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The Richness of Ambiguity: A Mencian Statement and Interpretive Theory and Practice in Premodern China

ZONG-QI CAI

Abstract The four-character statement “*Yi yi ni zhi*” 以意逆志 by Mencius on how to interpret the *Book of Poetry* has won praise from critics of all persuasions for nearly a millennium. How could this Mencian statement become a credo for so many different and often mutually opposed interpretive traditions? The extraordinary “versatility” of the Mencian statement, this article suggests, has much to do with the rich inherent ambiguity of uninflected classical Chinese. By adroitly exploiting the ambiguities of the words *yi* 意, *ni* 逆, and *zhi* 志 as well as its syntax, traditional Chinese critics continually reinterpreted the Mencian statement in a way that justified their novel interpretive approaches. So, by investigating the continual reinterpretation of the Mencian statement, this article maps out the rise of diverse interpretive approaches from pre-Han times through the Qing. It also discovers two distinctive thrusts of these approaches and sheds light on the underlying dynamic unity of the Chinese interpretive tradition.

Keywords Chinese interpretive theory, Mencius on interpretation, “The Mao Prefaces,” Zhu Xi on interpretation, the interpretive approaches to the *Shijing* (Book of Poetry)

The four-character statement “*Yi yi ni zhi*” 以意逆志 by Mencius on how to interpret the *Book of Poetry* (hereafter the *Poetry* or *Shijing*) has won praise from critics of all persuasions for nearly a millennium. It has been described as “having exhaustively elucidated the way of explaining the *Poetry*” 盡說詩之道,¹ “the most excellent exposition on the interpretation of the *Poetry* since high antiquity” 千古談詩之妙詮,² and the “ultimate principle for explicators of the *Poetry*” 說詩者之宗.³ This quasi-universal endorsement might seem puzzling to someone unfamiliar with Chinese

critical tradition. Western criticism offers no truly comparable case of a statement, however influential, being embraced by disparate critical schools over so many centuries.⁴

How could this Mencian statement become a credo for so many different and often mutually opposed interpretive traditions? The extraordinary “versatility” of the Mencian statement, I would suggest, has much to do with the rich inherent ambiguity of uninflected classical Chinese. The second character *yi* 意 could denote conception, speculation, imagination, or textual meaning. The third character *ni* 逆 has been rendered “actively trace back to” and, alternately, “to passively wait to meet something.” The fourth character *zhi* 志 has been glossed as either moral intent or simply feelings. These semantic ambiguities are compounded at the level of syntax because of the absence of possessives. Without possessives, it is impossible to know for sure whose *yi* 意 and *zhi* 志 Mencius was actually talking about. By adroitly exploiting these semantic and syntactic ambiguities, traditional Chinese critics continually sought to reinterpret the Mencian statement in a way that justified their novel interpretive approaches. To them, there was no better way to legitimize and elevate their own theories and practices than to ascribe them to Mencius, a towering Confucian thinker second only to Confucius.

So, by a careful look at how the Mencian statement is continually reinterpreted, we might hope to discover the distinctive thrusts of major interpretive approaches from pre-Han times through the Qing. We might also hope to discern the underlying interrelatedness of these approaches, and, in effect, the dynamic unity of the Chinese interpretive tradition.

**The Pre-Han Analogical Approach:
“Using Analogical Imagination to Perceive the Intent
[of a Poetry Presenter]”**

The “*Yi yi ni zhi*” statement has rarely been discussed in connection with the two most important pre-Han interpretive practices: *fushi* 賦詩 (presenting the *Poetry*) and *yinshi* 引詩 (citing the *Poetry*). Thanks to the ambiguities noted above, this Mencian statement can very well be used to characterize both practices.

Let us first consider *fushi*. Typically, this practice involved one or more court officials each presenting a *Shijing* poem (or a part of it) on a diplomatic occasion, probably by singing or recitation with musical accompaniment.⁵ This performative act carried a subtle message for the intended listener, who was also expected to respond. A famous *fushi* example is Zhao Meng’s 趙孟 encounter with seven Jin ministers in 545 BCE. Zhao Meng was treated to a performance of the *Poetry* at a court banquet held in his honor. At Zhao’s request, the seven ministers in attendance each presented a poem, allowing them to welcome him as a guest (and indirectly to

<i>The Presentation of Poems by the Seven Ministers</i>	<i>Zhao Meng's Responses</i>
Zi Zhan presented "Cicada" (Mao no. 14) 子展賦草蟲.	Zhao Meng said, "Good! This is a lord of the people, but I am not sufficient to be one" 趙孟曰: 善哉! 民之主也。抑武也不足以當之。
Bo You presented "Quails Bickering" (Mao no. 41) 伯有賦鶉之賁賁.	Zhao Meng said, "Words said in bed should not go across the threshold, let alone be heard in the open country. This is not what one can bear to hear" 趙孟曰: 床第之言不踰闕, 況在野乎? 非使人之所得聞也。
Zi Xi presented the fourth stanza of "Young Millet" (Mao no. 227) 子西賦黍苗之四章.	Zhao Meng said, "We have our lord; what abilities can I have to offer" 趙孟曰: 寡君在, 武何能焉?
Zi Chan presented "Mulberry on the Lowland" (Mao no. 228) 子產賦隰桑.	Zhang Meng said, "Allow me to accept the last stanza" 趙孟曰: 武請受其卒章.
Zi Dashu presented "Grass Grow in the Wild Country" (Mao no. 94) 子大叔賦野有蔓草.	Zhao Meng said, "This is the kindness you have accorded me" 趙孟曰: 吾子之惠也.
Yin Duan presented "The Cricket" (Mao no. 114) 印段賦蟋蟀.	Zhao Meng said, "Good! This is a lord who preserves his family. I can have hope in you" 趙孟曰: 善哉! 保家之主也。吾有望矣。
Gongsun Duan presented "Mulberry Finch" (Mao no. 215) 公孫段賦桑扈.	Zhao Meng said, "No arrogance, no pride, where else can good fortune go? If he can adhere to these words, he cannot decline good fortune and emolument due him even if he wants to do so?" 趙孟曰: 匪交匪敖, 福將焉往? 若保是言也。欲辭福祿得乎? ⁶

express their opinion of him) and reveal their own hearts' intent (*zhi* 志). This initiated seven rounds of *fushi* involving the seven ministers and the guest (table 1). In the left column, we can see how the seven ministers took turns presenting *Shijing* poems. Each would have mentally surveyed the corpus of the *Poetry* and selected the one he hoped would best convey his opinion of the guest and reveal his own intent. In the right column, we see how Zhao responded with an observation of his own. Listening to each poem performed, he reenvisioned it as an indirect, analogical expression of the presenter.

This use of *fushi* in lieu of explicit verbal communication was a high-stakes game. In its favor, the indirectness of a poetic presentation can allow one party to advance opinions and ideas too awkward to be explicitly stated, while giving the other party time to come up with a response. All but one (Bo You) of the seven ministers made good use of this opportunity. Through poetic mediation, the six ministers managed to praise without fawning and to express aspiration without arrogance. For their impressive display, they were rewarded with appreciation and praise from Zhao Meng. At the same time, this example reveals how the indirectness of *fushi* can easily lead to grave misunderstanding. Bo You's choice of "Quails Bickering"—probably because of its refrain "Evil are the men / Whom I must call 'lord'"⁷—was (mis)construed by Zhao Meng as a brazen denunciation of

his lord, the earl of Zheng. No one could say whether Bo You really meant this, as Zhao assumed—he might simply have bungled his *fushi* task by choosing the wrong poem for the occasion. Either way, he would pay dearly for the misstep. Not only was he instantly rebuked, but he was shortly afterwards indicted with a damning prediction by Zhao Meng: “Bo You will be put to death. The *Poetry* is used to convey the heart’s intent, and his intent was to slander his lord. He openly grumbled about his lord, and yet he thought he was doing it in honor of a guest. Can he live long? He would be lucky if he could get some respite before his death.”⁸ Unfortunately for Bo You, this malediction proved true only three years later.

Throughout the seven rounds of *fushi*, neither the seven ministers nor the guest showed any interest in the original meaning of the poems performed. Instead, both sides were preoccupied with encoding and decoding the messages therein. While the ministers used analogical imagination to *express* intent (a process that might be called “*yi yi ming zhi*” 以意(臆)明志), the guest exercised the same to *trace* (*ni*) that intention (“*yi yi ni zhi*”).

