

## THE BOOK OF SONGS - A SUPPLEMENTARY SOURCE FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT CHINESE HISTORY

### O LIVRO DAS CANÇÕES – UMA FONTE SUPLEMENTAR PARA O ESTUDO DA HISTÓRIA ANTIGA DA CHINA

Article received on: 9/10/2025

Article accepted on: 11/10/2025

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

#### Abstract

The Book of Songs (Shijing), the earliest extant anthology of Chinese poetry, has long been examined primarily through a literary lens, emphasizing its poetic artistry and the cultural spirit of its time. However, its significance extends beyond literary value. The Book of Songs also functions as a historical document that vividly mirrors the political, social, and cultural landscape of early Chinese civilization. It provides valuable insights that complement official historiography, enhancing the credibility of ancient Chinese historical narratives. Employing an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates historical and logical analysis, this study explores how the poems within the Book of Songs reconstruct key historical contexts—such as the formation and consolidation of Zhou dynasty power, the relationship between the Son of Heaven and the feudal lords, and the profound societal shifts characteristic of a decentralized feudal order. These include depictions of warfare, famine, and popular discontent. Through this approach, the study seeks to elucidate the historical value of the Book of Songs and its relevance as a critical source for understanding Chinese history during the Western Zhou and the Spring and Autumn–Warring States periods.

**Keywords:** Book of Songs. Confucius. Western Zhou Dynasty. Chinese History.

#### Resumo

*O Shijing – a mais antiga obra poética da China – costuma ser abordado principalmente sob a perspectiva literária, para compreender a arte da escrita e o espírito da época. No entanto, o valor do Shijing não se limita a isso: a obra também é considerada uma lente histórica, refletindo de forma rica a vida política, social e cultural de seu tempo, contribuindo para reforçar a autenticidade da história chinesa em um período bastante remoto, ao lado das fontes oficiais. Com base na combinação dos métodos histórico e lógico, o estudo esclarece como os poemas do Shijing reconstituem o contexto histórico da formação e consolidação do poder da dinastia Zhou, as relações entre o imperador e os senhores feudais, bem como refletem as grandes transformações da sociedade feudal descentralizada – da guerra e da fome às queixas do povo. Assim, o trabalho contribui para evidenciar o valor histórico do Shijing e o papel que desempenha na pesquisa da história da China durante os períodos Zhou Ocidental e Primavera-Outono – Estados Combatentes.*

**Palavras-chave:** Shijing. Confúcio. Zhou Ocidental. História da China.



## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the history of Chinese culture, the *Shijing* (Book of Songs) is one of the works included in the “Five Classics,” laying the foundation for Confucian thought. At the same time, it is the oldest preserved anthology of poetry, reflecting many aspects of social life from the Western Zhou period to the Spring and Autumn–Warring States era. The *Shijing* has often been studied merely as a purely literary work, imbued with ethical and educational values rather than historical significance. However, from a historiographical perspective, the *Shijing* also contains certain historical values, and this collection of poems can be regarded as a “mirror” of historical events, offering an authentic portrayal of the social life of common people—something that ancient official histories such as the *Zuo zhuan*, *Guoyu*, and *Records of the Grand Historian* did not fully record, as they focused primarily on the ruling class.

In particular, the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn–Warring States periods are among the earliest stages of Chinese history, dating back to before the Common Era, so historical sources from these times are relatively limited compared to later periods. Therefore, with more than three hundred poems composed by contemporaries and compiled by the eminent cultural figure Confucius, the *Shijing* becomes even more valuable, providing precious materials about daily life, human emotions, relationships between different social strata, between rulers and subjects, as well as local customs across various regions. This value makes the *Shijing* an important reference source that supplements official histories and contributes to reconstructing the social history of ancient China.

## 2 OVERVIEW OF THE *SHIJING*

The *Shijing* is a collection of ancient Chinese folk songs, reflecting the life, customs, and emotions of the people of antiquity (Confucius, 2003a, p.20). Regarding its origin, scholars believe that the *Shijing* arose from practical contexts: either as poems offered to the Son of Heaven, or as folk songs collected by court musicians and historians to serve ritual music and assess the lives of the people (Dieu et al., 2013, p.12).

