

Aural Fixity and Semantic Flexibility in the Early Chinese Songs Tradition

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Abstract: Based on the newly discovered bamboo slip *Songs* in the Ānhuī University manuscript collection, this article analyses how during the Warring States period (c. 475–221 BC) in China different text communities would fill the sound moulds of aurally fixed songs creatively for their purposes. By way of a hypothetical, emic reading of the manuscript text, we cast light on the conceptual community behind the bamboo slip *Songs* and how it assigned meaning within suspended but delimited possibles to the text in a systematic fashion. As an exemplary case, we discuss ‘White Boat’ 白舟 in the bamboo slip *Songs* with reference to ‘Cypress-wood Boat’ 柏舟 from the songs of the state of Yōng 邶 in the *Classic of Songs* (song 45) in the Máo recension.

Keywords: Early China, manuscript cultures, text formation, *Classic of Songs* (*Shijing*), philosophy, text communities, sound moulds, suspended meaning

Introduction

In early 2015 Ānhuī University (Héféi, Ānhuī Province, P.R.C.) obtained a cache of Warring States period manuscripts from the second half of the fourth century BC, written in ink on bamboo slips. Central to the cache is a selection of texts that belong to the foundational Songs (Shī 詩) tradition. On the surface they bear a close resemblance in sequence and content to the songs referred to as the ‘Airs of the States’ (Guó fēng 國風, henceforth just ‘Airs’) in the *Shijing* 詩經, the *Classic of Songs* (*textus receptus*).¹ The materials were ordered and published in November 2019 as volume 1 of *Ānhuī Dàxué cáng zhànguó zhújiǎn* 安徽大學藏戰國竹簡 (*Ānhuī University Storing Bamboo Slip Manuscripts from the Warring States Period*; henceforth *Ānhuī University Manuscripts*).²

The manuscripts were not obtained by a scientific excavation but purchased by an unknown buyer and then donated to Ānhuī University. We have no precise information as to where in China they were found, but based on archaeological discoveries of Warring States bamboo slip manuscripts recovered to date, the manuscripts were likely produced in the ancient state of Chǔ 楚, in the vicinity of modern-day Jīngzhōu 荊州, Húběi Province. We refer to the manuscript carrying the selection of the ‘Airs’ simply as ‘bamboo slip Songs’. The working title allows for flexibility and signals a larger, more inclusive tradition.³

We leave the standard problems and concerns of working with unprovenanced materials to be discussed elsewhere.⁴ Radiocarbon analysis suggests the manuscripts are roughly 2280 years old, calibrated to the year 1950 (Huáng Dēkuān 2017: 56–8). This gives us a date of circa 330 BC for the manuscripts, confirmed by subsequent chemical analysis of the slips. The ink however has not been tested. Theoretically this means we cannot exclude with certainty that recent forgers produced the texts on ancient bamboo slips (see also Liú Guózhōng 2008). But this is unlikely (Allan 2015: 51; Liu 2015). We follow the lead of Chinese scientists and palaeographers and rule out, as a working assumption, that the text was fabricated on ancient slips.

¹ The Songs (Shī 詩) are one of the three foundational text traditions of early China—the other being the Changes (Yì 易) and the Documents (Shū 書). We use the word Songs—capital letter but not italicised—referring to a cultural institution and inclusive tradition to which the various communities could relate in their own ways. When we speak of a particular recension or iteration of this cultural institution, we write *Songs*—capital letter and italicised—as in *Máo Songs* or the bamboo slip *Songs* of Ānhuī University manuscripts. When we speak of an individual song within a recension or iteration, we write ‘songs’, that is, not capitalised or italicised. This follows Meyer and Schwartz (2022), on which this article draws.

² Ānhuī dàxué hànzi fāzhǎn yǔ yìngyòng yánjiū zhōngxīn 安徽大學漢字發展與應用研究中心 (2019).