More extensively recorded than *fushi* in pre-Han texts is the *yinshi*, a practice of citing from the *Poetry*. It also operates through analogical imagination, as shown in this famous *yinshi* example:⁹

Zi Gong said, “‘Poor yet not subservient, wealthy yet not supercilious’. What do you think of this?” The Master replied, “That will do, but better still, “‘Poor yet delighting in the Way, wealthy yet fond of rituals.’” Zi Gong said, “The *Poetry* says, ‘Like things cut, then filed, / Like things carved, then polished.’ Is this the meaning of what you have just said?” The Master replied, “‘Ci [Zi Gong], now I can talk with you about the *Poetry*, because from what you were told you could infer what is to follow.”

子貢曰。貧而無諂。富而無驕。何如。子曰。可也。未若貧而樂。富而好禮者也。子貢曰。詩云。如切如磋。如琢如磨。其斯之謂與。子曰。賜也。始可與言詩已矣。告諸往而知來者。¹⁰

Compared with the *fushi* episode discussed above, three prominent differences emerge. First, the context shifts from public performance on a stately occasion to mostly nonperformative, private conversations. Second, what is to be encoded and decoded changes from a *Poetry* presenter’s broad intent or goal to a particular point (often a moral concept) that a *Poetry* citer wants to illustrate and amplify. So, *zhi* practically becomes synonymous with *yi* 意 or “intended meaning,” as later glossed by Xu Shen 許慎 (58–147).¹¹ Third, the analogical encoding and decoding has become far less imaginative. Often, the relationship between the analogical vehicle (the *Shijing* lines) and its tenor is quite clear. The lines cited by Zigong, “Like things cut, then filed, / Like things carved, then polished,” are readily recognized as an analogue to the moral ideal of continual self-cultivation. Though less imaginative than *fushi*, Zigong’s *yinshi* act is nonetheless commended by Confucius. His

response, “from what you were told you could infer what is to follow,” suggests that for Confucius analogical inference rather than imagination is a prerequisite for understanding the *Poetry*.

If we accept the common notion of interpretation as seeking to discover a work’s putative meaning, both *fushi* and to a lesser extent *yinshi* constitute a travesty. The *fushi* of the seven ministers and Zhao Meng might be seen as a type of poetic cannibalization: severing poems or poetic lines from their original contexts for use in analogical self-expression. Such analogical appropriation did not go unnoticed by traditional Chinese critics. It was first identified by Du Yu 杜預 (222–284) as “cutting off a section to get a desired meaning” (*duanzhang quyì* 斷章取義). Although this phrase would acquire a more negative connotation over time, it was originally a neutral characterization of the interactive *fushi* and *yinshi* in pre-Han times.

The Pre-Han Reconstructive Approach:

“Using What One Construes [from a Text] to Trace the Poet’s Intent”

In assessing the historical significance of the Mencian statement, scholars rarely consider its debt to earlier interpretive practices. This has prevented us from seeing where the true originality of this statement lies. Contrary to widely held belief, the *yi yi ni zhi*, or “conception-to-intent” model of interpretation, was not newly invented by Mencius but was rooted in earlier *fushi* and *yinshi* practices, in which a listener invariably “uses analogical imagination (*yi*) to perceive the intent (*zhi*)” of the person singing or citing the *Poetry*. The real originality of Mencius, in my opinion, lies in his ingenious reconceptualization of the terms *yi* and *zhi* in the new context of silent reading. As we shall see, this reconceptualization of the two terms supports his reconstructive theory of interpretation.

To begin, we examine Mencius’s treatment of *yi*. As a verb, *yi* 意 often means “*yixiang*” 臆想 (to imagine, to speculate). As a noun, *yi* 意 often denotes *ciyi* 辭意 (the meaning of phrases) or *wenyi* 文意 (the meaning of an entire composition). As shown above, *fushi* and *yinshi* practices reveal an indulgence in *yixiang* and an obsession with *ciyi* to the neglect of the *wenyi*. While he himself cares little about the original *wenyi* when citing a *Shijing* poem, Mencius maintains that neglecting *wenyi* inevitably leads to misreadings of the *Poetry*. In fact, his “*Yi yi ni zhi*” statement was made to show his pupil Xianqiu Meng how to correctly interpret a *Shijing* poem in light of its original *wenyi*.

Xianqiu Meng said, “I have already gotten your point that Shun did not treat Yao as his subject. But, the *Poetry* says, ‘Under the entire heaven, / There is no land that is not the king’s. / To the borders of the land, / There is no man who is not the king’s subject’ [“Northern Mountain,” Mao no. 205]. Since Shun had already become the Son of Heaven, I venture to ask, how was the Blind Man [his father] not his subject?”

Mencius replied, “It is an ode! That is not what it means. It only tells of people being so laboriously employed in the king’s business that they could not attend to the needs of their own parents. They were saying, ‘Isn’t this the king’s business? Why are we alone overworked?’ Therefore, one who explains the *Poetry* should not let rhetorical embellishment harm [the understanding of] words and should not let words harm [the understanding of] the author’s intent. One should use what one construes [from a text] to trace the author’s intent, and thereby get the meaning of a poem.”

咸丘蒙曰。舜之不臣堯、則吾既得聞命矣。詩云。普天之下。莫非王土。率土之濱。莫非王臣。而舜既為天子矣。敢問瞽瞍之非臣如何。曰。是詩也、非是之謂也。勞於王事、而不得養父母也。曰。此莫非王事。我獨賢勞也。故說詩者、不以文害辭。不以辭害志。以意逆志是為得之。¹²

This passage brings into sharp relief Xianqiu Meng’s obsession with *ciyi* (the meaning of phrases) and Mencius’s emphasis on *wenyi* (the meaning of an entire poem). Interpreting the four cited lines in isolation, Xianqiu Meng took them as a factual statement that all men were Shun’s subjects, including his own father. By contrast, Mencius saw the cited lines in the context of the entire poem and concluded they are not a factual statement but rather a rhetorical overstatement lamenting that the collective responsibility of the multitude had been unfairly placed on an unlucky few.

Xianqiu Meng’s interpretive approach strikes us as one of “cutting off a section to get a desired meaning.” In adopting this old analogical approach to reading, however, he ran into a problem unknown to *fushi* and *yinshi* practitioners: the absence of a new context of live interpersonal interaction in which detached poetic lines could acquire a new, coherent meaning. In *fushi* and *yinshi* practices, a decontextualization of poetic lines (i.e., “cutting off a section of a poem”) is always followed by their immediate recontextualization in the new exchange. While decontextualization inevitably results in a loss of *wenyi* or overall meaning of the original text, such recontextualization might be said to compensate for that loss as the cut-off lines gain new meaning through their analogical relevance to the ongoing interpersonal interaction. As the cut-off lines mainly depend on this extratextual “reinvestiture” of meaning, the *wenyi* of the original text becomes largely irrelevant.

When reading the *Poetry* by oneself, however, there is no extratextual event of interpersonal communication to meaningfully recontextualize any cut-off lines. Consequently, a reader should interpret each part of a poem within the original context of the entire poem or risk grave misinterpretation. Xianqiu Meng seems a typical case in point. If he had not neglected the poem’s context, he would not have blundered into reading a rhetorical statement as factual description and mistaking

the poem as praise of the king's power rather than an expression of grievances by his subjects.

Mencius was keenly aware that the root cause of Xianqiu Meng's interpretive errors was his misapplication of "cutting off a section to get a desired meaning" to reading. In response, Mencius immediately issued two important injunctions: "One should not let rhetorical embellishment harm [the understanding] of words. One should not let the [understanding of] words harm [the understanding of] the author's intent." Judging by the context, *ci* 辭 here does not denote a word or phrase per se but, rather, refers to "lines of words" cut off from a *Shijing* poem, like those cited by Xianqiu Meng. What Mencius says next lends support to this reading of *ci*: "If only lines of words (*ci*) are used [in interpretation], then think about what the ode 'Yunhan' says, 'Of the remaining people of Zhou / Not a single man survived.' If these words were to be believed [as literal truth], it would mean that Zhou had not left behind a single man."¹³

Instead of "only using lines of words" (*yi ci er yi* 以辭而已)—namely, "cutting off a section of a poem" (*duanzhang* 斷章)—Mencius urges the reader to "conceptualize a text's meaning or *wenyi*" (*yi yi* 以意) in interpretation. This marriage of the verbal and nominal senses of the term *yi* 意 aptly conveys Mencius's view on the nature of reading. To him, reading the *Poetry* is a dynamic process of conceptualization by the reader, properly conditioned by the textual meanings of a poem. To Mencius, such textual comprehension promises to "trace the intent [of the author] (*ni zhi* 逆志)."

