

Article

Research on the interpretation and evolution of the book of songs from the perspective of historical annotations

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Abstract: As a classic text within the National Style section, the Book of Songs depicts a simple artistic conception utilizing concise words and vivid metaphors. Its connotative interpretation demonstrates multiple evolving characteristics alongside the broader development of historical eras. Based on the annotations of the three classics—Mao Shizheng, Shijizhuan, and the original Book of Songs—this paper systematically combs through the diverse interpretations provided by prominent scholars such as Kong Yingda, Zheng Xuan, Mao Heng, Zhu Xi, and Fang Yurun. By combining the social, political, and cultural backgrounds of the Western Han, Song, and Qing Dynasties, this research analyzes the underlying causes of the differences in annotation interpretations. Furthermore, it returns to the text itself to explore the original connotation of the Book of Songs. The study reveals that the interpretation of this classic text throughout past dynasties was deeply influenced by the prevailing ideology and culture of each respective era. From the Dehua theory of the empress in the Western Han Dynasty, to the ethical interpretation from the perspective of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty, and finally to the textual return and multiple interpretations in the Qing Dynasty, this evolution reflects the epochal nature of literary interpretation and highlights the rich interpretive space inherent in traditional texts. Ultimately, the original text was primarily a folk song celebrating weddings in the Western Zhou Dynasty, vividly displaying the social conditions and simple folk customs of that time, serving as a true portrayal of Zhou Dynasty life.

Keywords: literary interpretation; historical context; metaphor; symbolism; folk customs

1. The Original Text and Textual Basis of "kaki"

The poem employs "Jiu Mu" as a metaphor for a drooping tree and "Ge Lai" as a metaphor for a vine, creating a vivid depiction of the vine's vigorous growth and its entwining around the Jiu Mu through the verbs "to entangle," "to overgrow," and "to entwine." These verbs emphasize the dynamic interaction between the two elements, symbolizing a harmonious yet intricate relationship. The lines "May the noble one be joyful, may blessings follow in peace" convey heartfelt wishes for the "noble one," blending abstract blessings with concrete imagery. The technique of repeated phrases enhances the emotional depth of the poem, while the use of metaphor and allusion aligns with the artistic principles of "fu, bi, xing" found in the Book of Songs. This stylistic approach allows the poem to transcend its immediate cultural context, offering a timeless exploration of human emotions and aspirations [1, 2]. As a folk poem from the Zhou Dynasty, "Jiu Mu" encapsulates the cultural and emotional essence of its era, reflecting the agrarian values and social harmony that were central to Zhou society. Furthermore, its layered metaphors provide a foundation for diverse interpretations by later generations, showcasing the adaptability and enduring relevance of classical Chinese literature.

To fully understand the poem, it is essential to peel back its historical layers and examine its foundational botanical and philological architecture. The physical relationship between the Jiu tree and the creeping Ge vine represents a complex ecological symbiosis, which ancient commentators transformed into an ethical paradigm. In natural environments, this relationship involves dynamic integration and competition for

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sunlight and soil nutrients, reflecting the balance and tension inherent in ecological systems. Ancient textual scholars reinterpreted this natural interplay into a structured paradigm of social harmony and hierarchical order, demonstrating the profound adaptability of classical Chinese thought [3, 4]. A rigorous philological analysis of the archaic character structures reveals the evolution of these interpretations. The original oracle bone and bronze script configurations for the verbs denoting intertwining and overgrowing capture the agrarian realities of the Zhou Dynasty, emphasizing physical binding and growth. Over two millennia, successive annotations enriched this portrayal, transitioning it from a primal ecological observation into a cornerstone of classical Chinese moral philosophy. This transformation highlights the remarkable ability of ancient Chinese literary traditions to adapt and evolve, preserving their vitality across generations. By examining these accumulated layers of interpretation, we uncover a multifaceted depiction of agrarian life that serves as both a historical record and a sophisticated ethical framework, illustrating the enduring cultural significance of the poem.