³ Texts of Songs that come from archaeologically excavated locations can thus be referred to by the formula ‘name of the place Songs’, as in the Wángjiāzuǐ 王家嘴 *Songs* and the Fùyáng 阜陽 *Songs* (from the tomb of Xiàhóu Zào 夏侯灶 at Shuānggǔduī 雙古堆). See Jiǎng Lǔjìng 蔣魯敬 and Xiǎo Yùjūn 肖玉軍 (2023); Hú Píngshēng 胡平生 and Hán Zìqiáng 韓自強 (1998).

⁴ Several projects which are currently ongoing deal with the issue of unprovenanced texts and their academic use. More recent works include exemplary studies by Foster et al. (2024); Meyer (2024).

Elsewhere we show that the ancient songs collected in the first two parts of the ‘Airs’—the ‘Zhōu Nán’ 周南 (Royal Zhōu) and the ‘Shào Nán’ 召南 (Royal Shào)—are phonetically stable between the *Classic of Songs* and the bamboo slip *Songs*. Semantically, however, there are substantial differences between the two that cannot be explained away as random phonetic or empty allographic variation (Meyer and Schwartz 2022). An important feature in the tradition of the *Songs* is the ‘suspended meaning’ of their lyrics. We elaborate on this feature in this paper.

During the Warring States period, the *Songs* were for the most part aurally fixed. But they were not fixed in writing and so they remained semantically open to different interpretations. This phenomenon reflects an inherent flexibility of early Chinese writing. By varying elements of the written graph, conceptual communities (Meyer 2021) with the expertise in the tradition had flexibility as to how to assign different semantic content within given phonetic parameters. The act of assigning meaning to a song within suspended but delimited possibilities entailed taking possession of the song, depending on the interpretive direction taken by the community. Such choices followed organic and internally coherent considerations. To show how such acts of systematic appropriation of a song might work, we propose a hypothetical emic reading of the manuscript text. The song we discuss as an exemplary case is ‘White Boat’ 白舟 in the bamboo slip *Songs* with reference to ‘Cypress-Wood Boat’ 柏舟 from the state of Yōng 鄘 in the received *Classic of Songs*.

The bamboo slip *Songs* and the Máo tradition of the *Songs*

The *Classic of Songs* is based on the Máo 毛 (a surname) tradition. The Máo tradition determines how we approach and read the *Classic of Songs* today. As recorded in the *Analects of Confucius* (*Lúnyǔ* 論語), by the time of Confucius (c. 551–479 BC) there was a tradition of ‘Three hundred songs’ (*Shī sān-bǎi* 詩三百).⁵ If we put trust in the eminent Scribe of the Western Hàn (202 BC–AD 8), Sīmǎ Qiān 司馬遷 (c. 145/135–86? BC), and his *Grand Scribe’s Records* (*Shǐjì* 史記), Confucius edited a collection of 300 songs from a pool of more than 3000.⁶ The Máo tradition comprises a recension and a commentary. The recension consists of 305 songs arranged in four sections: ‘Airs’; ‘Lesser Elegantiae’ (*Xiǎo yǎ* 小雅); ‘Greater Elegantiae’ (*Dà yǎ* 大雅); ‘Hymns’ (*Sòng* 頌). These sections are categorised based on style of composition and affiliations. This division was ostensibly in place during the sixth century BC, as suggested by an entry from the *Zuǒ zhuàn* 左傳 (*Mister Zuǒ’s Tradition*)—an ancient narrative commentary to the chronicle *Chūnqiū* 春秋 (*Spring and Autumn Annals*), in an entry

⁵ *Lúnyǔ*, Book 2 ‘Wéi zhèng’ 為政 (On Exercising Government) 2.2.