Mencius's reconceptualization of *zhi* 志 goes hand in hand with his rethinking of *yi*. Instead of a living *Poetry* user's intent, Mencius identified the ancient *Shijing* author's intent as the object of interpretation. As a result of Mencius's reconceptualization of the terms *yi* and *zhi*, the time-honored "concept-to-intent" interpretive process underwent a profound change. From the re-creative interpretations of *fushi* and *yinshi*, private reading led to an essentially reconstructive interpretive activity. Now, an entire poem rather than a few isolated lines was to be interpreted as a coherent expression of the *zhi* of the ancient author.

In his effort to trace authorial intent, the new reader of the *Poetry* faced far greater difficulty than a *fushi* or *yinshi* participant. As the person whose *zhi* he was trying to grasp was an ancient living hundreds of years before, the reader had few correctives to his misreadings. To overcome this inherent difficulty of reconstruction, Mencius proposed a way to mitigate the temporal and spatial distance separating reader and author:

Mencius said to Wan Zhang, "The virtuous man of a village makes friends with the virtuous men of other villages. The virtuous man of a state makes friends with the virtuous men of other states. The virtuous man of the whole world makes friends with

the virtuous men of the world. Still unsatisfied, he proceeds to consider the men of antiquity. Reading their poems and writings, how can he not know them as men? Hence he examines the world in which they lived. This is to make friends with the ancients.”

孟子謂萬章曰。一鄉之善士斯友一鄉之善士。一國之善士斯友一國之善士。天下之善士斯友天下之善士。以友天下之善士為未足。又尚論古之人。頌其詩。讀其書。不知其人可乎。是以論其世也。是尚友也。¹⁴

The ideas expressed in this passage are best known to us in the pithier dictum “to know the person [author] and examine his world” (*zhi ren lun shi* 知人論世). Such knowledge, Mencius suggests, makes possible a better grasp of authorial intent as well as a spiritual bond with the poet. Although Mencius proposed this highly sensible and practicable method of reconstructive interpretation, he seldom employed it himself. Far from practicing what he preached, he rarely read a *Shijing* poem for its own sake. Instead, he appeared most frequently as a fervent *yinshi* practitioner, citing isolated lines of *Shijing* poems to illustrate his point. Not until the Song Dynasty did the Mencian reconstructive approach gain wide acceptance.

The Han-Tang Analogical Approach:

“Using Fragmented Allegorical Reading to Trace the Poet’s Intent”

Whereas the *Poetry* had been primarily a source for analogical expression in pre-Han times, it became an object of textual comprehension during the Han. This profound shift can be seen from the compilation and proliferation of four competing editions of the *Poetry* (Lu 魯, Qi 齊, Han 韓, and Mao 毛), each with extensive commentary and possibly its own prefaces, though only the “Mao Prefaces” (“Mao *Shi xu*” 毛詩序) has survived. The “Mao Prefaces,” attributed to a certain Mao (Mao Heng 毛亨, Mao Chang 毛萇, or another Han figure), consists of two parts: the “Great Preface” (“Daxu” 大序) to the entire collection and the minor prefaces (“Xiaoxu” 小序) to the 305 individual poems.¹⁵

All four *Poetry* editions have traditionally been considered applications of Mencius’s “*Yi yi ni zhi*”: “Using textual comprehension to trace the poet’s intent.” Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) maintains that they “adopted this method [of the Mencian reconstructive interpretation] and supplied prefaces [to individual poems].”¹⁶ But this assessment of the Han *Shijing* commentarial tradition is not quite accurate—as will become clear when we examine Mao’s comments on the “Zhou Nan” 周南, the first group of “Airs of the States” (“Guofeng” 國風). These comments reveal Mao’s deviation from the Mencian approach as much as his debt to it.

It is true that Mao works hard to recover the putative original meaning of a text as advised by Mencius. To this end, he undertakes the two tasks deemed crucial

by Mencius—to “know the person” and “examine his world.” Regarding the world of the “Zhou Nan” 周南, he writes, “With regard to the transforming influence of ‘Guan ju’ 關雎 and ‘Lin zhi’ 麟趾, they are the airs of the sage king and therefore are all tied to the Duke of Zhou. ‘Nan’ means the kingly influence spreads from north to south.”¹⁷ By identifying the state governed by the Duke of Zhou, King Wen’s son, as the provenance of “Zhou Nan,” Mao lays the groundwork for his allegorical interpretation of the poems of that group. Mao contends that those poems, composed by the subjects of King Wen, embody the virtues of this sage king and are indicative of “the kingly influence spreading from north to south.” For him (as for Mencius) the time and place in which particular poems were composed provide reliable clues to their moral significance.

The second task, “to know the person,” is much more difficult. Since the *Poetry* is a collection of anonymous works, it is impossible to find any biographical information about the authors. Thus, an authorial surrogate has to be found within the poem itself in order to provide a historical context for reconstructive interpretation. A credible authorial surrogate is usually not very hard to detect in a hymn or a greater ode (*daya* 大雅): its central character is usually a real or legendary hero of antiquity who provides a historical anchor for reconstructive interpretation. The airs, however, are a different matter. They usually do not contain any reference to historical figures and therefore do not allow easy linkage to particular sociopolitical events or individual persons. Nonetheless, this does not deter Mao from seeking an authorial surrogate in the airs. Where he cannot find an authorial surrogate, Mao simply creates one:

	<i>Poem Title</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Detailed Comments</i>
Mao no. 1	“Osprey” 關雎	depicts the virtues of Hou Fei. 后妃之德也.	It is the beginning of the airs; it is what influences the world and rectifies the relationship between husband and wife 風之始也。所以風天下而正夫婦也..... “Osprey” celebrates the finding of a virtuous woman to match a lord. She was intent on promoting the worthy and did not indulge in her own sensuality. She worried about the beautiful [not being promoted], yearned for the worthy, and did not harbor anything that’s against the good. This is the meaning of “Guanju” 是以關雎樂得淑女以配君子。憂在進賢。不淫其色。哀窈窕。思賢才。而無傷善之心焉。是關雎之義也。

(Continued)

Table (Continued)

	<i>Poem Title</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Detailed Comments</i>
Mao no. 2	“Cloth-Plant” 葛覃	dwells upon the basis of Hou Fei's [virtues] 后妃之本也.	When Hou Fei lived with her parents, she was devoted to the duties of a daughter. Diligent and thrifty, she wore well-cleaned clothes and was reverent toward her home tutor. Therefore, after her marriage she could take leave from the court to visit her parents, using the way of a virtuous woman to influence the world 后妃在父母家。則志在於女功之事。躬儉節用。服瀚濯之衣。尊敬師傅。則可以歸安父母。化天下以婦道也。
Mao no. 3	“Cocklebur” 卷耳	shows the intent of Hou Fei 后妃之志也.	She took it upon herself to aid the lord, search for worthies, and evaluate officials. She knew the labor of the subjects and cherished the intent to recommend worthies for office without any oblique intention of self-advancement. From morning till night she was yearning for worthies, driven by her concern and diligence 又當輔佐君子。求賢審官。知臣下之勤勞。內有進賢之志。而無險陂私謁之心。朝夕思念。至于憂勤也。
Mao no. 4	“Drooping Boughs” 樛木	shows Hou Fei reaching to those below 后妃逮下也.	It shows her as capable of reaching to those below with no feeling of jealousy 言能而逮下無嫉妒之心焉。
Mao no. 5	“Locusts' Wings” 螽斯	evokes the multitude of Hou Fei's children and grandchildren 后妃子孫眾多也.	It compares her offspring to swarms of locusts. She is not jealous and hence is blessed with a multitude of children and grandchildren 言若螽斯不妒忌。則子孫眾多也。
Mao no. 6	“Peach Tree” 桃夭	speaks of what Hou Fei brought about 后妃之所致也.	She had no feeling of jealousy and therefore men and women were in proper accord. They got married in a timely fashion and there were no widowers in the country 不妒忌則男女以正。婚姻以時。國無鰥民也。
Mao no. 7	“Rabbit Nets” 兔置	reveals the transforming influence of Hou Fei 后妃之化也.	“Osprey” so transformed the people's conduct that few people weren't fond of virtues. The worthies were numerous 關雎之化行。則莫不好德。賢人眾多也。
Mao no. 8	“Plantain” 芣苢	demonstrates the beauty of Hou Fei 后妃之美也.	When peace prevails, women take delight in child-rearing 和平則婦人樂有子矣。 ¹⁸

In the prefaces to these first eight poems of the “Zhou Nan,” Mao establishes Hou Fei, the virtuous wife of King Wen, as the authorial surrogate on whom he’ll anchor his interpretation. As shown in the table above, his comments exhibit a uniform pattern. He always begins by identifying a particular role of Hou Fei as the theme of a poem. Looking down the second column, we can observe a fascinating display of her roles with attendant virtues: a sage-king’s wife praised for her devoted service to the lord (Mao nos. 1, 4); a newly wed queen displaying domestic virtue (Mao no. 2); a compassionate queen reaching out to the commoners (Mao no. 3); a matriarch blessed with many children and grandchildren (Mao no. 5); and a moral paragon who has rectified the man-woman relationship, fostered moral cultivation among officials, and brought peace and happiness to families (Mao nos. 6, 7, 8). After introducing each role of Hou Fei, Mao offers details from the poem to illustrate the virtue under discussion.