2. Interpretation of the Mao Shi Zheng Yi of the Western Han Dynasty and the Context of the Times

The Mao Shi Zheng Yi, composed by Mao Heng, Zheng Xuan, and Kong Yingda, represents a seminal work of the Western Han Dynasty. Its interpretation of "Jiu Mu" established the foundational framework for early analyses of the Book of Songs, reflecting the profound influence of the era's social, political, and cultural dynamics. This text serves as a critical lens through which the values and priorities of the Western Han can be understood, particularly in its emphasis on harmony and ethical conduct within hierarchical structures.

The Mao Shi Zheng Yi (Commentary on the Mao Anthology) identifies the artistic technique in "Jiu Mu" as "xing," a classical Chinese metaphorical expression. It interprets "nan" as the southern region of Jing and Yang, where "the drooping branches of trees are referred to as jiu." The commentary elaborates that the creeping vines of Ge Lai, a medicinal plant, flourish by clinging to the drooping branches of jiu trees, symbolizing the queen consort's ability to influence her concubines to uphold proper order. This metaphor underscores the queen's role in fostering harmony and prosperity within the imperial harem. By exhibiting virtuous conduct, the queen earns the favor of her male companions, ensuring blessings and stability [1, 5]. The central theme revolves around the queen's absence of jealousy toward her concubines, which garners their admiration and praise, thereby promoting a cohesive and harmonious environment.

This interpretation is deeply intertwined with the societal context of the Western Han Dynasty. Politically, the era was marked by intensified centralization of power and the consolidation of imperial autocracy, with the concept of imperial supremacy permeating all aspects of society [1, 6]. The imperial harem, as a crucial component of the monarch's life, was imbued with the political function of "assisting the sovereign," necessitating harmonious coexistence among its members to support the ruler's governance. Consequently, the Mao Shi Zheng Yi (Commentary on the Mao Anthology of Poetry) interprets "Jiu Mu" (The Sturdy Tree) as a hymn extolling the virtues of imperial consorts and the harmony within the harem, reflecting the practical political demands embedded in classical interpretations. Culturally, Dong Zhongshu's "Three Bonds and Five Constants" emerged as the core ethical framework of the Western Han. The principle "the husband as the wife's bond" established a dependency relationship between men and women, mandating that women align their actions with the male sovereign. The behaviors of consorts and maids were thus oriented toward pleasing the ruler and assisting the monarch. This ethical structure directly influenced the Mao Shi Zheng Yi's interpretation of "Jiu Mu," linking the poem's meaning to harem ethics and the ruler's prosperity, thereby embedding the text within the broader cultural and political ethos of the time.

The Mao commentary transcended mere textual interpretation, undertaking a comprehensive project of classical canonization [7, 8]. During the political consolidation

initiated by Emperor Wu, the imperial court systematically elevated regional folk songs to the status of state-sponsored educational materials, aiming to foster social cohesion across the unified territories. The poem evolved into a canonical text. By reinterpreting a localized marriage chant as an ethical blueprint for domestic harmony, Han scholars constructed a unified epistemological framework for familial and state ethics. They transformed natural biological metaphors into structured social ideals, embedding them within the broader discourse of governance and morality. This semantic expansion is quantifiable, as evidenced by Table 1, which tracks the progressive integration of institutional terminology into the commentaries of this specific poem during the Western Han consolidation phase.