⁶ *Grand Scribe’s Records*, chapter 47 ‘Kǒngzǐ shì jiā’ 孔子世家 (Hereditary Houses of Confucius); Nienhauser (2010: 180).

corresponding to the twenty-ninth year of Lord Xiāng 襄公 (544 BC) (Chen Zhi 2007: 14).⁷ The Máo commentary (in *gùxùn zhuàn* 故訓傳) provides glosses and explanations, as well as a preface for each individual song.⁸

‘Máo’ refers to Máo Hēng 毛亨 and a younger Máo Cháng 毛萇, perhaps his nephew. They both lived during the Western Hàn period, but their exact years of birth and death are uncertain. The Máo recension was promoted as the authoritative edition by the regional King Xiàn of Héjiān 河間獻王 (Liú Dé 劉德, r. 155–130 BC). But it did not gain higher institutional recognition until quite late in the Western Hàn, sometime between 1 BC and AD 6, then ousting the other major traditions, Lǔ 魯, Qí 齊 and Hán 韓, none of which any longer exists as an integral text.⁹ The Máo tradition plausibly inherited the 305 songs, as well as traditions of reading strategies and interpretation, but we are just beginning to learn how the tradition, one of four major competitive traditions at the time, shaped the songs’ meanings and eventually won out to become the singular tradition at the time. Early medieval theory relates that the ‘elder’ Máo, Máo Hēng, learned the Songs tradition from the Confucian philosopher Xúnzǐ 荀子 (ca. 300–219 BC).¹⁰ Aside from this, we do not actually know much about the origins of the tradition that eventually became dominant.

The manuscript carries fifty-seven songs from six states. Just like the Máo recension, the ‘Airs’ of the bamboo slip Songs begin with the Royal Zhōu and the Royal Shào, which serve as the gateway into the Songs tradition and more generally into poetic traditions of China.¹¹ The remaining thirty-two songs in the manuscript comprising songs of the non-royal, peripheral states, can all be firmly identified with counterparts in the Máo recension as well—although there are notable differences in the states’ names and songs’ affiliations, the sequence of songs and lyrics (additional lines, line variation etc).¹² The exclusion of any songs from the other three sections—the ‘Lesser Elegantiae’; the ‘Greater Elegantiae’; the

⁷ We are fully aware that the date of the *Zuǒ zhuàn* is likely to be centuries later, yet we have chosen to take the retrospective account of Jì Zhá’s 季札 visit to the state of Lǔ and his experience with ‘Zhōu music’ as grounded in historical fact; see Durrant et al. (2016: 1243–44). The manuscript **Shī lùn* 詩論 (*Discussion of the Songs*) from the Shànghǎi Museum collection (*Shànghǎi Museum Manuscripts*, vol. 1) confirms, unsurprisingly, that the division was in use no later than the mid- to late fourth century BC.

⁸ Máo Hēng 毛亨 et al. (2017). The prefaces have been ascribed variously to Confucius, his disciple Zǐ Xià 子夏 (507–? BC), Máo, and Wèi Hóng 衛宏 (AD 25–57).

⁹ We refer to Western Hàn Shī traditions of Lǔ, Qí and Hán as ‘major’ and to other, less-known ones as ‘minor’, thus drawing into parallel Jao Tsung-i’s conceptualisation of the Yì 易 (Changes) as attempted in Jao Tsung-i 饒宗頤 (2009, vol 4: 17).

¹⁰ Karlgren (1931: 18–20) proposes that Máo Hēng was a ‘disciple’s disciple of Xúnzǐ’, and says his commentary was ‘coloured’ by Xúnzǐ’s thought. He understands the completion of the Máo commentary to have been ‘nearer to 150 BC than to 200 BC’.

¹¹ The Royal Zhōu (Zhōu Nán) and the Royal Shào (Shào Nán) formed a conceptual pair in antiquity. They contain twenty-five songs, including the formative ‘Guān jū’ 關雎 (Call of the Osprey), perhaps the single most important song of Chinese heritage.

¹² We are currently preparing a volume on the thirty-two songs of the four peripheral states of the ‘Airs’ in the bamboo slip Songs.

