

Discussion of the Sublimity of *The Book of Songs*

LAI Meng-ying

Jiangxi College of Applied Technology, Ganzhou, China

The Book of Songs is the first collection of poems in China, originally named *Poetry*, and is one of the Five Classics. Whether in terms of themes, thoughts and emotions, language skills, as well as in artistic images and expression methods, it has shown the great achievements of China's earliest poetry works and has produced a profound influence on Chinese culture and literature. It not only has recorded the various aspects of the society of that time, but also opens the door to many literary studies. There is no need to argue about its status and significance. In the West, about twelve centuries after the creation of the first poem collected in *The Book of Songs*, there lived a literary theorist who has performed a great influence on western literature. He was Longinus, the author of *On the Sublime*. By comparing the aesthetic ideas of Longinus and the artistic characteristics of *The Book of Songs*, we are surprised to find that *The Book of Songs* is a paragon of the sublime described by Longinus.

Keywords: *The Book of Songs*, sublimity, Longinus

There is a paragraph that needs to be highlighted in Longinus's *On the Sublime*,

First and most important is the power of forming great conceptions, as we have elsewhere explained in our remarks on Xenophon. Secondly, there is vehement and inspired passion. These two components of the sublime are for the most part innate. Those which remain are partly the product of art. The due formation of figures deals with two sorts of figures, first those of thought and secondly those of expression. Next there is noble diction, which in turn comprises choice of words and use of metaphors, and elaboration of language. The fifth cause of elevation—one which is the fitting conclusion of all that have preceded it—is dignified and elevated composition. (Zhang, 2000, p. 119)

In a word, great conception, vehement passion, noble diction, proper use of metaphors and dignified composition are considered by Longinus as the characteristics a good literary work must equipped with.

Great Conception

Sublimity is the echo of a great soul.

First, then, it is absolutely necessary to indicate the source of this elevation, namely, that the truly eloquent must be free from low and ignoble thoughts. For it is not possible that men with mean and servile ideas and aims prevailing throughout their lives should produce anything that is admirable and worthy of immortality. Great accent we expect to fall from the lips of those whose thoughts are deep and grave. (Zhang, 2000, p. 121)

Here Longinus says that sublime writings are created by those who possess deep and grave thoughts.

At the Beginning of an October is such a work which contains the sublime thoughts emphasized by Longinus. At the beginning of the poem the persona observed that on the first day of October, the solar eclipse occurred, which aroused the poet's infinite and pensive thinking and uneasy recalling of the recent strange natural phenomena. It was not a preferred omen. The author's heart was full of shock and fear because of these portend.

The poet looked at the ominous signs and recalled the current situation of his kingdom: the rulers could not conduct good policy, extort people's wealth, and oppressed the people; officials did not perform their duties in their positions, deceived both the higher authorities and the common people, and only seek for their own benefit.

Unlike the people around him, the persona hoped to use his talents to develop the country for the benefit of the people. Looked at the natural and man-made disasters in front of him, he knew the precariousness of the kingdom and was perplexed by the irresistible fate of his country, which was seemingly appointed by a mysterious power, but he still wanted to do his best to fight against this predetermined fate for his country.

The sublimity of this poem's thought lies in the poem's praising of the poet's persistence.

Huang Fu presides over the state;
 Fan the interior,
 Jia Bo is magistrates;
 Zhong Yong is minister.
 Zou records worthy deeds;
 Of stable Qui takes care.
 Yu is captain of steeds;
 All flatter Lady Bao the fair.
 Oh, this Huang Fu would say He's done all by decree.
 But why drive me away;
 Without consulting me?
 Why move my house along; And Devastate my land?
 Has he done nothing wrong?
 The law is in his hand.
 Huang Fu says he is wise;
 And builds the capital.
 He choose me we despise,
 Corrupt and greedy all. (Xu, 2021a, p. 1507)

It can be inferred from above sentences that the political environment of the poet's country was very awful. The emperor exploited people carelessly, resulting in treacherous ministers in power and the people's hard making of living. In the face of the corrupt political environment, he still stuck to his colors, like a water lily come out of the mud without stain, and refused to compromise with the evil political situation. He did not only reject to comprise with the treacherous sycophants whose aims are to seek self-benefit and take the interests of the country and the people for themselves, but also dared to accuse the nepotism and incompetence occurred ruling class and to expose all kinds of evil deeds did by greedy officials, denouncing them for fooling the monarch, bullying the people, undermining national laws, privately occupying farmland, and privately demolishing houses. The persona spoken bluntly about their greed and corruption, and expressed his contempt and despise toward them. Even the situation is unfavorable, he still adheres to his idea and true feeling.