From Mao’s comments on the eight poems, we can tell he is not really pursuing a bona fide Mencian reconstructive interpretation even though he talks about the provenance of the *Poetry* and authorial intentions. Instead of an inductive process to discover authorial intent, Mao’s reading of the *Poetry* is essentially a deductive process of allegorization. He typically identifies an ethical or sociopolitical issue as the theme, sometimes mentioning a few details as illustrative. But it is not uncommon for him to blatantly suppress a poem’s obvious literal meaning to make its contents suit his preconceived theme.

Mao’s reading of “Guanju” is a classic example. On the literal level, the poem is a love song about a gentleman’s yearning for a beautiful lady. Yet he sees fit to regender the poem’s protagonist in the person of Hou Fei, thus turning a love poem into an allegorical depiction of Hou Fei’s quest for worthies.¹⁹ This method of allegorization is also used in his preface to Mao no. 3. In Mao no. 2, an account of a newly wed woman’s excitement about her impending visit to her parents, he identifies the female protagonist as Hou Fei and reads the poem as praise of her domestic virtue, a model to be emulated by all women. Mao nos. 4 and 5 do not have a protagonist (male or female), but Mao links both with Hou Fei through a metaphorical reading of a key image. For instance, in Mao no. 4, he takes the image of tree branches bending toward the ground as metaphorical praise of Hou Fei—her reaching to all the people beneath her. Mao nos. 5, 6, and 7 each depict a familial or communal activity that can hardly be associated with Hou Fei. Still, for Mao, the depiction of such joyful activities is none other than a testament to the well-being of the people living under Hou Fei’s wholesome influence.

Reading these prefaces, we cannot help but marvel at the ease with which Mao has rendered simple folk songs into a series of eulogistic statements about Hou Fei. At the same time, we cannot help asking: Which of the historical figures assigned to individual poems is not a brainchild of Mao’s imagination? To take Hou

Fei as an example, can there be any doubt that this authorial surrogate is a product of Mao's fantasy? Not the slightest textual evidence exists of any connection between the eight poems and Hou Fei. Nor does Mao seem to seek any corroboration in historical sources to justify his identification. He deems it fit simply to pronounce his bold identification as if it were an accepted truth and then proceeds to comment on the poems in light of that identification.

Historicity, originally intended by Mencius to guard against willful interpretation, is for Mao merely a convenient cloak to mask his unbridled fanciful allegorization. Insofar as he substitutes his imagined historicity for the bona fide historicity enshrined in the Mencian dictum, "To know the person and examine his world," his commentaries amount to a betrayal of the Mencian historicist, reconstructive approach to the *Poetry*. It seems to me that Mao's prefaces should best be regarded as an offspring of the *fushi* re-creative interpretation. Like *fushi* practitioners, he shows little regard for a poem's original meaning and has no qualms cannibalizing it in ways that fit his purpose. Just as *fushi* practitioners "cut off a section to get a desired meaning," he often reduces a poem of emotional intensity to a colorless abstract moral statement.

In short, "The Mao Prefaces" represent yet another version of "Yi yi ni zhi": "using fragmented allegorical reading to trace the poet's intent." This allegorical approach is very much a hybrid of the *fushi* analogical and the Mencian reconstructive impulses, and it would cast a long shadow over all subsequent interpretation. From the Han through the Tang, it was adopted by practically all the prominent *Shijing* commentators: most notably, the author of "The Mao Commentary" ("Mao zhuan" 毛傳),²⁰ Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200), and the Tang critic Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648). In fact, these commentators devoted their talents and energies almost entirely to expounding and rationalizing Mao's far-fetched allegorical interpretations, even while they took issue with his frequent historical errors.

For better or worse, Mao's interpretative approach produced a liberalizing effect on the study of the *Poetry* and poetry in general. It established the model for producing a quick, easy moral allegory out of a poem by identifying its speaker or protagonist as a historical figure and then interpreting the poem as a demonstration of that person's moral qualities. After the appearance of Mao's prefaces, this use of imagined historicity grew widespread and culminated in Kong Yingda's exegesis on the *Poetry*. Even after the Tang, it continued to undergird allegorical interpretation of different kinds in traditional Chinese literary criticism.

The Song Reconstructive Approach:

"Using Deep Textual Engagement to Meet the Poet's Intent"

After reigning supreme for over a millennium, the allegorical approach championed by the authors of "Mao Prefaces" and "The Mao Commentary," Zheng Xuan,

and Kong Yingda lost sway during the Song. These allegorists now came under relentless attack from many Song Neo-Confucian thinkers for their willful exercise of “cutting off a section to get a desired meaning.” In attacking the Han-Tang allegorists, these thinkers consistently invoked Mencius’s “*Yi yi ni zhi*” as their mantra of correct textual comprehension.

The Northern Song thinker Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), one of the earliest detractors of the Han-Tang allegorists, launches something of a crusade against “The Mao Prefaces” and “Zheng [Xuan]’s Annotations” 鄭箋 in his *Original Meanings of the Poetry* (*Shi benyi* 詩本義). Going through the *Shijing* poems one by one, he shows how Mao and Zheng misinterpreted each as they grossly ignored the plain contextual meaning of images, words, or lines and instead assigned them allegorical significance. He writes:

“Zheng’s Annotations” pays little attention to the beginning and ending of a poem and scatters commentaries here and there to the extent that the comments on one line differ from those on the very next in the same section. Consequently, there are often problems of disparate denotations, incoherent connections, and disorder, resulting in a loss of “the ultimate meaning of the *Poetry*. . . . The analogical and affective images should first be elucidated in the context of an entire poem before one draws any inference. If one focuses on only one sentence and does not explore its meaning in a poem’s context, how can one see the “poet’s intended meaning”?

《鄭箋》不詳詩之首卒，隨文為解，至有一章之內每句別為一說，是以文意散離，前後錯亂而失「詩之歸」矣。……且詩之比興，必須上下成文以相發明，乃可推據，今若獨用一句，而不以上下文理推之，何以見「詩人之意」？²¹

A deep dissatisfaction with fragmented allegorical readings as expressed here by Ouyang was no doubt a catalyst for an upsurge of interest in the art of reading during the Song. In their search for a correct way to read the *Poetry*, most Song thinkers turned to the Mencian reconstructive approach. As a rule, they enshrined Mencius’s “*Yi yi ni zhi*” as the touchstone of correct textual comprehension—witness these remarks of Lü Zuqian 呂祖謙 (1137–1181):

Cheng [Yi] says, “In the statement, ‘Do not let embellishment (*wen*) harm the understanding of phrases,’ the character *wen* denotes one single character.” When referring to one single character, we use the character *wen*. When *wen* or characters form a sentence, they become *ci* or phrases. If a character does not square with our explanation of a poem, we try to make it fit by giving a different gloss, as in the handling of the line, “The Zhou is not illustrious.” This ought to be the way of words. Zhang [Zai] says, “In understanding the *Poetry*, nothing can compare with Mencius’s ‘*Yi yi ni zhi*’ method.” Cheng Yi also says, “In perusing books, one cannot get mired in

analogies and individual words. Otherwise, the words of a poem would get in the way of one another. One should contemplate the meaning that arises from the dynamic unfolding of the context.”

