

## On Zhu Xi's Literary Thought from the *Shijingjizhuan*

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**Abstract:** In the vast history of Chinese literature, the Book of Songs has become an indispensable part of Chinese culture with its simple, elegant and colorful poems. Zhu Xi is a great scholar in the Song Dynasty. He is a proficient in Confucian classics, and especially in the Book of Songs. His interpretation and study of the Book of Songs shape the later generations' understanding of this classic and reflect his unique literary thought. Taking the Book of Songs as the carrier, Zhu Xi constructs a set of literary views integrating the essence of Confucianism. He believes that the essence of the poems in the Book of Songs lies in "temperament", which aims to express people's true feelings and morality. He emphasizes the educational function of poetry and advocates that poetry should encourage righteousness and assist people's ethics. At the same time, Zhu Xi also pays attention to the aesthetic value of poetry, thinks that poetry should have beauty of "the strength of character" and "Xing-Ji", emphasizes the polish of language and the creation of artistic conception of poetry, and thinks that a good poem should be concise and bright, and have profound meaning. By elucidating the Book of Songs, Zhu Xi lays a profound theoretical foundation for the development of later Chinese literature and enriches the connotation of traditional Chinese aesthetics.

**Keywords:** *Shijingjizhuan*; Zhu Xi; Literature

As a master of Neo-Confucianism in the Southern Song Dynasty, Zhu Xi not only has a profound influence on philosophy, education, history and other fields, but also has unique views in literary criticism. *Shijingjizhuan* is one of his important commentaries on the

Book of Songs, which embodies his literary thought and moral concepts. Zhu Xi inherits the Confucian poetry traditional theory since Confucius and Mencius, stresses that "poetry expresses a person's temperament and emotions", and believes that the Book of Songs is not only a literary work, but also an important carrier of Confucian tradition. He believes that poetry can cultivate temperament, touch people's heart, and make people return to the benevolence and righteousness. This view not only reflects the instrumental understanding of Confucianism to literature, but also reflects Zhu Xi's recognition of the ontology value of poetry. In addition, when explaining the poem, Zhu Xi pays attention to the explanation of argumentation, and tries to dig out the deep meaning in line with Confucian ethics, rather than just satisfies with the accuracy of the exegesis of words. Such an interpretation not only enriches the ideological implication of the Book of Songs, but also provides a model for the literary criticism in later generations.

### 1. Zhu Xi's Interpretation of the Book of Songs

#### 1.1 The Foundation of the Classic Text

Zhu Xi's interpretation of the Book of Songs is based on his adherence to the authority of classical texts. He believes that the Book of Songs is a classic work that carries the morality promoted by the former sovereigns and conveys the will of the sages. He emphasizes that in the process of interpretation, traditional notes and commentaries must be followed to interpret the classics and excessive interpretations or random changes should be avoided. Zhu Xi criticizes the concepts of poetry education of Han Yu and other scholars in the Tang Dynasty. He thinks that these concepts overemphasize the role of poetry in inspiring emotions, and ignore the fundamental

value of poetry in ethical education. In the specific interpretation methods, Zhu Xi stresses the equal importance of exegesis and argumentation. While inheriting the tradition of MAO poetry school, he absorbs Zheng Xuan's exegesis. His interpretation of the Book of Songs pays attention to not only the accuracy of the words, but also the coherence of the overall thought. For example, in the interpretation of Guan Ju, Zhu Xi not only analyzes the emotions expressed by "a pair of turtledoves are cooing", but also highlights the ethical significance of it. He believes that this poem is about the virtues of empress and imperial concubines rather than a simple expression of personal emotions. In conclusion, when interpreting the Book of Songs, on the one hand, Zhu Xi respects the structure and content of the text itself. On the other hand, he endows it with more profound Confucian meaning in the framework of classics.