‘Hymns’—suggests that other manuscripts which exclusively contain songs from these sections were also in circulation at this time. The recent discovery of a more extensive compilation of the ‘Airs’ more closely resembling the *Máo* recension from a late Warring States tomb (Tomb 798) at Wángjiāzuǐ plainly shows that the bamboo slip *Songs* from the Ānhuī University collection is a selection. It remains undetermined whether this selection was made intentionally (Jiǎng Lǚjìng 2023) or influenced by other factors.¹³

How we read the bamboo slip *Songs*

The bamboo slip *Songs* belongs to a tradition of Songs that ostensibly can be traced to the Western Zhōu period (1045–771 BC). While the manuscript was almost certainly produced during the late fourth century BC in the southern state of Chǔ, we furthermore take a position that the text on the slips, too, was a contemporary product of a community with profound knowledge in the Songs. This is not to say that we question the pedigree of the Songs as a tradition. Rather, one of our emerging hermeneutical strategies acknowledges that attested written instantiations in dedicated compilations of Songs *are variance* (on this term in manuscript cultures, see Cerquiglini 1999). We developed this reading strategy comprehensively for the ancient Royal songs of the ‘Airs’ (Meyer and Schwartz 2022) and, within limits, it can be applied to songs of the peripheral states too.¹⁴ In this paper we focus on the opening song from the central state of Yōng.

Differences between the songs are not mere graphic variations of a ‘more authentic’ (*sic*) version; rather we take them as specific actualisations of an aural template that enabled flexibility and generality. Meaning, suspended in spaces of aural plausibility, was activated, and thus actualised, according to different hermeneutical traditions by dynamic reader-writers (more on this concept later) with a deep knowledge and stake in the tradition. We therefore assert that during the Warring States period, the purpose of writing the Songs was for interpretation with a more public outlook. This includes providing semantic fixity

¹³ The text, unearthed in 2021 from Tomb 798 at Wángjiāzuǐ, consists of dedicated ‘Airs’ written over approximately three hundred bamboo slips. The collection does not include a title, such as ‘Airs’ or ‘Songs’, nor does it include paratext, such as section headings and song totals as do the bamboo slip *Songs* of the Ānhuī University collection, but unlike in the bamboo slip *Songs* it includes names for each individual song and paratext indicating stanzas and totals of stanzas per song, and sentences per stanza. The text also contains songs not included in the *Máo* recension, and thus not included in the bamboo slip *Songs* of the Ānhuī University collection. Wángjiāzuǐ is located in the Jīnān Town area of Jīngzhōu District, Jīngzhōu City, Húběi Province.

In addition, preliminary reports state that from July 2014 to January 2015 archaeologists excavated sites at Xiàjiātái 夏家台 and Liújiātái 劉家台, Húběi province. Tomb 106 at Xiàjiātái, which dates to the Warring States period, is reported to have included a manuscript comprised solely of songs from the state of Bèi (‘Bèi fēng’ 邶風); see Húběi *ribào* (2016). While the manuscript has yet to be published, we have no reason to question the accuracy of the report. This confirms that dedicated compilations of songs of individual states were in written circulation at this time.

¹⁴ Within limits, because the songs of the peripheral states are generally less settled when compared with the received *Máo* text.

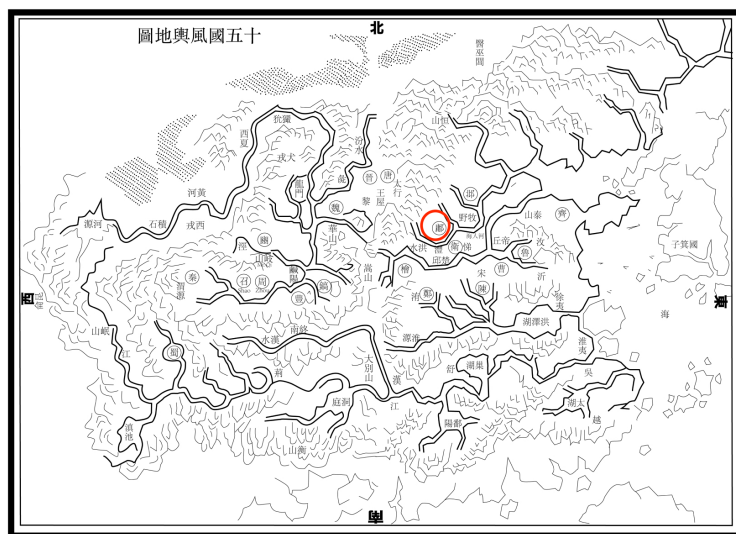


Fig. 1: Map of the states of the *Classic of Songs*, with Yōng marked in red. Adapted from Fāng Yùrùn 方玉潤 (2017: 10–11).