程氏曰：「不以文害辭」，文，文字之文，舉一字則是文，成句是辭。詩為解一字不行，卻遷就他說。如「有周不顯」自是文當如此。張氏曰：知《詩》莫如孟子。以意逆志，讀《詩》之法也。又曰：凡觀書，不可以類而泥文，不爾則字字相梗，當觀其文勢上下意。²²

This passage contains three famous quotes about reading. The first, by Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), offers a new gloss on Mencius’s remark, “Do not let embellishment harm the understanding of phrases.” He reglosses “embellishment” (*wen*) as single characters and *ci* (phrases) as sentences and argues that single characters cannot be taken at face value or outside the context of an entire poem. If one word’s literal meaning does not square with the meaning of an entire poem, he contends that one must alter the reading of an individual character to fit the poem’s wider meaning—not the other way around. In the quoted line “The Zhou is not illustrious,” the character “not” (*bu* 不) conflicts with the meaning of the entire poem: praise of the illustrious Zhou. So he reads “not” to mean its affirmative opposite “very” (*shen* 甚) [illustrious].²³

The next quote, presumably by Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077), lauds Mencius’s “*Yi yi ni zhi*” for showing the best method of reading the *Poetry*. The last quote, attributed by many to Cheng Yi rather than Zhang Zai, again dwells upon the paramount importance of context to textual comprehension in an echo of Ouyang Xiu’s remarks cited above. Just as Ouyang Xiu stresses a careful contextualization of analogical and affective images (*bixing* 比興) on which Mao and Zheng anchored their allegorical interpretations, Cheng warns against being obsessed with isolated analogical expressions to the neglect of a poem’s overall meaning.

Of all the Song expositions on reading, none is more important and influential than Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130–1200) theoretical reflections:

“*Yi yi ni zhi*,” this is a really excellent statement. The word *ni* means “going forward to meet it,” that is, letting one’s own thought go forward to wait for the arrival of the poet’s intent. Zhu Xi added, “This is like waiting for someone. If the person does not come today, we will wait again the next day. Not until this person comes can we develop a natural bonding. This is unlike our contemporaries who use their conceptions to capture the [author’s] intent.” . . .

Dong Renshu asked about “*Yi yi ni zhi*.” Zhu Xi replied, “It means putting forward one’s own thought to wait for it. This is like you going out to welcome a guest. If he comes, you will meet him. If he does not come, you will not do anything. If you decide to go out to capture and bring him back, that would not be acceptable.”

「以意逆志」，此句最好。逆是前去追迎之意，蓋是將自家意思去前面等候詩人之志來。又曰謂如等人來相似。今日等不來，明日又等，須是等得來，方自然相合。不似而今人，便將意去捉志也。

董仁叔問「以意逆志」。曰：「是以自家意去張等他。譬如有一客來，自家去迎他。他來，則接之；不來，則已。若必去捉他來，則不可。」²⁴

With this elegant metaphor, Zhu Xi delineates the philosophical differences between his interpretive approach and that of his contemporaries still attached to the Han-Tang allegorical approach. He suggests the source of their differences can be traced to their understanding of the relation between the reader's "conception" and authorial "intent." For those contemporaries, readerly conception is master, authorial intent merely its servant. Thus they freely let their conceptions override authorial intent just as a master has his way with a servant. But to Zhu Xi, the readerly "conception" is a humble host and the authorial "intent" his honored guest. So the reader must humbly wait, days on end if necessary, to meet authorial intent. In this metaphorical description, the act of waiting seems to suggest deep, prolonged textual engagement. In Zhu Xi's view, the difference between his interpretive approach and the other can also be seen through the reading of *ni* 逆, the third character in the Mencian statement. Where his contemporaries interpret *ni* as an overweening act of "capturing" (*zhuo* 捉), Zhu glosses *ni* as a humble meeting with authorial intent.

Zhu Xi not only theorizes about Mencius's "*Yi yi ni zhi*" but applies it to his rereading of the 305 *Shijing* poems in his *Shi jizhuan* 詩集傳 (Collected Commentaries on the *Poetry*). This book represents a bona fide model of reconstructive interpretation, long overdue since Mencius introduced the concept. Zhu's reconstructive (re)interpretation of the *Poetry* is best known for two methodological innovations and one startling discovery.

The two methodological innovations are his balanced sectional commentaries and his consistent labeling of *fu* 賦 (narrative/descriptive presentation), *bi* 比 (analogical images), and *xing* 興 (affective images). As a corrective to the gross neglect of contextual meanings in "The Mao Prefaces" and "Zheng's Annotations" deplored by Ouyang Xiu and Cheng Yi (see pages 275–76), Zhu places his commentaries evenly throughout the poems, in an apparent effort to guide the reader to read all parts and derive a proper overall meaning of the poem. Moreover, to counter Mao's and Zheng's tendency to focus exclusively on isolated analogical and affective images (*bixing*), Zhu attaches the labels of *fu*, *bi*, and *xing*, along with their various combinations, to all sections of a poem. This labeling seems intended to remind the reader that analogical and affective images—however richly invested with allegorical significance by Han-Tang allegorists—must be interpreted in relation to the *fu*, *bi*, and/or *xing* employed in other parts of the poem (as advocated

by Ouyang Xiu). By applying these two new interpretive methods, Zhu effectively encourages the reader to read poems as they are (textually presented) and make sense of their plain overall meanings.

This exercise of deep textual engagement yields a startling discovery: many poems (including those endowed with lofty moral significance by Han-Tang allegorists) are evidently erotic love poems. This gap between the plain textual evidence and the purported allegorical meaning is too great for Zhu (or anyone who respects textual evidence) to bridge. So Zhu feels compelled to label these poems “of licentious elopement” (*yinben* 淫奔), left in the collection by Confucius as negative examples to be heeded by the reader.

Zhu Xi’s theorization of Mencius’s “*Yi yi ni zhi*” and practical innovations in his *Shi jizhuan* brought about something of a revolution in the development of Chinese theories of interpretation. The millennium-old dominance of the fragmented allegorical approach came to an end, and Zhu Xi’s model of reconstructive interpretation became dominant from the Southern Song through the mid-Ming.

The Yuan-Ming-Qing Allegorical Approach:

“Using Holistic Allegorical Reading to Trace the Poet’s Intent”

As Zhu Xi’s *Shi jizhuan* acquired canonical status, “The Mao Prefaces” and the entire Han-Tang allegorical tradition lost their former sway. Down they might be, but not out. In fact, it wasn’t very long before a generation of scholars emerged to defend “Mao Prefaces” and deprecate Zhu’s *Shi jizhuan*. Ma Duanlin 馬端臨 (1254–1323), a prominent early Mao defender living in the late Song and early Yuan, explains why people like himself jettisoned Zhu’s interpretive approach and reembraced Mao:

[Mao’s] “Prefaces” seeks the meanings of the *Poetry* beyond phrases and Wengong [Zhu Xi] looks for the same within phrases. How can we decide which is right and which is wrong? I reply: It is not that I dare to thoughtlessly agree with the stance of the “Prefaces” and make disparaging remarks about early Confucians. But after I read the *Poetry* in the light of Confucius’s and Mencius’s comments on it, I came to know that the “Prefaces” is not erroneous and that doubts abound about Zhu Xi’s views. . . .

The *Poetry* arose from emotions, and the expression of emotions cannot be faultless. For this reason, men and women, husband and wives were often overwhelmed with feelings of worry, yearning, and sorrow. Likewise there were unavoidably words of pent-up grievances between the lord and his ministers. Of the 157 airs from the fifteen states, those composed about women and filled with words of affection between men and women make up nearly one half. Even with the poems of Zhou Nan and Shao Nan, like “Osprey” and “Peach Tree” at the beginning of the so-called “correct airs,” what is repeatedly chanted is nothing but an affair of erotic love and private affections. . . .

No one understands the intentions of the *Shijing* poets better than Confucius and Mencius. No one is more concerned than Confucius and Mencius about scholars reading the *Poetry* but failing to grasp its true meanings. We have [Confucius's] "no evil thought" statement only because the *Poetry* cannot but employ words that border on the evil. . . . We have [Mencius's] warning about erroneous understanding of the poet's intent only because some words of the *Poetry* cannot but be at odds with what the poets actually intended to say. . . . Judging by this, we know that the poets' original intentions were to satirize licentious elopement. The poems that Confucius did not edit out are absolutely not self-accounts by the licentious characters in the poems.

