

Abstract

READING THE SHR PHILOSOPHICALLY
E Bruce Brooks (ebbrooks@research.umass.edu)

Philosophy after Aristotle focuses on the good life (eudaimonia), usually conceived in individual terms. In other traditions, social or collective values are relatively more prominent. Ancient China is one of the best documented of those traditions. The Chinese canonical Shī are an important repository of collective values: as a public performance text, it might be called philosophy through a bullhorn. But to bring out this philosophical dimension, the text needs to be correctly dated and correctly read. Given its poetic character, this requires formal analysis which is not part of the usual toolkit of philosophy. I here give examples of how this preliminary work might be accomplished, and what results it might yield.

1. Relative Date. The usual view is that the Sùng or sacrificial pieces are oldest, followed by the Yǎ or elite pieces, and last the Fǎng or popular pieces. Literary analysis of borrowing shows that the relation of the Fǎng to the Yǎ is bidirectional, hence the latest pieces in both must be of the same age. Both Yǎ and Sùng show growth, but that growth has the same endpoint.

2. Absolute Date. Some Shī are said to relate to historical events. The connection of the poems with those events is sometimes unclear. In one case where it *is* clear, the event is spurious: the murder of Chǔn Líng-gūng by the son of Syà Jì, supposedly in retaliation for the affair between the ruler and the lady. The murder is known to history, but the affair figures only in a mid-04c stratum of the sensationalistic Dzwǒ Jwàn. Then the end of the Shī formation process lay in the late 04c, in agreement with Analects testimony which is first aware of a complete 300-poem Shī in the late 0320's. Other Analects evidence puts the first assembling of Shī material in the early 05c, and the whole Shī formation process thus lies within the Warring States period, not in the Jōu Dynasty in the usual sense of that term.

3. Values. The most disapproved poems in the Shī are the songs of loose love which are especially common in the Jǔng section. Beside many of those poems are counterpoems which preach a conventional view of sex and marriage. Some love poems have added stanzas, which achieve the same conventionalizing result. Not only are the conventional stanzas or poems later, they reflect a culture difference, as Granet's work long ago suggested. Then the value systems of the poems report more than one culture, and this must also be taken into account.

4. Ideology. China's religion is ancestor worship, and by the rules of ancestor worship, only direct descendants can participate: except by inmarriage, no one can convert to someone else's ancestor worship. There was thus no public religion of early China. But as the Shī collection grows, two wider possibilities appear: first, loyalty to Jōu as a political entity; and somewhat later, a focus on Jōu as a people, that is, China divorced from any one political or ancestral form. At this point we do have a religion of China, one in which everyone can participate. The content of that religion remains what it is today. The religion of China, the unifying ideology of China, is precisely China.