



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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Harm of Slanders Reflected in *The Book of Songs*

Word Count: 2000

Respected Provost and Ms Deng, good afternoon! My name is Wang Xinyu, The topic I would like to share today is Harm of Slanders Reflected in *The Book of Songs*.

My presentation will be divided into four parts. The first part is introduction. The second part is the introduction of two poems. The third part is my personal understanding and the final part is the conclusion.

I. Introduction

In this part I would like to introduce something about *the Book of Songs* which is the earliest collection of poems in China, and also the beginning of Chinese poetry. It collects poems from the early Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle spring and Autumn Period reflecting the social landscape from the early Zhou dynasty to the late Zhou Dynasty for about 500 years

The poems I want to talk about today are all from *Maoshi zhiyao* in *The Governing Principles of Ancient China*. At the command of Emperor Lishimin of tang Dynasty, Weizheng 魏徵, Yushinan 虞世南, Chu Suiliang 褚遂良 and other scholars edit *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* in the early years of Zhenguan 貞觀. In view of the collapse of the previous dynasty, the Sui dynasty, emperor Taizong of Tang knew it was not easy to start a business but more difficult is to keep it. So, during his reign, he encouraged his ministers to give advice to him and criticize his decision-making mistakes. And instructed his ministers Wei Zheng and Yu Shinan and other scholars to sort out the essence content about self cultivation and how to regulate the family and rule the state from the historical materials of governing principles by emperors of the past dynasties, extracting the six classics, four history, and *Zhuzi baijia*. All of these materials were compiled into this great work of governing principles which can provide warning to the emperor. Among this book, *Maoshi zhiyao* is composed of some quintessential poems in *The Book of Songs* selected by Wei Zheng and others. These selected poems all have their warning significance to the emperor. I think slanderous talk not only brings negative effects to emperors, but also has negative or even terrible influence on every individual in different social strata and all kinds of interpersonal relationships in our life. So I specially selected two poems that criticize the harm of slander as the theme of my presentation.

II. Introduction of two poems

The first poem I want to mention today is *Clever Words* in the *Minor Odes of the Book of Songs*. The book of Songs has three different classification which is *Airs*(風), *Odes*(雅), and *Hymns*(頌). They are classified according to region and music. *Airs* is also named *Airs of the states*, which is the local music of different countries. *Odes* is the music of the imperial banquet or meeting in the capital area of Zhou Dynasty. *Hymns* is the dance song of ancestral worship, the content is to praise the achievements of ancestors. And the two poems I am going to talk about today are all from *Odes*. Let's first look at the the original text and its English translation:

巧言

亂之初生，僭始既涵。亂之又生，君子信讒。
君子信盜，亂是用暴。盜言孔甘，亂是用餒。¹

Clever Words

When disorder first came,
Calumny did soon reign.
Now that disorder has come again,
My lord follows those slanderers.
My lord has followed slanderous thieves,
And with that the disorder turned mean.
The words of those thieves are sweet,
And with them the disorder is fed.²

In the *Book of Songs*, there is a prologue to each poems which is a short preface that explains the subject of each poem. The preface of the poem *Clever Words* said that ‘*Clever Words* is a poem satirizing King You of Zhou dynasty. Because a minister of Zhou was hurt by slander, so did this poem.’ Qu Wanli notes in his work *the interpretation of the Book of Songs* that this is a poem that criticizes those slanderous people. The character Jiàn 「僭」 means slander. The character Han 「涵」 is the meaning of tolerance, that means slanders began to be

¹ Qu Wanli 屈萬里, *Shijing Quanshi* 《詩經詮釋》 (Taipei: LINKING PUBLISHING, 2018), P376.

² Translated by Arthur Waley, edited by Joseph R.Allen, *The Book of Songs*, (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. 179.

accepted. The word Junzi 「君子」 in Traditional Chinese culture usually refers to a person with high moral cultivation, but in this poem, it refers to the king. The first two sentences of this poem describe the foolish king's indecision on politics. It also pointed out that the disorder is caused by listening to slanders, and the reason why these slanders can be listened to by the king is because the king can not distinguish right from wrong. Therefore Kong Yingda said that if a king can clearly observe right from wrong, then false words would not come to him and slanderous talk have no reason to be with him.

Let us look at the last two sentences of the poem. The character Dao 「盜」 means people who are slanderous. The character Bao 「暴」 means more intense. The word Kongan 「孔甘」 means that it tastes good. The character Tan 「燄」 means Eating. That is to mention that slanders sound very good, just like delicious food. So listening slanders is like being greedy to eat those junk food. They are delicious, but also harmful to the health. The only difference is that one is bad for physical health and the other is bad for mental health. And slanders will eventually put people and even the country to the road of destruction.

King You of Zhou is an example of those who cannot appoint capable person, conversely, good at appointing crafty and fawning people like Guo Shifu and following their advice. King You was exactly following the words of his pampered imperial concubine Baosi and his crafty minister Guo Shifu, so that he disqualified his heir at law, which was his elder prince, and replaced him with his favored son. He also deluded the kings of feudal states to gather round by setting the beacon-fire for nothing, which had brought big shame and anger to feudal kings and broken up the friendships and trust with them. All his actions made his people left and neighboring countries betrayed, when an invasion force really came, King You had no effective defence because no body ever listened to him and finally the Western Zhou Dynasty was destroyed. From this we know that how influential the harm of slanders were!