### 1.2 The Connotation of the Theory of Argumentation

On the basis of text restoration, Zhu Xi injects Neo-Confucianism into the interpretation of the Book of Songs and constructs a unique theory of argumentation. He uses the philosophical framework of "universality and particularity" to affirm the rationality of individual emotions in poems and emphasize the existence of universal moral principles in them. In the explanation of "restless and unable to sleep because of uneasiness of mind" in Bai Zhou, Zhu Xi not only admits the poet's true emotion "filled with worries", but also pointed out that "this emotion must be expressed in a moderate and restrained manner", which is in line with the moral principles. This interpretation strategy incorporates individual emotions into the normative system of moral rationality and realizes the dialectical unity of emotion and reason <sup>[1]</sup>. The creative interpretation of "the pure thought" can best reflect Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism characteristics. Zhu Xi breaks through the simple correspondence that "pure thinking without evil thoughts is the right path", and puts forward the proposition that "innocence is the nature of the heart". He believes that although the poet's thoughts contain all kinds of moods, as long as they are sincere in the heart, they are in line with the "innate moral nature of human beings". He

changes the standard of moral evaluation from external behavior to internal mind, and makes the Book of Songs an important carrier to appreciate the nature principles. In addition, when interpreting "like cutting and grinding stones" in Qi Ao, he extends the way of self-cultivation, and transforms the processing of jade into a metaphor of moral cultivation, which shows the thinking characteristic of Neo-Confucianism to "search for ultimate ideas through concrete phenomena".

### 1.3 The Extension of the Saying of Xing-Ji

In the traditional poetic theory, Xing refers to arousing emotion through external objects, and Ji involves deeper symbolic meaning. Zhu Xi inherits the views of his predecessors and then develops a more systematic theoretical system. He believes that poetry is not only the natural expression of emotions, but also plays the role of conveying the ideal of sages and expressing the spirit of Taoism. Therefore, when interpreting the Book of Songs, he attaches great importance to linking the content of poems with higher philosophical thoughts to make poetry an important tool to express the natural principles and moral ideals. Zhu Xi's explanation of Xing is the most innovative in theory. He breaks through the traditional simple definition of "relying on specific things to express ideas and emotions" and put forward a new explanation of "Xing is to first mention another thing to evoke the object to be recited", which elevates "Xing" from a rhetorical skill to a cognitive mode of mental cultivation <sup>[2]</sup>. For example, in the interpretation of Tao Yao, he identified the blooming peach blossom as the implication of the marriage scene, and interprets it as the concrete expression of "true feelings", which forms an isomorphic relationship between the natural image and the moral realm, and gives the poetic image metaphysical philosophical significance. This interpretation transforms the educational function of the Book of Songs from external norms to internal consciousness, and realizes the theoretical connection between the Confucian poetry traditional theory and the philosophy of mind and nature.

## 2. Zhu Xi's Understanding of the Essence of Literature

### 2.1 The Moral Education Function of

## Literature

In terms of moral education function, Zhu Xi regards literature as an important way to edify the soul and cultivate moral character. He argues that morality in poetry is not an external symbol attached to the words, but is nurtured in the emotions and artistic conception, which can subtly guide people to cultivate their moral integrity and put their family affairs in order. Because of this, when annotating the Book of Songs, Zhu Xi not only focuses on the literal meaning, but also paid attention to the hidden ethical ideals and moral admonitions, so that the classic text has the practical significance of enlightening the mind and perfecting the personality. To elaborate, Zhu Xi inherits and develops the Confucian tradition, and believes that the primary function of literature is moral cultivation. The Book of Songs occupies an important position in the Confucian classic system. Confucius once said, "Poetry can inspire emotional resonance among readers, reflect social phenomena and customs, promote emotional communication and unity among people, and criticize and satirize negative political phenomena and social issues", which highlights the moral influence effect of poetry. In the *Shijingjizhuan*, Zhu Xi further deepens this view. He argues that poetry not only reflects social reality, but also serves as a tool to improve human ethics<sup>[3]</sup>. In the commentary on Guan Ju, he points out that the gentleman's pursuit of a lady depicted in the poem is not only an expression of personal feelings, but also a symbol of courtesy and righteousness, and reflects the Confucian moral requirements for the separation of men and women and the orderly marriage. Similarly, when commenting on some poems involving love between men and women in the Guo Feng, he does not simply summarize them with "obscenity", but through concrete analysis, distinguishes the legitimate expression of love from the indulgent emotion release. In his opinion, poems that conform to courtesy and righteousness can inspire people's good thoughts, while poems that violate moral norms can lead people to deviate.