Confucius played an important role in preserving the *Shijing*, though the extent of his editorial involvement remains debated. On one hand, historian Sima Qian believed

that Confucius revised and selected 305 poems out of more than three thousand pieces to serve educational purposes, in accordance with the principles of ritual and music (Sima, 2003, pp.225–226). On the other hand, Professor Bửu Cầm suggested that Confucius may have contributed to its preservation by removing obscure parts and retaining content with high educational value, rather than deeply intervening or creating new material (Confucius, 2003a, p.23). The relationship between Confucius and the *Shijing* is thus one of transmission and heritage, between educational ideals and traditional culture.

The *Shijing* contains a total of 311 poems, though six survive only by title without text (known as *Yishi*), so later generations usually count 305 poems (Institute of Sino-Nom Studies, 2004, p.111). The *Shijing* is divided into three sections: *Feng*, *Ya*, and *Song*. *Feng*, or *Guofeng*, consists of folk songs from fifteen feudal states. *Ya* reflects music within the Zhou royal court, including *Dayao*, which describes the life of the aristocracy, and *Xiaoya*, which depicts the life of the lesser nobility. *Song* comprises hymns praising the virtues of ruling dynasties, often used in ancestral temple rituals, including *Shang Song*, *Zhou Song* (the central part), and *Lu Song*. Among these, *Guofeng* accounts for more than half, with 160 poems, and is considered the most valuable section for its profound reflection of social realities and the lives of the people.

### 3 CHINESE HISTORY THROUGH THE LENS OF THE *SHIJING*

#### 3.1 Historical events preserved in poetry

##### 3.1.1 *The Life of Hou Ji*

The poem *Birth of the People* (*Sheng Min*) in the *Greater Court Hymns* (*Da Ya*) recounts the miraculous birth of Hou Ji, regarded as the ancestor of the Zhou dynasty. Jiang Yuan, Hou Ji's mother, after praying to Heaven and Earth, stepped on a mysterious footprint, became pregnant, and gave birth to Hou Ji. The poem describes this wonder: “A footprint of the toe stirred desire / From the moment she stepped on the mark of the toe” (Confucius, 2003c, pp.132–151).

As he grew up, Hou Ji became renowned for his agricultural skills, cultivating grains and being granted land. Part of the poem depicts him planting rice and other crops: “Rows of rice grow lush and fair / Thorn and millet planted side by side” (Confucius,

2003c, pp.132–151). The poem not only reflects prosperous agricultural life but also reverence for Heaven and Earth through rituals: “*The ears hang heavy, none are empty / The houses of Tai are granted lands*” (Confucius, 2003c, pp.132–151).

Another line states: “*Barley and wheat bestowed in full / Heaven nourishes all the people*” (Confucius, 2003c, p.461). Hou Ji’s transmission of wheat and barley to the people indicates cultural and commercial exchanges between China and regions of West Asia and Central Asia. Archaeological studies confirm that wheat and barley were introduced into China very early through various trade routes: “*Wheat was introduced into central China in the second or third millennium BCE, but barley did not arrive until the first millennium BCE*” (Everding, 2017). This demonstrates that China engaged in exchanges and trade with other peoples since antiquity, long before the Silk Road emerged during the Han dynasty.

### 3.1.2 King Tai of Zhou Moves the Capital to Mount Qi

The Zhou people lived in Bin (or Min) until the time of King Tai of Zhou, also known as Gugong Danfu—the grandfather of King Wen of Zhou—who lived during the Shang dynasty and led the Zhou to settle in the region of Mount Qi. This event is clearly recorded in the poem *Mian (Da Ya)*: “*Westward along the river’s edge, / At Mount Qi beneath the hills they settled*” (Confucius, 2003c, p.44).