to the already fixed aural forms as was seen fit by the conceptual communities in question. We show how this works by reading the song ‘White Boat’ in the bamboo slip *Songs* side by side with the received *Máo* recension (i.e. ‘Cypress-Wood Boat’), resisting the common temptation of forcing them to match. By doing so, we consider how different communities, including the one around the ultimately victorious *Máo* tradition, fashioned the song.

Let us be clear about one point from the onset to avoid possible misunderstandings as we move forward. We are not taking a stance about the orality of the *Songs* one way or another. We believe the discussion is futile because the primary circulation of *Songs*—oral or written—cannot be shown either way.¹⁵ The truth probably lies on a scale somewhere in the middle between the two extremes. Our position is that during the Warring States period the *Songs* had long been aurally fixed, and they were defined by specific phonetic textures and sound moulds. But this stability did not extend to semantic precision beyond a particular version of the *Songs* as claimed by a conceptual community. Yet unmistakable and wide-

¹⁵ The articles by Smith and Poli (2021) and Jiǎng Wén (2021) are revealing in this regard. Citing the same philological evidence, Poli and Smith conclude the manuscript text shows the oral nature of the *Songs*, while Jiǎng asserts the opposite.

spread semblance between the texts of the different traditions—if we only compare the tradition represented by the bamboo slip *Songs* to the *Máo* recension of the *Classic of Songs*, and further to the fragmented texts of the other three major Hàn traditions—suggests that Warring States communities were working from earlier, or more generic, templates, whatever shape or form they might have taken. It is from this idea that we have formulated a concept where listening/reading, suspended meaning, delimited interpretive possibility, semantic creativity and eventual scribal commitment interlock as a process.

The disparities between songs of the manuscript text and the *Máo* recension of the *Classic of Songs* follow an internally consistent logic. On display for a perceptive reader keyed into the tradition is a show of choices to be made in an organic and internally coherent way.¹⁶ Emphasising reader-response theory, which finds meaning arising from the interaction between text and reader rather than being solely embedded in the text,¹⁷ we must recognise the manuscript text as an independent iteration of the *Songs* that was actualised by a writer who was also a reader.¹⁸ Consequently, we should avoid interpreting it exclusively through the lens of the *Máo* recension and the established classic. (But of course, to understand what is going on in the manuscript text we must consider what the *Songs* of the *Máo* recension do, and how the *Máo* exegetical tradition explains them.) The goal of taking the bamboo slip *Songs* on their own terms—yet within an earlier *Songs* tradition more widely—is to establish a hypothetical emic perspective of reading *Songs* in their various iterations. By doing so we seek to cast light on how those who wrote out this selection of *Songs* committed to and followed consistent strategies in assigning meaning to them as integral units (referring both to the individual song and to the arrangement of songs in sequence).

Bakhtin reminds us that behind the iteration and interaction of texts is always ‘a contact of personalities and not of things’ (Bakhtin 1986: 162). Texts are the secondary products of the multi-faceted social realities of meaning-construction. The primary actors are people—individual or groups—participating in a discourse (Meyer 2021: 113). As there are always groups and individuals behind the iteration of a text, we ought to take their use of it seriously, especially when it reflects structural and internally coherent choices. In the specific case of the bamboo slip *Songs*, we prefer not to force a previously unknown iteration through the dominant sub-tradition, just because we may be cautious of going against prevailing norms that have come to accept a particular sub-tradition as normative. In attempting an emic reading of the songs (Meyer and Schwartz 2022), we thus set out to approach

¹⁶ We are reminded of Eagleton (1996: 45–46) who says: ‘Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: there are processes of signification materialised only in the process of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author’. In Meyer and Schwartz (2022: 31–32, 55) we have shown how this can be applied to the *Máo* reading of the first and most important song in the *Classic of Songs*, ‘Guān jū’ (‘Call of the Osprey’).