The second poem I want to mention is also from *the Minor Odes of the Book of Songs*. Its name is *The Bluebottles*. Let's take a look at the original text and its English translation:

青蠅

營營青蠅，止於樊。豈弟君子，無信讒言。

營營青蠅，止於棘。讒人罔極，交亂四國。³

The Bluebottles

Buzz, buzz the bluebottles
That have settled on the hedge.
Oh, my blessed lord,
Do not believe the slanders that are said.
Buzz, buzz the bluebottles
That have settled on the thorns.
Slanderers are very wicked;
They disturb the whole land.⁴

The preface of the poem *The Bluebottles* said that this is a poem that a senior official satirizes King You of Zhou dynasty. This poem is to describe those slanderous people as the bluebottles that pollute the environment and spread virus. So people should hate slander like bluebottles and keep it distance, this is a short poem that warns a king not to believe slanders.

This poem shows an image of slanderous people and what should good people do to them. Generally, there are two explanations about the Chinese word 「營營」 (Buzz). One is the annotation from *Mao Chang* 毛萇, who first annotated *the Book of Poetry*, he stated, ‘Yingying is an image of bluebottles buzzed around, which is a metaphor for the image of slanderers gossiping in a hurry.’⁵ Another annotation is from *Shuowen Jiezi*, it is stated, ‘Ying means whisper, or a light sound’,⁶ which especially means buzzing sounds from a flying bluebottle. However, it is only slightly different between these two meanings, the truth of what it is and how it harms had never changed. Therefore, Pei Puxian 裴普賢, a specialist in Chinese Classics and translation, had put these two meanings together, and she explained it as ‘The voice and appearance of flying flies’,⁷ which was excellent, I think. From the use of this metaphor, it is obvious that the poet wanted to show how hateful the slanders were and they were just hurrying around, spreading their gossip, persevering in achieving their evil aims, just like flying flies.

³ Qu Wanli 屈萬里, *Shijing Quanshi* 《詩經詮釋》 (Taipei: LINKING PUBLISHING, 2018), P424.

⁴ Translated by Arthur Waley, edited by Joseph R. Allen, *The Book of Songs*, (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. 206.

⁵ Qu Wanli 屈萬里, *Shijing Quanshi* 《詩經詮釋》 (Taipei: LINKING PUBLISHING, 2018), P424.

⁶ Qu Wanli 屈萬里, *Shijing Quanshi* 《詩經詮釋》 (Taipei: LINKING PUBLISHING, 2018), P424.

⁷ Pei Puxian 裴普賢, *Textbook of Shijing Annotation* 《詩經評註讀本》, (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 2020), p. 586.

From Wei Zheng's point of view, it is important for a king to know that slanderers are not only hateful like a fly, but bringing enormous and endless harm to a state. They might make a king blind and deaf, selfish and foolish, addicted to everything except politics. When the whole country turns turbulent, they start grabbing. This is not a story, but what was happening in the history. There are loads of slanderers in every state and dynasty, the most notorious ones are: eunuch Zhao Gao 趙高 of Qin dynasty, prime minister Li Linfu 李林甫 of Tang dynasty, prime minister Qin Hui 秦檜 of South Song dynasty, and the powerful minister He Shen 和珅 of Qing dynasty. They were the key figures of pushing their countries from prosperity to decline.

III. Personal Understanding

Since ancient times, slander is a major factor leading to wrong decisions and even the destruction of a country. How much the bad influence of slanders can be, we can see from a ancient story of 'Sanren chenghu' recorded in The Zhan Guo Ce. During the Warring States Period, Pang Cong, a minister of the State of Wei, was highly regarded by the king of Wei. Once a prince of Wei was sent to the state of Zhao as a hostage. The king of Wei ask Pang Cong to accompany him. It can be seen that the king of Wei regarded that Pang Cong is capable and trusted him very much. Before Pang Cong left, he told a special story to the king of Wei. He asked the king, If someone told you there was a tiger wandering in the street, would you believe it? The king said, "Of course I don't believe it." Pang Cong then asked, If another man came back from the street and told you there was a tiger there, would you believe it? The king said, It is hard to say. I will doubt whether it is true. Pang Cong continued, If the third person said the same thing, would you believe it? The king of Wei definitely nodded and said, Then I believe it is true. Pang Cong said, It was obvious that there would be no tiger in the street, but after three people spread rumours, there seemed to be a real tiger in the street. Now I am going to Handan, the capital of Zhao with your son. There may be more than three people who want criticize me during this period. I hope your Majesty can keep a clear mind and do not believe the slanders. The king of Wei said, I know this well. You can go at ease. As soon as Pang Cong accompanied the prince to leave, someone framed him in front of the king of Wei. At the beginning, the king of Wei would still defend Pang Cong, but finally, he believed those slanders because there were too many people say bad

things about Pang Cong. After Pang Cong and the prince returned, the king of Wei never summoned him again.⁸

From this story, we can see how terrible slander can be. Even though the king of Wei had been warned in advance, he still could not defeat the flood of slanders. Therefore, slanderous talk can not only destroy the relationship between the sovereign and minister, but also the father and son, husband and wife, teachers and students, all of this relationship will be affected negatively.

IV. conclusion

From the these poems, it can be seen that Wei Zheng and other ministers compiled *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* with Good intentions. They chose these poems in *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* to show emperor Taizong the importance of keeping close to virtuous people and staying away from slanderous people.

⁸ Liu Xiang 劉向, *Zhanguo ce* 《戰國策》 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 1985), P845-846.

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