序求《詩》意於辭之外，文公求《詩》意於辭之中，而子何以定其是非乎？曰：愚非敢苟同序說，而妄議先儒也。蓋嘗以孔子、孟子之所以說《詩》者讀《詩》，而後知序說之不繆，而文公之說多可疑也。……夫詩，發乎情者也，而情之所發，其辭不能無過，故其於男女夫婦之，多憂思感傷之意；而君臣上下之際，不能無怨懟激發之辭。《十五國風》，為《詩》百五十有七篇，而其為婦人而作者，男女相悅之辭，幾及其半。雖以二《南》之詩，如《關雎》、《桃夭》諸篇，為正風之首，然其所反覆詠歎者，不過情欲燕私之事耳。……蓋知詩人之意者莫如孔、孟，慮學者讀《詩》而不得其意者，亦莫如孔、孟，是以有無邪之訓焉，則以其辭之不能不鄰乎邪也。……是以有害意之戒焉，則以其辭之不能不戾其意也。……以是觀之，則知刺奔果出於作詩者之本意，而夫子所不刪者，其詩決非淫泆之人所自賦也。²⁵

Here Ma Duanlin makes a very smart move: to turn Zhu's argument against Zhu himself. As shown earlier, Zhu and other Song thinkers accused Mao of not seeing the forest for the trees—not seeing the overall meaning of a poem because of an obsession with isolated images and phrases. Here Ma accuses Zhu of the same blunder: failure to locate the true authorial intent (*zhi*) within a broader, extratextual allegorical frame of reference, owing to an obsession with the text itself. By launching the same "not seeing the forest for the trees" accusation, Ma cleverly deflects Zhu's criticism of Mao's indefensible cannibalistic reading of a text while placing Mao the extratextualist on a higher ground than Zhu the textualist.

This belief that the extratextual supersedes the textual has a Daoist ring to it. But if he is influenced by what Laozi and Zhuangzi have said about the two categories, Ma certainly does not show it as he seeks to sanctify his argument in the same way Zhu Xi did: by aligning it with statements by the Confucian sages. Citing first "Of the three hundred poems, one remark covers it all: no evil thoughts," he disputes the existence of poems of licentious elopement as claimed by Zhu. Next, again following in Zhu's footsteps, he carefully finesses the Mencius "*Yi yi ni zhi*" to justify his own interpretive approach. In the running commentary leading to that statement, Mencius had warned against two grave interpretive errors: letting embellishment harm the understanding of phrases, and letting phrases (*ci*) harm the understanding of the author's intent (*zhi*). Whereas Ouyang Xiu accused Mao

of the first error, Ma faults Zhu for committing the second. If a textual account of licentious elopement is the *ci*, and the allegorical tenor behind the text is the *zhi*, Zhu can be accused of allowing the *ci* to block the understanding of the true authorial *zhi*. To complete his defense of Mao's allegorization, Ma claims the erotic poems are not genuine self-accounts by licentious lovers but must be allegorical presentations by Confucian-minded gentlemen.

Ma Duanlin's uncomplimentary comparison of Zhu's *Shi jizhuan* with "The Mao Prefaces" sets the direction many Ming-Qing allegorists would take to defend Mao and denigrate Zhu. Like Ma, they sought to render irrelevant Zhu's criticism of "The Mao Prefaces" by deemphasizing the text and downgrading Zhu's textual reading as mere preparation for lofty allegorical reading. While many Ming-Qing allegorists were content to rehash Ma Duanlin's views, some earnestly came up with arguments of their own. For instance, Hao Jing 郝敬 (1558–1639) presented an original argument on the inevitability of Mao's extratextual approach in his essay "On Mencius's Explanation of the *Poetry*":

Master Zhu says that "*Yi yi ni zhi*" means putting forward one's conceptions to meet the poet's intent. Whether or not the poet's intent has arrived or whether it has arrived early or late, a commentator dares not presume. He should instead quietly listen for its arrival and get close to it. Otherwise he will get mired in far-fetched interpretations and cannot avoid being mocked as a case of "a letter from Ying misread in the state Yan." In my opinion, Zhu's theory appears correct but is in fact wrong; it aims to grasp the intent naturally but ends up distorting what is refined. While it could be applied to the reading of other books, this theory cannot be used for explaining the *Poetry*. Zhu thinks that he has acquired a good understanding of the *Poetry*, but actually he has gone against what Mencius has said. He denigrates "Mao Prefaces" as having been forged but actually errs by "letting phrases harm [the understanding] the author's intent."

The language of the *Poetry* is different from that of other classics. Therefore, an elucidation of the *Poetry* must be different from an explanation of other classics. In other classics, words and the author's intent converge, but the words of the *Poetry* often do not seem expressive of the author's intent. In other classics, one can strictly follow the words to meet the author's intent if it is not immediately evident. But for the *Poetry*, one must first grasp the author's intent and then one can grasp the allegorical import of words.

朱子謂：以意逆志，將自家意思前去迎候詩人之志。至否、遲速不敢自必，而聽于彼，庶乎得之。不然則涉干穿鑿，未免郢書燕說之誚。按此說似是而非，欲自得而反傷巧。可以讀他書、不可以說詩。自謂得解，而實與孟子背。所以詆詩序為贗者，正以辭害志蔽之也。蓋詩言與他經異。說詩與說他經殊。他經辭志吻合，詩辭往往不似志。他經不得志，執辭可會。詩必先得其志，然後可諷其辭。²⁶

Here Hao Jing argues that Mao's extratextual, allegorical approach is a matter of necessity rather than choice, largely predetermined by the poetic genre itself. Since poetry (and the *Poetry* in particular) is deeply invested in indirect expression and abides by the well-known principle of "gentle and sincere" (*wenrou dunhou* 溫柔敦厚), Hao deems it counterintuitive, if not futile, to seek authorial intent within the text. To him, the textualist approach adopted by Zhu and his followers is appropriate only for other classics in prose, not the *Poetry*.

In defending "The Mao Prefaces," Ma Duanli, Hao Jing, and other Ming-Qing allegorists envisioned an allegorical approach nonetheless quite different from Mao's. It is holistic where Mao's is fragmented. In contrast to the cannibalization of texts in "The Mao Prefaces," they tended to regard a whole text, not its isolated parts, as an allegorical vehicle for authorial intent.

**The Late Ming and Qing Hermeneutical Approach:
Transcending the Divide between the Textual
and the Extratextual, the Author and the Reader**

By the late Ming, many critics had grown tired of the rivalry between the pro-Mao and pro-Zhu camps and ceased to evaluate an interpretive approach in terms of whether it adhered to Mencius's "*Yi yi ni zhi*." Instead they revisited the earliest interpretive practices of *fushi* and *yinshi* in an attempt to construct a new, broader paradigm for thinking about interpretation, and *Shijing* interpretation in particular. We can discern this new trend in the following famous remarks by Zhong Xing 鍾惺 (1574–1625):

The *Poetry* is a living thing. After Ziyou and Zixia, from the Han through the Song, few did not say something about the *Poetry*. What they said was not necessarily relevant to the *Poetry*, yet it all could be said of the *Poetry*. Whatever could be said of the *Poetry* does not necessarily have to be relevant to the *Poetry* itself. Not that people discussing the *Poetry* can have this liberty, but that this cannot but be the way the *Poetry* exists as a living thing.

How can we understand this? . . . When reading Confucius's and his disciples' citations of the *Poetry* (*yinshi*), the accounts of presenting the *Poetry* (*fushi*) at meetings and banquets in honor of envoys from other states, or Han Ying's commentary on the *Poetry*, we cannot fail to notice this: the ancients cited, presented, and commented on *Shijing* poems even though what they talked about—events, texts, and meanings—had absolutely nothing to do with the original events, original texts, and original meanings of those poems. Yet after they cited, presented, and commented on the poems, we felt that after all they might not necessarily have departed from the events, texts, and meanings of those poems.

Why so? The *Poetry* is a matter of “cutting off a section.” What is cut off there remains intact here; what is not available here can be obtained there. The discussion of the *Poetry* has proliferated throughout the world and has evolved through the ages. Without itself being aware, the *Poetry* has been illuminated and has spread afar. Such is the way of the *Poetry* being itself, and this is why the *Poetry* is a classic.