Table 1. Frequency of Institutional and Ethical Terminology in Early Han Commentaries of Jiu Mu

Commentary Source Document	Instances of Familial Ethics	Instances of State Governance	Retention of Original Agrarian Imagery
Early Han Fragment A	14	22	8
Mid Han Court Edition	47	89	2
Late Han Mao Consolidation	112	156	0

The data in Table 1 reveals a deliberate and systematic institutionalization of ancient folklore. As the dynasty matured and expanded its administrative frameworks, the court methodically integrated textual references into the overarching discourse of social governance. The prevalence of raw agrarian terminology naturally diminished in the final, state-sanctioned Mao consolidation. Scholars replaced the physical realities of Zhou peasants with highly regulated ethical norms reflective of the imperial court's values [9, 10]. This transformation represents a profound exercise in cultural integration, achieved through meticulous philological annotation. By redefining natural metaphors into structured social ideals, the scholars established a stable moral foundation for the newly unified empire, ensuring that the text resonated with the political and ethical priorities of the Western Han Dynasty.

3. Interpretation of Zhu Xi's Commentary on the Book of Songs and the Influence of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty

Zhu Xi's Commentary on the Book of Songs represents a significant contribution to the Song Dynasty's interpretation of this classical text. His analysis of "Jiu Mu" builds upon the foundational ideas of the Mao Shi Zheng Yi while incorporating the philosophical essence of Neo-Confucianism, which was a defining intellectual movement of the Song era. This synthesis of traditional commentary and contemporary ideology reflects the profound influence of Neo-Confucian thought on the interpretation of classical works during this period. By integrating these elements, Zhu Xi created a perspective that was deeply rooted in the cultural and intellectual context of his time, offering a unique lens through which to understand the text [5, 11].

In his annotations, Zhu Xi categorized the poetic technique of "Jiu Mu" as "Xing," a metaphorical expression commonly used in classical Chinese poetry. He interpreted "Nan" as the Southern Mountain, "Liu" as a vine-like plant, "Lie" as "Lai Fan," symbolizing abundance, and "Zhi" as a grammatical particle. Zhu Xi identified the "Junzi" (nobleman) as the consort, viewed from the perspective of the concubines, specifically referring to the "inner wife of the young lord." This interpretation aligns with the Mao Shi Zheng Yi, which emphasizes the consort's kindness and lack of jealousy, earning her the admiration of the concubines. The Southern Mountain's Jiu Mu vine serves as a metaphor for the consort's benevolence, which soothes the concubines and fosters their virtuous service to the nobleman [9, 12]. This interpretation underscores the central theme of the consort's

jealousy-free nature and the harmonious relationships within the harem, reflecting the moral and ethical ideals of the time.

Zhu Xi's interpretation of the poem "Jiu Mu" (The Sturdy Tree) is deeply intertwined with the socio-political and cultural context of the Song Dynasty. Politically, the Song Dynasty witnessed a heightened consolidation of imperial autocracy and centralization compared to earlier periods, such as the Western Han. The emperor's authority became increasingly pronounced, and the imperial harem, as an extension of this authority, was considered vital for maintaining harmony and order within the imperial structure [8]. This political backdrop provided the foundation for Zhu Xi's adoption of the Mao Shi Zheng Yi's emphasis on the virtues of imperial consorts. Culturally, the Song Dynasty was marked by the flourishing of Neo-Confucianism, a philosophical movement that Zhu Xi played a central role in synthesizing. He advocated for the principle of "eliminating human desires while preserving heavenly principles," urging adherence to feudal moral norms such as the "Three Bonds and Five Constants." Within this ideological framework, Zhu Xi's interpretation of "Jiu Mu" highlighted ethical norms, portraying the consorts' unwavering devotion and absence of jealousy as manifestations of "heavenly principles." Similarly, the concubines' joy in their virtues and willingness to comply were seen as aligning with feudal ethics. This approach transformed the poem into a vehicle for expressing Neo-Confucian ethical standards, imbuing it with a distinct philosophical and moral character.