And when he was isolated by false and malicious slander from villains, his mind to do practical things and good deeds for his kingdom was not wavered.

“I work hard all day long;
Of my toil I’m not proud.
I have done nothing wrong;
Against me slander’s loud.” (Xu, 2021a, p. 1509)

When he was excluded, he still worried about the country and the people, did his best and did not forget his original aspiration. At the same time, he was not proud or superior because of his achievements, but only felt that it was his responsibility and obligation.

Even most governors around the poet are greedy and corrupt, the persona are not slightly influenced by them and still do his responsibilities. At the same time, the poet was not troubled by malicious slander, not trapped by arrogance. No matter what environment he was in, he still strove to fulfill his duties. This like pine-and-cypresses perseverance is the sublimity deserves admire and praise. The nobleness of persona’s thoughts is also reflected in his spirit of contribution. He just sincerely wants to do something helpful for the country and the people with his innocent heart. And he was already prepared to sacrifice his own benefits to achieve this aim, like enjoying the pleasure of life. He says in the poem,

Other people are gay;
Alone I am grieved here.
When all people are free,
Why can’t I take my ease? (Xu, 2021a, p. 1510)

When everyone around him was enjoying joy, only the poet foresaw the crisis of his country earlier than others, and meditated and worried about it.

“I can’t as friends do what I please.” Seeing the dangerous current situation of the country and thinking of the suffering people, he felt that he could not enjoy pleasure like his friends. He had the responsibility to save his country. When the country was rich and strong and the people were happy, maybe he could start to think about doing something relaxing.

“Plan and worry ahead of the people; enjoy the fruit after the people.” This kind of self-dedication spirit is one of the sublime thoughts of *The Book of Songs*.

The sublimity of the poet’s thoughts is also reflected in his courage. “I dread Heaven’s decree” In the face of the collapse of mountains and rivers, the poet also feels panicked and uneasy in his heart, and is extremely confused about future of his country. He felt that the strange phenomena in front of him was the punishment designed for his kingdom, which seems coming from heaven and was irreversible. He can choose to leave or hide in ease and forget the difficulties in front of him, but he didn’t. In order to save his country and people, he wants to fight against the irreversible fate.

He seems want to say that, “for the ideal that I hold dear to my heart, I’d not regret a thousand times to die” (Xu, 2021c, p. 117), and “I still want to try, even if I know that there is little hope”. The courage of this sad hero is impressive and touching.

The readers can be easily moved by the pure and great heart depicted in this poem. The persona’s sublime thoughts hit our mind like lightning, making us tremble. As Longinus said, “wheres sublimity flashing forth at

the moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude” (Zhang, 2000, p. 120).

Vehement Passion

Mao Shixu is a interpretation of *The Book of Songs* that has been handed down in the Han Dynasty to present. In the interpretation of *The Book of Songs*, the Preface to Mao Poetry has unshakable authority.

One of its sentences says that, “*poem is the production of strong emotions which are deep thoughts when they are hided in hearts and transformed into poems when they are expressed*” (Guo, 1982, p. 30). The author of this work thinks that the poems included in *The Book of Songs* are the uncontrollable overflowing of the poets’ emotions. This definition of poems coincides with Longinus’ view.