¹⁷ Wolfgang Iser (1976) and (1989) remains the classic.

¹⁸ That during the Warring States period readers and writers (the latter is not necessarily the author) are essentially one group is an established fact. In this regard, the works of Krijgsman (2018) and Xiao (2023) are exemplary.

the text on its own terms and, on this basis, reconstruct what its textual community may have made of it. Stressing that it reflects people and their concerns ‘and not things’, we are establishing a hypothetical reading of this iteration of the Songs as circulating among certain conceptual communities during the Warring States period—conceptual because they must remain our theoretical projections (Meyer 2021).

The meaning of a sound mould

Before carrying out the applied reading of ‘White Boat’: ‘Cypress-Wood Boat’, we should clarify the notion of a sound mould. Sound moulds carry a song’s words, and thus they define the individual songs phonetically. However, they do not determine the precise semantics of the song in question but only offer a range of options for its reading. This constitutes a song’s suspended meaning. A song’s suspended meaning is the gap between the delivery of a song and its aural reception, or the display of a song and its visual reception.¹⁹ As our term ‘mould’ suggests, during the Warring States period, the sound moulds served as containers that could be filled, within prescriptive limits, with semantically malleable content.²⁰ Different text communities would assign an interpretive direction for the suspended meaning of a song and commit it to writing as they saw fit. As a result, they shaped, and so took possession of, the song. Hence, the differences between the bamboo slip *Songs* and the *Máo* recension’s *Classic of Songs* show that variance between the versions is far from meaningless, let alone random.²¹ Warring States period communities with a profound knowledge of the tradition assigned meaning to the Songs through the written word. While this required creativity, it was an organic and internally sound process—or, from our perspective,

¹⁹ Compare this to Wolfgang Iser’s *Leerstelle*: ‘immer dort, wo Textsegmente unvermittelt aneinanderstoßen, sitzen Leerstellen, die die erwartbare Geordnetheit des Textes unterbrechen’ (Iser 1976: 302). Iser developed his notion of the ‘gap’ in literary reception aesthetics (1972) from the philosopher Roman Ingarden (1893–1970) and his work on the phenomenological take on ontology and aesthetics.

²⁰ It is at this stage not possible to lay out precisely how closely a match was required phonetically for the different communities across the Warring States to consider a chosen word as apt for the sound mould. However, a close reading of the songs of the Royal Zhōu and the Royal Shào in the bamboo slip *Songs* vis-à-vis the texts of the Hàn traditions, for which *Máo* is dominant, indicates adherence, at the word level, to a pre-existing rule about the agreement of the vowel sound(s) at a minimum. We found the best system to use is to reconstruct OCM after Axel Schuessler (2007, 2009).

²¹ Huáng Dékuān (2018) and Shaughnessy (2021) have already commented on linguistically different word choices in the bamboo slip *Songs* vis-à-vis the *Máo* recension where the phonetic value of the word remains intact while rendering a different meaning, and so we will not repeat their findings here. For the sake of the reader, however, we shall provide a common example adduced by them, which is found in bamboo slip *Songs* Shào Nán 14: *Máo* 25 ‘Zōu yú’ 騶虞. The meaning of the title, by way of its repeated appearance in the song’s lyrics, is notoriously difficult to interpret. The bamboo slip *Songs* writes *cóng hū* 從虞 *dzong-*hā ‘after them’ or *zòng hū* 縱虞 ‘release them’, said of animals hunted, where *Máo* has *zōu yú* 騶虞 (*tsro-*ŋwā), explained variously as a kind of righteous animal, or as officers, ‘groomsmen and gamesmen’. Although the difference between the two versions is phonetically stable, mainly in the articulation of the words’ vowels, we agree with Huáng Dékuān who insists that this does not necessarily present an innocent phonetic loan—the words may just as well show two different readings of the song.

a systematic one. This means that the specific choices regarding how certain words or compounds were understood by the reader-writer profoundly directed the overall conceptualisation of the song.