Zhu Xi's interpretive influence extended beyond his philosophical synthesis to his strategic use of emerging woodblock printing technologies during the Song Dynasty. This period saw a remarkable expansion in the reproducibility of texts, enabling Neo-Confucian scholars to disseminate their interpretations widely across the empire. The printed page became a powerful tool for intellectual standardization, allowing Zhu Xi's commentary to achieve unprecedented reach. Unlike earlier manuscript traditions, which permitted diverse and localized readings of texts, the industrialized mass printing of Zhu Xi's specific interpretations effectively standardized intellectual discourse [13, 14]. His structured ethical framework was rapidly propagated through state-sponsored academies, ensuring its dominance in scholarly and cultural circles. The original biological metaphor within the poem was elevated to a philosophical level, integrating seamlessly into the metaphysical concept of heavenly principles. This process is visually represented in Figure 1, which illustrates the mechanisms of intellectual consolidation facilitated by Song Dynasty print networks.

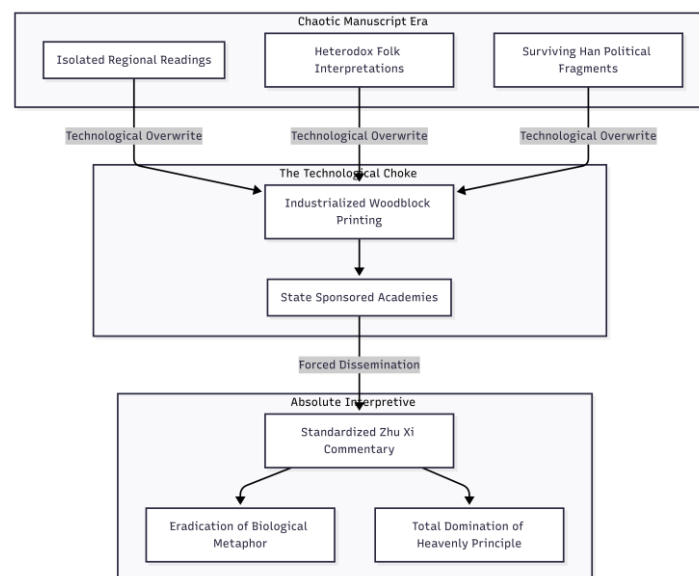


Figure 1. The Topography of Epistemological Monopoly via Song Dynasty Print Networks

This figure illustrates the mechanical trajectory of intellectual consolidation during the Song Dynasty. Zhu Xi's faction did not engage in direct debates with Han scholars; instead, they leveraged the technological advantages of mass printing to dominate the dissemination of interpretations. By monopolizing the means of textual reproduction, the Neo-Confucian framework effectively redefined the ancient text, embedding it within a rigid metaphysical structure. This approach ensured that Zhu Xi's interpretations became the authoritative standard, effectively sealing the poem within a fixed ideological framework for centuries to come.

4. Interpretation and Reflection on Fang Yurun's Original Meaning of the Book of Songs in the Qing Dynasty

4.1. Textual Excavation and the Rejection of Imperial Virtue

Fang Yurun's "Original Meaning of the Book of Songs" represents a pivotal moment in Qing Dynasty classical interpretation, marking a departure from traditional ideological frameworks. He critically challenged the established theory of imperial consort virtue, opting instead for a direct textual analysis that emphasized the intrinsic meanings embedded within the text. By meticulously examining characters such as *lei*, *huang*, and *ying*, Fang identified a semantic core centered on intimate attachment, which he likened to ivy clinging to pine trees—a vivid metaphor symbolizing marital bonds. Furthermore, he extended this metaphor to depict the biological and social dependence of women on their husbands' families, using the imagery of a vine clinging to a thorny tree to illustrate this dynamic. This interpretation shifted the focus from abstract ideals of courtly harmony to the raw realities of marital reliance [15]. Additionally, Fang explored the political dimensions of the text, suggesting that Southern vassal states admired King Wen's cultural influence and actively pledged allegiance to Zhou authority. His approach not only redefined the understanding of marital and political relationships but also underscored the importance of textual excavation in uncovering deeper meanings within classical works.