In “National Style”, folk songs with the theme of love occupy a lot of volum. “*Zhou Nan Guan Ju*” is a typical love song in the *The Book of Songs* which praises the innocent. It narrates that a man was so enchanted lady whom frequently picking wild vegetables on the beach in his heart that he can’t sleep all night, because of his missing. We can read one of the stanzas:

The youth yearns day and night,
For the maiden so fair.
His yearning grows so strong,
He cannot fall asleep,
But toss all night long,
So deep in love, so deep! (Xu, 2021b, p. 12)

The indescribable psychological characteristics of a man who was in the pursuit of a lovely girl, his eager and anxious feelings that are difficult to curbed day and night are vividly expressed. The whole poem is full of relaxed, humorous and magic romanticism, reflecting the pure inner world of young men and women, the positive and cheerful attitude of theirs in the enthusiastic pursuit of love and the sincere and serious attitude of young men and women towards love.

Unlike Guan Ju which describes sincere and passionate love, “*Mang*” (also called *A Faithless Man*) is a poem tells the story of a abandoned woman, recording the whole process of the woman from her falling in love, marriage to being abandoned. Although it is a narrative poem, it has a strong emotional color. The husband in the poem cheated her money and discarded the heroine only three years after marriage. In the face of reality, the heroine warned all young women with incomparable sadness, indignation, pain and regret that,

Beware, O turtledove,
Eat not the fruit of love!
It will intoxicate.
Do not repent too late!
Man may do what he will;
He can atone it still.
No one will e’er condone,
The wrong a woman’s done. (Xu, 2021b, p. 424)

She called on women all over the world not to fall in with men easily and indulge in love casually. In the end, they will be suffered from their decision and regret for what they have done. The whole poem is full of

emotional power, which not only shows the pain of the heroine when she was abandoned due to her naivety, but also shows the heroine's resolute attitude after realizing, which is full of strong appeal.

Noble Diction and Proper Use of Metaphors

Mao Shixu concludes that, "there are six characteristics of *The Book of Songs*, they are respectively, Feng (风), Fu (赋), Bi (比), Xing (兴), Ya (雅) and Song (颂)."

"Feng, Ya and Song" refer to the three main content of *The Book of Songs* while Fu, Bi, Xing are the three writing skills frequently applied in *The Book of Songs*.

"Fu" means to state the story and characteristics of things, directly describe events, passions, show things and emotions explicitly to the reader, and emphasize the directness of diction.

My Man Is Away has presented the typical use of "Fu", following is the expert of this poem,

My man's away to serve the State;
I can't anticipate How long he will there stay
Or when he'll be on homeward way. (Xu, 2021b, p. 480)

There is no word that describes the protagonist's appearance and specific acts at all, but these line has successfully presented the woman's psychological activities through emotional narrative language, that readers can easily imagine and feel the hostess's infinite sad inner feelings caused by missing her husband and mourning for her lonely situation.

"Bi" refers to indirectly stating things, but uses other things to describe the target or the aimed object, and the thing you want to illustrate will not be directly exhibited in poetry. It emphasizes the use of euphemism and is similar to the exploit of metaphor. For example, in the poem *Large Rat*, there are lines,

Large rat, Large rat,
Eat no more millet we grow!
Three years you have grown fat;
No care for us you show. (Xu, 2021b, p. 778)

In appearance, this poem seems to describe a peasant begging the mouse not to be so cruel to them, and not to eat the fruits of their hard work. In fact, the poem here uses the skill of "Bi" to compare the merciless exploiter with a big mouse, which vividly shows the disgust and aversion of the working people towards the exploiter, and also vividly shows the ugly face of the exploiter who ruthlessly encroaches on the fruits of their work regardless of the lives of the peasant.

"Xing" is usually used at the beginning of a poem, mentioning other items first, then introducing what you want to depict. For example, in *Guan Ju*, the poet initially presented the vivid scene of "By riverside a pair of turtledoves are cooing" to introduce the main content "There is a maiden fair whom a young man is wooing." The interaction between turtle doves is mentioned to imply the emotional interaction between men and women.

We can pay our attention to the beginning lines of the *Jian Jia*, "Green, green the reed, Frost and dew gleam" The images, frost and dew, are presented to create a beautiful and dreamy scene, which paves the way for the appearance of the unforgettable beauty that fascinates the poet, and creates a beautiful and hazy atmosphere in which the poet's is tossing and turning for the beauty.