Another verse notes: “*In hidden pits or earthen caves, / No grand houses yet were built*” (Confucius, 2003c, p.42). Before the Zhou, at least three types of housing architecture existed, adapted to natural conditions: domed earthen houses in the cold western regions to retain heat; earthen or stone caves in highlands serving similar functions; and wooden houses that appeared when King Tai moved to Mount Qi, where the climate was mild and timber resources abundant. These were representative styles, though not exhaustive of architectural development from antiquity to the Three Dynasties.

King Tai also practiced divination using turtle shells to predict fortune and misfortune. At that time, the *Bagua* and *Zhou Yi* were not yet complete, so coin-casting divination did not exist; instead, people heated turtle shells over fire and interpreted the cracks. During the Shang dynasty, this practice was widespread, with results inscribed on animal bones and turtle shells. This led to the creation of Oracle Bone Script, the earliest

Chinese writing, discovered at the Yin Ruins with over 100,000 artifacts (Lam & Tao, 1997, p.31).

When Gugong Danfu moved to Mount Qi, he formally established the state name “Zhou,” marking the transition from a tribal community to an organized polity. Before this, figures such as Hou Ji or Gong Liu, though important ancestors of the Zhou, were not associated with the state name and were referred to only by personal names. From Gugong Danfu onward, the Zhou royal lineage bore the official title linked to the state, such as King Tai of Zhou or King Tai Gong (Phan, 1958, p.16).

### 3.1.3 From the Birth of King Wen to King Wu’s Campaign against Zhou of Shang

The Zhou dynasty reached a turning point with the birth of King Wen, recorded in the poem *Great Brightness (Da Ming, Da Ya)*. Wang Gui, father of King Wen Ji Chang, married a woman of the Ren clan from the state of Zhi, a small vassal of the Shang, and she bore King Wen. Because King Wen revered Heaven and Earth and possessed abundant virtue, states from all directions submitted to him. Heaven also granted him a virtuous consort, Lady Tai Si. After their marriage, Lady Tai Si gave birth to King Wu Ji Fa.

When grown, King Wu allied with other vassal states to attack the Shang. The decisive battle between Zhou and Shang was the Battle of Muye, fought about 70 li south of Zhaoge. Historical records describe the Shang army and the battle: most of Shang’s 700,000 troops were slaves and captives from the Eastern Yi, hastily organized. Oppressed and mistreated by King Zhou of Shang, they had long resented him and were unwilling to sacrifice their lives for him. On the battlefield, when the Zhou forces advanced fiercely, these soldiers turned their spears and joined the Zhou, causing the Shang army to collapse in an instant (Lam & Tao, 1997, p.42).

Most histories simply note that the Battle of Muye was swift, but the *Shijing* provides an important detail: the battle lasted only a single morning, highlighting its rapidity: “*He sent forth troops to strike Shang, / Within one morning, peace spread to all directions*” (Confucius, 2003c, p.41).

Poems such as *King Wen, Summer Rain*, and *King Wen Has a Voice (Da Ya)* mention that after King Wu defeated Shang, he withdrew his troops to Haojing, established the capital there, and enfeoffed his brothers, meritorious officials, and even

descendants of previous dynasties such as Xia and Shang as vassals, assigning them territories to govern (Confucius, 2003c). The poem *Chen Lu (Zhou Song)* also records that descendants of Shang and Xia came to the Zhou ancestral temple to offer sacrifices and pay homage: “*They came as guests to my hall / With solemn and dignified bearing*” (Confucius, 2003c, pp.470–471).

The Zhou feudal system was distinctive compared to Western feudal states: the Zhou Son of Heaven not only managed the Zhou state but also cared for the vassal states. This is clearly reflected in poems such as *Shi Mai (Zhou Song)* and *Ban (Zhou Song)*. The *Book of Rites* also records: every five years, the Son of Heaven conducted an inspection tour. Each time, in the second month, he toured the east to Mount Dai Zong, performed sacrifices, inspected rivers and mountains, visited vassals, inquired after elders over a hundred years old, ordered the Grand Master to recite the *Shijing* to examine the customs of the people, sent officials to observe the markets, revised rituals and music, adjusted calendars, and set clothing regulations to match local customs (Confucius, 1999, p.99).