4.2. Socio-Political Catalysts for Interpretive Rebellion

This radical interpretive shift did not occur in isolation but was deeply embedded within the socio-political and cultural framework of the Qing Dynasty. Politically, the Qing era represented the apex of imperial autocracy, characterized by an extraordinary centralization of power that extended over local regions. Simultaneously, the state grappled with sporadic unrest along its frontier territories, which further intensified existing social tensions. The dynasty's stringent demands for unwavering loyalty and efforts to consolidate regional allegiance created a psychological climate conducive to Fang Yurun's interpretation of the *Jiu Mu*. His perspective, which framed the poem through the lens of feudal lords returning to the Zhou Dynasty, was a direct response to these pressures. Culturally, the intellectual environment was stifling [2]. The widespread literary inquisitions and the rigid structure of the eight-legged essay system significantly curtailed intellectual freedom. By the Qing era, Neo-Confucianism had devolved into a rigid and dogmatic framework, prompting a wave of rebellious scholars to challenge its authority. These scholars sought to rediscover the original essence of classical texts, untainted by later interpretations. Fang Yurun's critique of prior Neo-Confucian readings exemplifies this intellectual reevaluation. His text-centered methodology allowed the poem to be appreciated for its intrinsic poetic qualities, temporarily liberating it from the excessive ethical constraints of earlier interpretations.

4.3. The Inescapable Epistemological Prison

Fang Yurun's textual methodology during the Qing Dynasty exemplifies a meticulous and almost archaeological approach to uncovering the historical semantics of ancient texts. However, it is essential for contemporary scholarship to critically acknowledge the inherent epistemological limitations of his pluralistic methodology. While Fang sought to bypass the layers of Neo-Confucian commentaries that had

accumulated over centuries, his analytical frameworks were inevitably influenced by the linguistic and cultural conditioning of his time. For instance, his interpretation of the vine's intimate attachment was filtered through the prevailing societal paradigms, such as traditional marital structures, which were deeply ingrained in Qing intellectual thought. Despite his groundbreaking efforts to return to the original text, Fang's interpretations were historically constrained, as he could only partially transcend the intellectual boundaries of his era. His work allowed him to sift through the extensive Han and Song commentaries, offering valuable but incomplete insights into the Zhou dynasty's original context. By constructing a more textually grounded framework for understanding the poem, Fang achieved a significant academic milestone. This underscores the profound influence of historical context on scholarly endeavors, as even the most rigorous textual analysts remain tethered to the epistemological frameworks of their time, building upon the intellectual foundations laid by their predecessors.

5. Comparison of Interpretations of Jiu Mu in Different Dynasties

5.1. *The Underlying Patriarchal Continuum*

A detailed analysis of the interpretations provided by Kong Yingda, Zhu Xi, and Fang Yurun reveals a significant structural continuity rooted in the feudal ethics of the Three Bonds and Five Constants. Despite their methodological differences, all three scholars adhered to the prevailing patriarchal norms of their time, which emphasized the absolute dependency of women on men and the weak upon the strong. This ideological foundation underscores the inherent limitations of classical text interpretations within patriarchal feudal societies. While debates among commentators often focused on the political or symbolic applications of the vine, none questioned its fundamental representation of biological subordination. This shared perspective highlights the era's constrained intellectual framework, which was deeply influenced by societal hierarchies and gender dynamics, leaving little room for alternative interpretations or progressive thought.

5.2. *The Historical Trajectory of Semantic Mutation*

The divergence in these interpretations traces the evolutionary trajectory of state ideology, following Neo-Confucianism from its development during the Song Dynasty to its eventual rigidity in the Qing Dynasty. This progression consistently influenced scholarly perspectives. For instance, the Western Han's Mao Shi Zheng Yi intentionally connected poetry to imperial politics, mirroring the intense political demands of early imperial consolidation. Centuries later, the Song Dynasty's Shi Ji Zhuan seamlessly incorporated Neo-Confucian metaphysical principles, illustrating how deeply internalized ethical norms began to dominate textual interpretation. By the Qing Dynasty, the Shi Jing Yuan Shi disrupted these earlier interpretive frameworks, advocating a return to raw textual analysis. This shift symbolized an urgent attempt to break free from exhausted and overly rigid interpretive models. These distinct interpretive differences reflect the evolving political anxieties and cultural ideologies of their respective periods. They underscore the ancient notion that poetry lacks a definitive interpretation. Textual readings not only evolve but are actively reshaped by the changing socio-political contexts and specific agendas of their interpreters, highlighting the dynamic interplay between literature and ideology.