《詩》，活物也。游、夏以後，自漢至宋，無不說《詩》者。不必皆有當于《詩》，而皆可以說《詩》。其皆可以說《詩》者，即在不必有當于《詩》之中。非說《詩》者之能如是而《詩》之為物，不能不如是也。何以明之？……今讀孔子及其弟子之所引《詩》，列國盟會聘享之所賦《詩》，與韓氏之所傳《詩》者，其事、其文、其義，不有與詩之本事、本文、本義絕不相蒙而引之、賦之、傳之者乎？既引之、既賦之、既傳之，又覺與詩之事本文、之義未嘗不合也。其故何也？夫詩，取斷章者也。斷之於彼，而無損於此。此無所予，而彼取之。說《詩》者盈天下，達於後世，屢遷數變，而《詩》不知，而《詩》固已明矣，而《詩》固已行矣。然而《詩》之為詩，自如也，此《詩》之所以為「經」也。²⁷

In earlier expositions on interpretation, *fushi* and *yinshi* practices are often ignored or appear in the context of censuring Han-Tang allegorists' indulgence in “cutting off a section to get a desired meaning.” But here Zhong Xing makes the daring move of elevating them to the status of Mencius's original “*Yi yi ni zhi*.” Citing the prevailing practice of “cutting off a section to get a desired meaning” in *fushi*, *yinshi*, and Han exegetical works, he acknowledges that cut-off *Shijing* lines are usually made to convey meanings that have nothing to do with the original text. However, Zhong notes, once such new extratextual meanings are re-created by the *Poetry* users, they appear to be related to the original textual meanings after all. To Zhong, this ceaseless, dynamic, symbiotic interaction between the extratextual and the textual, enabled by “cutting off a section to get a desired meaning,” makes the *Poetry* “a living thing” that can proliferate and evolve indefinitely. Zhong goes so far as to redefine the *Poetry* itself: “The *Poetry* is a matter of cutting off a section to get a desired meaning.”

This novel interpretive approach of Zhong Xing bears many salient features of what is called “hermeneutics” in modern criticism. Among them, we may mention the emphasis on freedom of interpretation, simultaneous validation of different interpretations, recognition of an open-ended process of mutually transformative interaction between the textual (part) and the extratextual (the larger part or even the whole), and above all, the belief that a text's mode of existence is nothing else than an unending process of re-creative interpretation.

To be truly hermeneutical, however, a critic must undermine any authority over meaning. Here, Zhong Xing and his collaborator Tang Yuanchu 譚元春 (1586–1637) pull back. Although they stress the equal validity of diverse interpretations of the *Poetry*, they continue to accept the author as final authority, repeatedly urging the reader to commune with the spirits of ancient authors.²⁸ To

them, the authorial spirit is still the ultimate source of meaning, and a reader's freedom is inexorably constrained by it.

The task of dethroning the author is left to Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692). Unlike Zhong and Tan, Wang Fuzhi considers reading not an endeavor to meet the authorial intent or spirit but a process as free and creative as the original composition. Commenting on Confucius's famous statement on the *Poetry*, he writes:

“The *Poetry* is capable of inspiring people (*xing*), letting them observe things (*guan*), helping them to bond with one another (*qun*), and conveying their grievances (*yuan*)”—this statement is complete! In light of it, we distinguish between the refined and the vulgar, success and failure in the poetry of Han, Wei, Tang, and Song. In reading the *Three Hundred Poems*, we also go by these four terms. “Being capable of” (*keyi*) means that [a work] can be read according to each of these four terms. . . .

Beginning without these four emotions, the reader comes into possession of them. As he entertains a play of the four emotions, his own emotions are not stifled in the slightest. While the author follows a coherent line of thought, each reader obtains what his own emotions dispose him to find. Therefore, the poem “Osprey,” an instance of *xing*, was taken as a mirror in which the negligence of King Kang, who had been late in giving morning audiences, could be observed. “He who takes counsel wisely is final in his commands, / Far-seeing in his plans, timely in the announcing of them”²⁹—these two lines are an instance of *guan* or observation, but upon reading them Xie An found much delight, and his sense of detachment was consequently enhanced. The play of human emotions knows no bounds, and each reader joins in with his own emotions. This is why it is so valuable to have the *Poetry*.

「詩可以興，可以觀，可以群，可以怨。」盡矣。辨漢、魏、唐、宋之雅俗得失以此，讀《三百篇》者必此也。「可以」云者，隨所以而皆可也。……出於四情之外，以生起四情；遊於四情之中，情無所窒。作者用一致之思，讀者各以其情而自得。故《關雎》，興也，康王晏朝，而即為冰鑒。「訏謨定命，遠猷辰告」，觀也，謝安欣賞，而增其遐心。人情之遊也無涯，而各以其情遇，斯所貴於有詩。³⁰

Here Wang elevates the reader to a status comparable to the author's. “While the author followed a coherent line of thought,” Wang stresses, “each reader obtains what his own emotions dispose him to find.” This process of obtaining “what his own emotions dispose him to find” is for Wang fundamentally equivalent to that of original composition. Like the latter, it consists of a free, creative projection of one's emotion into a text. To validate this projection of the reader's emotions, Wang writes, “The play of human emotions knows no bounds and each reader joins in with his own emotions.”

In Confucius's statement, the *shi* 詩 is generally taken to denote the *Book of Poetry* as a whole: consequently the statement is read as an account of the four

general functions of the *Poetry*. Judging by the context and the two examples given, however, Wang obviously reads *shi* as referring to individual poems. Thanks to this surreptitious subject change, Wang turns Confucius's statement into an observation about the reader's four different responses to a *Shijing* poem. In keeping with this shift, he redefines *xing* 興, *guan* 觀, *qun* 群, and *yuan* 怨 as "four emotions" a reader may experience in reading a *Shijing* poem. He also reinterprets *keyi* 可以 to mean a poem is *simultaneously capable of evoking four emotions in the reader*. Taken in this new sense, *keyi* becomes the very pivot of the four emotions, enabling them to enhance and merge into one another. Repeating his remarks on *keyi* elsewhere, he stresses that only in the finest of poems—the *Three Hundred Poems*, the Wei-Jin poems, and a handful of poems by Li Bai and Du Fu—can we observe the simultaneous presence and mutual blending of the four emotions.³¹ This aesthetic ideal strikes us as being quite in line with our modern appreciation of multiple meanings in a poetic text.

If reconstructive interpretation is perforce a linear process from reader back to author, Wang's creative interpretation may be seen as a circular process in more ways than one. First, we observe a kind of circular switching of roles between author and reader. As the once subservient reader assumes the role of author, the no longer commanding author seems relegated to being just one member (if still the first) of an ever-growing contingent of creators of meaning. Wang's mutual identification of the four terms also attests to the nonlinear, hermeneutic character of his interpretive process.

Theoretical Reflections:

Ambiguity and Unity in the Chinese Interpretive Tradition

From this survey of six major interpretive approaches what emerges is a broad pattern of dynamic development in Chinese thinking about interpretation, propelled by two distinct interpretive thrusts: the re-creative and the reconstructive.

The re-creative arises from a desire to adapt the *Poetry* for an ongoing interpersonal dialogue (as in *fushi* and *yinshi* practices) or to break away from an entrenched literary tradition (as with Zhong Xing and Wang Fuzhi). Typically, it involves an imaginative quest for extratextual meaning, allegorical or otherwise. By contrast, the reconstructive impulse stems from a reader's desire to communicate privately with past authors for sociopolitical and/or aesthetic reasons. Here the reader essentially looks for textual meanings by engaging with a text empathetically or analytically. The divergence of these two approaches is aptly reflected in the reading of *yi* 意 as either imaginative conception (*yixiang* 臆想) or textual meaning (*wenyi* 文意).

In the development of Chinese interpretive traditions, these two tendencies alternately wax and wane, constantly influencing and transforming each other. The

Han-Tang period witnessed the ascendancy of the re-creative school, leading to the absolute dominance of the fragmentary allegorical approach. The Song-Yuan-Ming period saw a counterascendancy of the reconstructive effort. During the late Ming period through the Qing, the two seemed to reach relative equilibrium, making it possible for diverse interpretive approaches to flourish simultaneously: allegorical, reconstructive, analytical, and hermeneutical.