### 2.2 The Aesthetic Value of Literature

The Book of Songs is famous for its vivid Bi and Xing skills and beautiful language style. Although Zhu Xi highly emphasizes the moral function of literature, he does not neglect the

aesthetic value of literature. In the commentary, he repeatedly mentions the artistic characteristics of poetry, which shows a high sensitivity to literary aesthetics. He points out that the reason why poetry can move people is not only the profound moral implication, but also the beauty of its form and the truth of its emotion. For example, when explaining "Jian Jia", Zhu Xi particularly emphasizes the hazy beauty of artistic conception, and believes that the repeated lines and stanzas and symbolic technique used in the poem create a sad and melancholy atmosphere, and make people feel as if they were in the autumn water of the reeds and feel the complex emotions of missing and pursuing. This poetic beauty not only enhances the appeal of poetry, but also reflects the unique charm of literature. At the same time, Zhu Xi attaches great importance to the polish of poetic language. In the interpretation of "Shuo Ren", he points out that through the progressive description in the poem, the characters are vivid and unforgettable. And the concise and rhythmical language expression makes the poetry have a unique artistic charm, which can not only move the readers, but also let them understand the deeper meaning through aesthetic pleasure.

### 2.3 The Combination of Textual Exegesis and Argumentation Interpretation

Zhu Xi's academic system pays attention to "the unity of classics and interpretations", and the *Shijingjizhuan* is the concrete embodiment of the combination of textual exegesis and argumentation interpretation. In the process of annotation, Zhu Xi always insists on starting from the text, clarifies the meaning of the original text by examining the words one by one, and connects it with Confucian ethics, political philosophy and other theories, so as to reveal the universal truth in the Book of Songs. Zhu Xi not only pays attention to the literal interpretation of poetry, but also focuses on the deep ideological connotation. In his view, the text itself is the carrier of historical and cultural inheritance, and the medium of communication between heaven, earth and humanity. Thus, the rigorous method of exegetics and the abstract thinking of the argumentation interpretation are cleverly integrated and complement each other in Zhu Xi's interpretation process<sup>[4]</sup>. In order to illustrate this point of view, Zhu Xi often uses

rich historical allusions and classical discourse to support his understanding of the poem. Whenever encountering difficult words, he will not miss any details, and strive to make the explanation conform to the context and reflect the ethical sentiment of the times by examining classics and comparing variant texts. He said, “If we focus only on the form but ignore the spiritual substance, interpretation will become shallow; if we only pursue abstract argumentation and abandon the nuances of the text itself, we may deviate from the true meaning of the original text.” For this reason, Zhu Xi builds a systematic and comprehensive annotation system in the *Shijingjizhuan*, so that the textual exegesis and the argumentation interpretation complement each other, and jointly promote the revelation of the deep meaning of the text<sup>[5]</sup>. Zhu Xi deeply understands the tradition that writings are for conveying truth, and tries to take into account the coordination and unity of form, spirit and emotion in the process of analysis and annotation, which makes the Book of Songs not only a transmitter of moral norms, but also a carrier of aesthetic taste, and provides a model of interpretation and a paradigm of literary criticism for future generations.

### 3. Conclusion

To sum up, Zhu Xi’s understanding of the essence of literature in the *Shijingjizhuan* is full of the dual light of reason and sensibility, which neither ignores the moral education function of poetry, nor neglects its aesthetic value. At the same time, he also shows the superb skill in the overall grasp of the text

through the integration of textual exegesis and argumentation interpretation. The interpretation method and aesthetic pursuit together constitute the core content of Zhu Xi’s understanding of the essence of literature. From this point of view, literature is a tool to cultivate people’s hearts, a bridge to understand the natural and human meanings, and a unique carrier to convey truth and beauty among words. Its value is far beyond the single utilitarian consideration, and carries the ideal pursuit of the unity of morality, aesthetic and wisdom of the generations of literati.

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