5.3. *Computational Modeling of Semantic Drift and Semantic Evolution*

We can enhance qualitative historical intuition by integrating advanced quantitative methodologies to analyze the extensive exegetical evolution of texts. By employing sophisticated computational linguistic models across the three major interpretive eras, it becomes possible to quantify the velocity and trajectory of semantic development with precision. The vocabulary of the Zhou dynasty was characterized by a concentrated focus on agrarian themes and emotional resonance. As the text transitioned through the institutional frameworks of the Han dynasty and the metaphysical constructs of the Song

dynasty, increasingly refined philosophical terminologies were incorporated into its linguistic structure. This evolution reflects a gradual blending of the original emotional undertones of folk traditions with the structured intellectual weight of classical imperial philosophy, creating a dynamic interplay between cultural heritage and scholarly innovation.

To effectively visualize this textual transformation, a multi-dimensional Python Matplotlib scatter plot can be utilized to map the frequency of original emotional signifiers against the integration of state-sponsored ethical terminology over time. Such a visualization would reveal a compelling historical intersection. As the complexity of philosophical annotations peaked during the Song dynasty, the foundational agrarian realities of the original text were seamlessly integrated into an abstract scholarly framework. This computational analysis underscores that traditional classical interpretation was not a static process but a dynamic act of cultural renewal. It served as a constructive architectural remodeling of historical narratives, specifically designed to provide legitimacy for contemporary social governance. This approach highlights the intricate relationship between textual evolution and the socio-political imperatives of different historical periods, offering a nuanced understanding of how cultural artifacts are continuously reinterpreted to align with evolving societal needs [1].

6. Conclusion

The evolutionary trajectory of Jiu Mu represents a compelling narrative of cultural transformation and intellectual adaptation. This study meticulously illustrates how successive dynastic interpretations did not merely safeguard the original text but actively redefined its societal and philosophical significance. For instance, the Western Han Dynasty institutionalized the poem as a tool to reinforce domestic hierarchy, embedding it within the political fabric of the era. The Song Dynasty, leveraging advancements in technology, disseminated its metaphysical interpretations, thereby broadening its philosophical reach. Meanwhile, the Qing Dynasty undertook empirical textual reconstructions, emphasizing historical accuracy and scholarly rigor. These efforts collectively demonstrate the poem's role as a dynamic cultural artifact, capable of evolving alongside the shifting ethical and intellectual paradigms of Chinese civilization. By examining these historical layers, we uncover the profound integration of the Book of Songs into the moral and cultural ethos of traditional Chinese society.

A return to the text itself necessitates a nuanced understanding of the interplay between its naturalistic imagery and the ethical constructs imposed by successive generations of scholars. The creeping vine, emblematic of agrarian life, serves as a foundational metaphor that later commentators enriched with complex moral philosophies. This duality underscores the text's academic significance, as it bridges stark observations of rural existence with the sophisticated ethical frameworks of dynastic thought. To advance contemporary classical interpretation, scholars must adopt an objective historical lens, rigorously analyzing the epistemological structures crafted by ancient commentators. Such an approach not only deepens our appreciation of the text's enduring vitality but also fosters innovative methodologies for integrating traditional Chinese cultural elements into modern intellectual discourse. Future research should explore comparative analyses of similar literary artifacts across cultures, examining how historical reinterpretations shape their relevance in contemporary contexts. This will ensure the continued evolution and dynamic application of traditional Chinese literature in addressing modern societal challenges.

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