The poem *King Wen Has a Voice* also records Zhou Wu’s emphasis on education, when he established *Bi Yong*, a school for princes and nobles, showing his regard for learning: “*At Haojing he established Bi Yong*” (Confucius, 2003c, p.127). The *Bi Yong* of King Wen and King Wu can be considered the beginnings of the Chinese educational system, laying the foundation for the expansion of schools later, especially for the aristocracy. The *Book of Rites* also notes the early Zhou educational system, with levels from *Shu* to *Si* and *Guoxue*, where the sons of kings and nobles were taught, and regulations were set for academic progress year by year (Confucius, 1999, p.157).

#### 3.1.4 King You of Zhou and Lady Bao Si

“*Women speak with many words / Creating steps that lead to disorder. / In court affairs, women have no place / To participate, abandoning their weaving of silk*” (Confucius, 2003c, pp.410–413).

In ancient Chinese records, it is often recounted that King You of Zhou lit the beacon fires on Mount Li merely to amuse Lady Bao Si, causing the vassal states to lose faith in the Zhou king and ultimately leading to the collapse of the Western Zhou. However, the *Shijing* presents another perspective on the “Beacon Fires of Mount Li”

incident: Lady Bao Si directly participated in court affairs alongside King You. The poem's author identifies this as the root cause of turmoil within the royal court.

### 3.2 Customs and daily life of the people

#### 3.2.1 Tools of production

In addition to bronze, the Chinese also knew how to use iron very early. The poem *Si Tie* in the *Qin Feng* section, according to scholars Nguyễn Gia Phú and Nguyễn Huy Quý, was composed at the end of the Western Zhou period and mentions the appearance of iron—making it the earliest text to reference iron in China (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2007, p.38). “*A chariot of four stout dark horses, / Six reins held firmly in hand*” (Confucius, 2003a, p.529).

The poem's title *Si Tie* means “four iron-colored horses,” either referring to their dark hue like iron or to armor of blackened iron (Confucius, 2003a, p.528). Yet aside from this poem, no other evidence has been found to confirm the existence of iron at the end of the Western Zhou.

#### 3.2.2 Irrigation

From the flood-control legends of Nüwa, Gun, and Yu, we see the development of ancient hydraulic techniques: Nüwa used stones to block waters, Gun built earthen dikes, and Yu dredged channels to divert water into fields for flood relief (Du, 2007, pp.11–14). Yu's method proved most effective and remained the standard for Chinese irrigation for centuries.

The poem *Mian (Da Ya)* mentions King Tai of Zhou moving the capital to Mount Qi, distributing land to the people, and guiding them to channel water into fields (Confucius, 2003c, p.49). The poem *Yi Xi (Da Ya)* records King Cheng of Zhou admonishing agricultural officials, with references to irrigation (Confucius, 2003c, p.468). The poem *Bi Gong (Lu Song)* describes farming in Zhou and Lu, based on irrigation techniques handed down from Yu: “*Throughout the land crops grow abundant, / Continuing the legacy of Lord Yu*” (Confucius, 2003c, p.561).

### 3.2.3 Agricultural work throughout the year

The poem *Qi Yue* (*Min Feng*) provides a detailed account of the yearly agricultural cycle. Across twelve months, people were never idle, each month tied to seasonal tasks:

January: repair tools, carve ice for storage

February: spring sacrifices

March: pick mulberry leaves and vegetables

April: weeds produce seeds

May: cicadas and crickets appear

June: eat fruits of wu and yu

July: harvest beans, eat melons, begin dyeing cloth

August: cut reeds, pick dates, dye cloth for clothing

September: harvest vegetables, cold begins

October: harvest grain, prepare for winter, seal cave dwellings

November: hunt animals for fur, store provisions

December: hunt pigs, drink rice wine to welcome spring (Confucius, 2003a, pp.635–654).

This cycle shows a stable rhythm of agricultural life closely tied to nature. Cross-referencing with contemporary texts, the *Zhong Dong Ji* in *Lüshi Chunqiu* also records November tasks: gathering uncollected produce, retrieving stray livestock, harvesting from mountains and marshes, and punishing theft (Lü, 1999, pp.184–185). These details align almost exactly with the *Shijing*, reinforcing its historical accuracy.