“Fu” can directly show the emotions that poetry wants to express in front of readers. It makes poetry very infectious.

“Bi” is novel and interesting. Although it does not directly describe the aimed objects, it can show the characteristics of the target in a euphemistic and interesting way and arouse the interest of readers. It is similar to metaphor.

“Xing” makes the article full of layers and situational sense, introduces readers into a wonderful scene created by words, and allows readers to automatically realize the deep meaning of poetry.

In a word, through the above analysis, it can be found that *The Book of Songs* has its special writing skills and rhetorical methods and is indeed a perfect demonstration of noble diction and proper use of metaphors.

Dignified Composition

Longinus says in his work that, “The fifth cause of elevation—one which is the fitting conclusion of all that have preceded it—is dignified and elevated composition” (Zhang, 2000, p. 119).

It can be concluded from his statement that the dignified composition is based on the previous elements and that if a work has great conception, vehement passion, noble diction, proper use of metaphors and dignified composition, then it is very likely to be a work with a dignified composition.

Through the previous discussion, we can find that *The Book of Songs* not only praises the great humanistic spirit, shown in *At the Beginning of an October*, depicts the sincere and enthusiastic emotions of human beings, presented in *Guan Ju*, but also good at using the three skills of “Fu”, “Bi” and “Xing” in terms of wording and rhetoric to vividly and interestingly show the story to readers. In terms of structure, *The Book of Songs* has always been called a model of four-character poetry. It can be say that the composition of *The Book of Songs* is admirable and decent.

Conclusion

Longinus’ *On the Sublime* is a conclusion based on the analysis of the great classic works of ancient Greece and Rome, especially the analysis of Homer’s Epic. In the far east, *The Book of Songs* perfectly presents the aesthetic ideas it holds. It is not exaggerated to say that *The Book of Songs* is the perfect demonstration of Longinus’s aesthetic ideal illustrated in *On the Sublime*.

Why are the two literary works, which are thousands of miles apart, having no chance to communicate with each other have such similar characteristics? Perhaps just as Marx found that there are universal laws in the development of human history, there are also some universal laws in literary works that have not yet been discovered.

References

- de Jonge, C. C., & Nijk, A. A. (2019). Longinus, on the sublime 12.4-5: Demosthenes and cicero. *Mnemosyne*, 72(5).
- Longinus, M. H. (2000). On sublimity. *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 45.
- Zhang, Z. Z. (2000). *Selected readings in classical western critical theory*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- 鲍晨. (2014). 论《史记》一书的崇高美 (陕西师范大学).
- 郭晓春. (2012). 论屈原作品的崇高之美——兼论朗基努斯的崇高观. *河南科技学院学报*, (07), 67-69.
- 雷丽娟. (2018). 章太炎《诗经》研究 (山西大学).

- 王晶. (2023). 《诗经·卫风·氓》的多元解读. *语文教学通讯 D 刊(学术刊)*, (01), 76-78.
- 王思尧. (2022). 《关雎》主旨解读的“即”与“离”. *文化创新比较研究*, 6(22), 97-100+115.
- 吴洋. (2020). 读安大简《诗经》札记. *国学学刊*, (02), 5-16+142.
- 许渊冲. (2021a). 《许渊冲译诗经·雅》. 北京: 中译出版社.
- 许渊冲. (2021b). 《许渊冲译诗经·风》. 北京: 中译出版社.
- 许渊冲. (2021c). 《许渊冲译楚辞》. 北京: 中译出版社.
- 姚绪文. (2014). 浅谈《十月之交》中“我”的觉醒. *现代妇女(下旬)*, (01), 190.
- 俞珂巧. (2022). 《诗经》中的一抹旖旎风光——《蒹葭》赏析. *名作欣赏*, (29), 84-86.
- 张静. (2018). 从接受美学看《诗经》解读——以《毛诗序》《诗集传》为例. *文山学院学报*, 31(02), 84-86+90.