and Shu Diao, but he also had Guan Zhong in authority.¹⁸ Unfortunately, King Li of Zhou was not wise enough to place authority in the hands of loyal and righteous ministers. The third and fourth passages explained the reasons respectively. It states that if the ruler employs those with virtues, then the unreasonable and oppressive officials will resent them and will make up rumours to defame them. And when those treacherous men are governing the state, oaths and curses will come with no end; furthermore, the next verse states that you receive strong fierce from the people, but you consider this to be a proof of virtue; it is difficult to elevate your virtue as you have not virtuous officials by your side; your virtue cannot surface as you do not have good advisors around you.¹⁹ At the time,

¹⁵ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘蕩，召穆公傷周室大壞也。厲王無道，天下蕩蕩，無綱紀文章，故作是詩也。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1356.

¹⁶ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1358.

¹⁷ Sima qian 司馬遷: *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1959) Vol.4, P. 141

¹⁸ *Guanzi* 管子, <https://ctext.org/guanzi/xiao-cheng/zhs?searchu=%E7%AE%A1%E4%BB%B2%E6%9C%89%E7%97%85&searchmode=showall#result>, accessed 8 December 2020

¹⁹ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘而秉義類，彊禦多慙。流言以對，寇攘式內。侯作侯祝，靡屈靡究。’ ‘女魚然于中國，歛怨以為德。不明爾德，時無背無側。爾德不明，以無陪無卿。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.p.1359-1360.

Minister Rui Liang Fu 芮良夫 once tried to admonish King Li of Zhou to not increase tax as it would impose great burden on the people, but the King ignored his advice.²⁰

Witnessing the state gradually stepping into disorder, Shao Mu Gong began to remonstrate to his king. He said that the Heaven would not sprinkle your face and seduce you with wine, but you are allowing yourself to indulge to such a degree; you are following what is wrong and your conduct is not on the right path. You see no difference between light and darkness; among all the shouting noise, you turn day into night.²¹ At the time, the people could no longer tolerate King Li's corruption, so they began to discuss his wrongdoings. The next verse says that all around you is like the sound of cicadas, and like the noise from the bubbling of boiling soup. Great and small affairs are all approaching destruction; but the people are still made to follow your ways. The anger of the people is evident within the land, but it has also extended to foreign regions.²² As can be seen from this verse, the resentment of the people and the disloyalty of other minor ethnic groups all reflect the social unrest and disorder of the state at the time; Shao Mu Gong was very concerned about this situation. Not only did King Li ignore Shao Mu Gong's advice, but on the contrary, he sent a sorcerer to watch over the people and to kill those who talked about the king behind his back. Hence, the people became too frightened to speak. King Li was self-satisfied with his way of stopping the people from complaining and he boasted this to Shao Mu Gong, but Shao Mu Gong replied: "It is even more challenging to prevent people from speaking freely than to block the water of a river."²³ He was in disagreement with King Li's way of only resolving the problem on the surface. The issue may be temporarily solved, but it actually becomes the cause for forthcoming riots and chaos.

At the end of this poem, Shao Mu Gong continued to admonish King Li. It is said in passage seven that although there may be a lack of experienced aged officials who have been in the

²⁰ Sima Qian 司馬遷: *Shiji* 史記, Vol.4, p. 141.

²¹ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: '天不湏爾以酒，不義從式。既愆爾止，靡明靡晦。式號式呼，俾晝作夜。' Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1361.

²² Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: '如蜩如蟬，如沸如羹。小大近喪，人尚乎由行。內興于中國，覃及鬼方。' Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1362.

²³ *Guoyu* 國語 (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1978), p. 9.

government since early times, but the ancient statutes and laws still exist.²⁴ The purpose of saying this was to advise King Li to follow the decrees and the governing principles passed down by the kings of the past. The last verse says that ‘the lesson that Yin had shown is not far-distant, Yin is the sovereign after Xia.’²⁵ This was said to advise King Li that the decline of the last sovereign of Yin should be regarded as a warning for the current sovereign of Zhou.

Conclusion

Through some exploration of these two poems 板 and 蕩, the meaning of the sentence ‘板蕩識誠臣’ by Tangtaizong 唐太宗 can be better understood. During the reign of King Li of Zhou, the whole state began to be torn apart and he was distrusted by his people. Wentianxiang once stated in his poem Zhengqige 正氣歌 that in the time of crisis, one's backbone is revealed.²⁶ That seems to reveal the principle that the more unstable the state is, the more possible to reflect the integrity of a loyal minister. There is a verse in the third passage of the poem 板 that those who are talented and virtuous keep silent as though they were the speechless corpses. Owing to the instability of the state and the fatuity of the king, they no longer offer valuable advice. However, those loyal ministers like 凡伯 and 邵穆公 still give suggestions in the hope to bring peace to their state and the people. There are sentences 老夫灌灌 in the poem 板 and 如沸如羹 in the poem 蕩, which describe the situation where Fan Bo and Shao Mu Gong were extremely concerned about the social disorder in their state and how they anxiously but eagerly abode by their duties despite the poor attitude of the king. Similarly, Xiao Yu stood by Emperor Taizong through thick and thin, especially in times of adversity and chaos, he never stopped his support. I believe this is what Emperor Taizong wished to express in his poem to Xiao Yu that a loyal minister will always uphold his duties regardless of the circumstances that he needs to face.

²⁴ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘雖無老成人，尚有典刑。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1363.

²⁵ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘殷鑒不遠，在夏后之世。’ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1364.

²⁶ Wen Tianxiang 文天祥, ‘Wenshan ji’ 文山集, in Yingyin wenyuange sikuquanshu 景印文淵閣四庫全書, comp. by Aixinjueluo Yongrong 愛新覺羅·永瑤 et al., 1500 vols (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1986), vol. 20, pp. 12a-12b.

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