### 3.2.4 Romantic love

Love songs in the *Shijing* can be grouped into two main categories: poems celebrating pure love and those expressing passionate, unrestrained love.

**Unrestrained love:** exemplified by *Tang Zhong* (*Yong Feng*), describing a bold tryst between a girl and boy in a mulberry grove: “*We meet in Tang Zhong / At Shang Gong she welcomes me / Leading me to Qi Shang*” (Confucius, 2003a, p.233). These poems reveal a yearning for free love beyond rigid social norms.

**Pure love:** subdivided into unrequited love (longing and yearning), unhappy love (broken or incomplete), and happy love (fulfilled union). Unrequited love appears most

frequently, as in *Guan Ju* (Zhou Nan), portraying a young man's longing for the woman he loves: "*Far away I gaze through the long night / Restless on my bed, unable to sleep*" (Confucius, 2003a, p.39).

**Unhappy love:** *Ge Sheng* (Dang Feng) depicts a soldier's wife faithfully awaiting her husband's return, ultimately in vain: "*For a hundred years I remain true / May I be buried with my husband alone*" (Confucius, 2003a, p.518).

**Happy love:** *Tao Yao* (Zhou Nan) describes the joy of a bride entering her husband's home (Confucius, 2003a, pp.59–60).

Thus, the *Shijing* not only praises tender, innocent love but also records intense, free emotions, authentically reflecting the romantic life of people in the Western Zhou–Spring and Autumn periods, in both its beauty and its sorrow.

### 3.2.5 Husband–wife relations

In ancient Chinese society, wives held low status in marriage. The system of "three wives and four concubines" allowed men multiple partners, while the principal wife had to accept them, reinforcing inequality within the household. With husbands holding absolute authority, women were rendered dependent and powerless.

The poem *Ge Tan* (Zhou Nan) reflects the wife's timidity and passivity: "*She instructs the nurse clearly / To ask her husband's leave to visit her parents*" (Confucius, 2003a, p.48). Here, the woman dares not speak directly to her husband, relying on a servant to convey her request, showing ritual constraints and deep dependence.

The poem *Gu Feng* (Bei Feng) portrays the tragedy of a wife abandoned when her husband marries anew: "*This body is no longer accepted / How could he spare pity afterward?*" (Confucius, 2003a, pp.174–176). These lines express the bitterness of neglect, casting the former wife into loneliness and abandonment, vividly reflecting the injustice women endured under feudal marriage.

## 4 THE ROLE OF THE *SHIJING* IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION

### 4.1 The *Shijing* as a special historical source

#### 4.1.1 *Supplementary source to official histories*

Unlike official histories, which were compiled from the perspective of the court and served the interests and ideology of the ruling class, the *Shijing* reflects voices from below. Its poems bear the imprint of the lives of common people, women, soldiers, ordinary laborers, and marginalized groups. For this reason, the *Shijing* becomes a valuable historical source, supplementing and cross-checking official records to reconstruct a more comprehensive picture of Chinese history during the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn–Warring States periods.

The *Guofeng* section records many aspects of social life, from marriage customs and romantic love to labor, war grievances, and corvée service. Poems such as *Shuo Shu* and *Bei Feng* express the people’s resentment toward greedy, authoritarian officials and nobles, who drove them into poverty and even forced them to consider leaving their homeland in search of better living conditions. Works like *Bao Yu*, *Ce Hu*, *Ge Lei*, and *Yang Zhi Shui* reveal the suffering of people repeatedly conscripted into military service or forced labor, leading to family separation, wives waiting for husbands, and parents longing for sons. These realities are often absent from official histories, which focus on decrees or military achievements rather than the fate and emotions of ordinary people.

Meanwhile, poems such as *Guan Ju*, *Tao Yao*, *Shang Zhong Zi*, and *Da Che* highlight emotional life, marriage, and family ethics valued by the community, offering precious insights into social and cultural structures of the time. Notably, some *Da Ya* poems such as *Mian*, *Yi Xi*, and *Bi Gong* mention agricultural organization, irrigation, and farming, reflecting the Zhou state’s efforts to manage production and stabilize people’s lives.