As Qing critics became aware of how these two interpretive thrusts diverged, they attempted a formal bipartite division of Chinese critical approaches. For instance, Fang Yurun 方玉潤 (1811–1883) lists *fushi*, *yinshi*, and *xueshi* 學詩 (learning of the *Poetry*) as the camp that thrives on “cutting off a section to get a desired meaning,” while *shishi* 釋詩 (explication of the *Poetry*) defines the camp that pursues reconstructive interpretation.³² Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857) not only sees matters similarly but also describes the two camps in terms of re-creation versus reconstruction. He identifies *fushi* and *yinshi* with the imaginative use of *xing* 興 (affective images) and considers them the precursor of later literary creation. Likewise, he identifies *shuoshi* 說詩 (explaining the *Poetry*) with the reconstructive exercise of “*Yi yi ni zhi*” and regards it as the genesis of all scholarly commentaries.³³

Despite their differences, all these approaches sprang from the reinterpretation of, or reaction against, the same Mencian statement. In that sense, by virtue of the common point of departure, they exhibit the interrelatedness of their approaches at the deepest level. At the same time, as we have seen, they diverge significantly from each other, often precisely in terms of their reaction to each other. And that points to the type of unity they possess—specifically, its dynamic quality. It is this creative tension, defined over a common exegetical base, that is perhaps the hallmark of the Chinese interpretive tradition.

In closing, I also want to reflect on ambiguity in Chinese critical statements. The “*Yi yi ni zhi*” statement represents a classic example. It is impossible for anyone to assign it a definitive meaning or find a single, fully accurate English translation for it. For this reason, I have translated the Mencian statement differently in each section here, based on how it was understood and elucidated in the particular historical period. Ambiguity in Chinese critical terms and statements has long been deplored by modern scholars as evidence of vagueness, imprecision, and slipperiness in Chinese critical thinking. But this could not be further from the truth. So long as we are willing to patiently contextualize and historicize, we will find such ambiguity a unique strength of traditional Chinese literary theory. Instead of conveying a single fixed, definite concept or belief, ambiguous critical statements like “*Yi yi ni zi*” often serve as loci for interaction, competition, and mutual transformation among divergent concepts and beliefs on a given subject. To confirm this, we need only ask ourselves: Had it been less ambiguous, would “*Yi yi ni zhi*” have been so effectively used to justify and foster the development of so many

different interpretive approaches, and would it have so compellingly revealed the dynamics of evolving Chinese thinking on interpretation?³⁴



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Notes

1. Wang Yinglin. *Han shu yiwenzhi kaozheng*, 2.6: 以意逆志, 孟子一言而盡說詩之道。
2. Hu Yinglin, *Shi sou*, 2: 孟曰: 不以文害辭, 不以辭害意, 以意逆志, 是為得之。千古談詩之妙詮也。
3. Aisin Gioro Hongli, *Yu zuan shiyi zhezong*, 1: 以意逆志是為得之, 此說詩者之宗也。逆志而得其志之所在, 則詩之本得而為教也。正矣。
4. The closest parallel might be Horace's dictum: *Ut pictura poesis*. See Rensselaer Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York: Norton, 1967).
5. See Wai-ye Li's article on the *fushi* tradition in this issue. For a study on the ritualized sequence of music playing, *fushi*, and dancing, see Chen Zhi, "Shuo 'Xia' yu 'Ya'," 1–54.
6. Kong Yingda, *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi*, Xianggong 27, in Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu* 2:1997. "Mao no. 14" means the fourteenth poem in the Mao Text of the *Book of Poetry*. For English translations of these seven poems, see Waley, *Book of Songs*, 86, 299, 130, 85–86, 21, 199, 180.
7. Waley, *Book of Songs*, 299.
8. Kong, *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi*, Xianggong 27, in Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu* 2:1977.
9. Chang Su-ch'ing, *Zuo zhuan chengshi yanjiu*, 261–88, lists 36 *fushi* and 139 *yinshi* instances in the *Zuo zhuan*. Dong Zhi'an, *Xian Qin wenxian* provides four useful comparative charts on *yinshi*, *fushi*, and *geshi* 歌詩 (singing the *Poetry*) in the *Zuo zhuan* and the *Guoyu*. The last two charts (35–45) identify the time, speaker, and title of the cited work for every occurrence of *yinshi*, *fushi*, and *geshi* in these two works.
10. *Lunyu yinde*, 1/15.
11. Xu Shen writes, "Yi means zhi. It is constituted of the parts xin (heart) and yin (sound). It can be known through an examination of words (yan)" 意, 志也。从心音。察言而知意 (*Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 10.502).
12. *Mengzi yinde*, 35/5A/4.
13. Ibid.: 如以辭而已矣。雲漢之詩曰。周餘黎民。靡有孑遺。信斯言也。是周無遺民也。
14. Ibid., 42/5B/8.
15. The authorship of the "Mao Prefaces" has been a matter of speculation since antiquity. Some scholars consider it the work of Confucius's disciple Zi Xia 子夏, with subsequent expansions by a Mao of the Han, while others attribute it to Wei Hong 衛宏, an Eastern Han scholar. See Yong Rong et al., *Siku quanshu zongmu*, 1:15.119.
16. Wang Guowei, "Yuxisheng," in Guo Shaoyu and Wang Wensheng, *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan*, 1:38–39.
17. Kong Yingda, *Mao shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (The True Meaning of the Mao Edition of the *Poetry*), in Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu* 1.272: 然則關雎、麟趾之化。王者之風。故繫之周公。南、言化自北而南也。

18. Ibid., in Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu* 1.269, 273, 276–79, 281.
19. Kong Yingda glosses the word *xian* 賢 (the worthy) as *xiannü* 賢女 (virtuous woman) and contends that the poem is about Hou Fei's search for virtuous women to serve her husband as consorts. See *ibid.*, in Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu* 1:273.
20. "The Mao Prefaces" and "The Mao Commentary" are by two different authors having the same surname of Mao.
21. Ouyang Xiu, *Shi benyi*, 7:1.
22. Lü, *Lü shi, juan* 1.
23. *Ibid.*, *juan* 25: 不顯, 則所以甚言其顯也; 不時, 則所以甚言其時也。
24. Zhu Xi, *Zhu zi yu lei*, 4:58.1359.
25. Ma Duanlin, *Wenxian tongkao*, 178.1590.
26. Hao Jing, "Mengzi shuo shi jie," 53:69.
27. Zhong, *Yinxu xuan ji*, 391–92.
28. See Zhong, "Shigui xu" in *ibid.*, 235–36: 庶幾見吾所選者以古人為歸也。引古人之精神以接後人之心目, 使其心目有所止焉, 如是而已矣。……惺與同邑譚子元春憂之, 內省諸心, 不敢先有所謂學古不學古者, 而第求古人真詩所在。真詩者, 精神所為也。
29. These two lines appear in "Yi 抑" (Mao no. 256); Waley, *Book of Songs*, 300.
30. Wang Fuzhi, *Shiyi*, 8.4613.
31. Wang Fuzhi, *Xitang yongri xulun*, 8.4620: 興觀群怨, 詩盡於是矣。經生家析《鹿鳴》、《嘉魚》為群,《柏舟》、《小弁》為怨,小人一往之喜怒耳,何足以言詩?「可以」云者,隨所以而皆可也。《詩三百篇》而下唯《十九首》能然。李、杜亦髣髴之,然其能俾人隨觸而皆可,亦不數數也。又下或一可焉,或無一可者。
32. See Fang Yurun, *Shijing Yuanshi*, 51: 《詩》多言外意, 有會心者即此悟彼, 無不可以貫通。然唯觀《詩》、學《詩》、引《詩》乃可, 若執此以釋《詩》, 則又誤矣。蓋觀《詩》、學《詩》、引《詩》, 皆斷章以取義; 而釋《詩》, 則務探詩人意旨也, 豈可一概論哉?
33. See Wei Yuan, *Shi gu wei*, 38: 自國史編《詩》諷志, 於是列國大夫有賦《詩》之事; 自夫子刪《詩》垂訓, 於是齊、魯學者有說《詩》之學。然說《詩》者意因詩生, 即觸類旁通, 亦止因本文而引申之, 蓋詩為主而文從之, 所謂"以意逆志"也。賦《詩》與引《詩》者, 詩因情及, 雖取義微妙, 亦止借其詞以證明之, 蓋己情為主而詩從之, 所謂興之所之也。"以意逆志"者, 志得而意愈暢, 故其後為傳注所自興; 興之所至者, 興近則不必拘所作之人、所采之世, 故其後為詞賦之祖。
34. A Chinese version of this paper will appear in the inaugural issue of *Lingnan Journal*, to be published in 2015 by Shanghai guji chubanshe.

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