By preserving practical, concrete aspects of life often overlooked or downplayed in official histories, the *Shijing* fills gaps in traditional historiography. It is not only a literary work but also a kind of “folk historical source,” allowing researchers to approach history from a perspective closer to the lived experiences, emotions, aspirations,

grievances, and joys of the people. As a result, ancient Chinese society emerges as multidimensional and vivid, far beyond the dry records of court chronicles.

#### 4.12 Characteristics of a “literary” historical source

Although primarily a literary work, the *Shijing* simultaneously reflects social realities through language rich in imagery and emotion. Its poetic form—simple structure, musical rhythm, and diverse rhetorical devices—renders its “historical records” lively and infused with the spiritual life of the time, unlike the dryness of official histories.

Thanks to this feature, the *Shijing* is a valuable source for studying not only social history but also the history of emotions and mental life in ancient society. Images, metaphors, laments, praises, and complaints in the poems reveal the inner world—joys, anxieties, aspirations, and grievances—that official histories, focused on political events, military exploits, and dynasties, rarely recorded.

Moreover, expressed in literary form, the *Shijing* provides a clear human depth. The poems not only describe marriage rituals, farming practices, or the hardships of military service, but also show how people truly felt—how they loved, hated, feared, hoped, complained, and dreamed in response to reality. This emotional depth makes the *Shijing* a unique literary-historical source, illuminating the deeper layers of human history—the spirit and soul of an era.

Thus, studying the *Shijing* helps reconstruct social relations and customs while opening opportunities to explore the mental states, value systems, and psychological dynamics of communities and individuals in specific historical contexts. This is what gives the *Shijing* its special importance as a rare “literary historical source” in the corpus of ancient Chinese writings.

#### 4.1.3 Valuable material for cultural and intellectual history

As the oldest surviving poetic anthology of China, the *Shijing* not only reflects social life but also contains precious layers of cultural and intellectual history. Through its imagery, emotions, rituals, and human relationships, one can discern the formation and consolidation of foundational values of the Huaxia civilization.

First, the *Shijing* vividly demonstrates the ideology of ritual and music (*li yue*), which underpinned social order in the Western Zhou. Many poems were composed and performed in ancestral temple sacrifices and court ceremonies, embodying the belief in using ritual and music to educate the people, maintain discipline, and distinguish hierarchy. Thus, the *Shijing* became a key instrument for sustaining and disseminating the political ideal of “governing the state and pacifying the people” through ritual and music—a tradition later inherited and developed by Confucius and the Confucian school.

At the same time, the *Shijing* preserves the communal moral concepts characteristic of early agrarian society, emphasizing kinship, lineage, and obligations between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife. Norms of filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty, and trust are naturally expressed in love songs, wedding joy, and anxieties over soldiers going to war, thereby shaping enduring moral values in Chinese culture.

Equally important, the *Shijing* reflects a worldview of harmony between humans and nature. Natural scenery in the poems is not merely a static backdrop but a space of communion, where people entrusted their emotions, joys, and hopes. This perspective reveals the beginnings of the idea of *tian ren xiang yu* (the unity of Heaven and humanity), a crucial premise in classical Chinese philosophy.

With all these layers of meaning, the *Shijing* is an essential source for studying China’s cultural and intellectual history. It helps decode how ancient society established and maintained political order through ritual and music, formed moral values, and developed a spiritual relationship with the natural world. Thus, the *Shijing* is not merely a poetry collection but a mirror reflecting the inner forces that shaped the identity of Chinese civilization from its earliest days.

## **4.2 Accessibility and utilization of the *Shijing* in the modern context**

### *4.2.1 Reconstructing history and artistic inspiration from the *Shijing**

As the oldest poetic heritage of China, the *Shijing* not only provides valuable evidence of society, customs, and ethics during the Western Zhou period but also opens a pathway to approach history through artistic language rich in symbolism and emotion. This is particularly important in the study of *spiritual history* and the *history of emotions*,

fields that increasingly emphasize exploring the inner world, collective consciousness, and foundational spiritual values beyond mere chronology or political events.

Through this perspective, the past no longer appears as a rigid sequence of events but as a vivid living space, enabling learners not only to understand but also to truly *feel* history. The poetic imagery—wedding joys, longing, or lamentations in the *Shijing*—becomes a gateway into the spiritual life of ancient people, thereby reconstructing an entire system of aesthetic, moral, and ritual values that governed society at the time.

Moreover, the *Shijing* serves as a rich repository of images and themes, easily adaptable to contemporary art forms. Visual arts, theater, cinema, and modern folk music can all draw powerful inspiration from it, creating works that are deeply infused with traditional spirit while resonating with modern aesthetic tastes. Historical practice shows that even in Vietnamese folk art, the *Shijing* once appeared—for example, in the chèo play *Quan Âm Thị Kính*, which opens with Thiên Sĩ reciting the poem *Guan Ju*. This demonstrates the enduring vitality and diverse adaptability of this heritage.

In today's educational and media contexts, incorporating the *Shijing* into theatrical performances or cultural-creative projects not only re-enacts history in an emotionally rich way but also cultivates aesthetic appreciation and cultural identity. In this way, classical values are not merely preserved but actively disseminated, continuing to live vibrantly in the spiritual life of communities.

#### 4.2.2 Preservation and translation in the contemporary Era

In the age of globalization and digital technology, the preservation and translation of the *Shijing* face new demands—not only to safeguard an ancient text but also to ensure that this heritage continues to “live” within modern spiritual life.

In practice, many existing translations of the *Shijing* still employ a large number of Sino-Vietnamese terms, maintaining an archaic style but making it difficult for younger generations to access. Furthermore, earlier interpretations were often heavily influenced by Confucian ideology, which could render them rigid and doctrinal, sometimes obscuring the subtle imagery and emotional richness that form the soul of poetry. This creates a pressing need for new approaches.

One feasible direction is to encourage translation and commentary projects in a more modern style, using contemporary Vietnamese that is accessible to today's readers

while preserving the spirit, imagery, and core aesthetic values of the original text—avoiding oversimplification or detachment from its ancient cultural context.

Additionally, digitizing translations, building open databases, and developing online search and annotation applications are becoming prominent trends. Through technology, learners, researchers, and cultural enthusiasts can easily access, compare, and study different versions, consult commentaries from multiple perspectives, and overcome the limitations of physical storage.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This study has helped clarify the role of the *Shijing* as a special historical source in reconstructing Chinese history during the Western Zhou to Spring and Autumn–Warring States periods (11th–3rd centuries BCE). From analyzing the overall structure, origins, and editorial process of the *Shijing* to situating it within the turbulent socio-political context of a decentralized feudal era, the research demonstrates that the *Shijing* not only reflects aesthetic, moral, and intellectual values but also preserves vivid evidence of popular life, collective psychology, and social contradictions of the time.

From a historiographical perspective, the *Shijing* provides important supplementation and cross-reference to official histories, which were largely narrated from the viewpoint of the ruling elite. The poems in the *Guofeng* section expose realities of forced labor, warfare, famine, family separation, and the grievances of the people against the greed and harshness of officials and aristocrats.

This broadens the scope of historical inquiry—from focusing solely on decrees or military achievements to exploring *spiritual history* and the *history of emotions*, reflecting the inner world and communal values that official Chinese histories of the period rarely emphasized. In addition, the study raises questions about the preservation and reinterpretation of the *Shijing* in the modern context. The persistence of archaic Sino-Vietnamese translations highlights the need for new translation and commentary projects that are more accessible while still preserving the spirit of the original, combined with digitization and the creation of open databases to expand accessibility for the scholarly community.

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### Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

### Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

**How to cite this article (APA)**

My, N. T., & Bao, L. G. (2025). THE BOOK OF SONGS - A SUPPLEMENTARY SOURCE FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT CHINESE HISTORY. *Veredas Do Direito*, 22(6), e223960. <https://doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v22.n6.3960>