‘White Boat’ versus ‘Cypress-Wood Boat’

Let us now demonstrate how this plays out in practice. The two versions of the song under discussion are the first song of the state of Yōng (Yōng 1) found in the bamboo slip *Songs*, and the corresponding song in the *Máo* recension (*Máo* 45 in a continuous count). There is in our reading meaningful variance between the two iterations that stretches consistently over entire lines so they alter, dramatically, their overall make-up *in a meaningful way*, while keeping intact the phonetic integrity of the sound moulds.

In what follows, we offer a transcription and translation of the manuscript iteration of the song alongside the parallel version of the *Máo* recension. For the latter, we reproduce Legge’s translation of the song, slightly modified.

Yōng 甬 (鄆) song 1

泛皮白舟
才皮申河。
淋皮兩駟
是佳我義
死矢棘它
母可天氏
不京人氏

泛皮白舟
才皮河昊。
淋皮₈₄|| 兩駟
是佳我惠。
死矢棘弋
母可天氏
不京人氏■

Máo 45 ‘Bǎi zhōu’ 柏舟 (Cypress-Wood Boat)

汎彼柏舟，
在彼中河。
髡彼兩髦，
實維我儀。
之死矢靡它，
母也天只，
不諒人只！

汎彼柏舟，
在彼河側。
髡彼兩髦，
實維我特。
之死矢靡慝，
母也天只，
不諒人只！

Yōng 甬 (邛) song 1:

Drifting is that white boat,
in that midst of the river.
Submerging are those two wild ducks,

it is in this we find integrity.
Until death [I] swear there will be no other.

Mother! Oh heaven!
Why don't you trust a person!

'Cypress-Wood Boat' 柏舟 (Máo 45), translated by James Legge (1961: 73), amended:

It floats about, that boat of cypress wood,
There in the middle of the He.
With his two tufts of hair falling over his forehead,
He was my mate;
And I swear that until death I will have no other.
O mother, O Heaven,
Why will you not understand me?

Drifting is that white boat,
in that side of the river.
Submerging are those two wild ducks,

it is in this we find inner strength.
Until death [I] swear there will be no change.
Mother! Oh heaven!
Why don't you trust a person!

It floats about, that boat of cypress wood,
There by the side of the He.
With his two tufts of hair falling over his forehead,
He was my only one;
And I swear that until death I will not do the wrong thing.
O mother, O Heaven,
Why will you not understand me?

The song's title and how the Máo tradition establishes a reading

Yōng 1 is one of two instances in the manuscript text where a discrete name is provided for a song, albeit listed after the last song at the end of the subsection. Internal evidence thus suggests its title as 'Bái zhōu' 白舟, which literally reads 'white boat'.²² In the Máo recension and, as far we know, in the texts of the other major Western Hàn traditions, the corresponding song was titled 'Bǎi zhōu' 柏舟 'Cypress-Wood Boat'. It seems a simple enough philological exercise to render the graphs 白 (of the ms) and 柏 (of Máo) equal as though they wrote the same word, whether it be 'white' or 'cypress' because of their shared phonetics (白 *brāk in both *bái* 白 and *bǎi* 柏). The graph 柏 is just adding a 'tree' signifier (木) to

²² The title thus overlaps with the first song in the 'Airs of Bèi' 邶風, of the received *Classic of Songs* (Máo 26). The songs of that state, however, are not included in the bamboo slip *Songs*. In another manuscript text from that period, namely the **Shi lùn* 詩論 (Discussion of the Songs; *Shànghǎi Museum Manuscripts* 1), the writer includes the state name before the song's title, also written 'White Boat', to distinguish between the two (slip 26). Kern (2015) offers a compelling reading of the text.

the phonophore *bái* 白 ‘white’ which, phonetically speaking, may just be ignored in the reconstruction of the song. But both 白 and 柏 occur in scripts as early as Shāng (c. 1600–1045 BC) oracle bones (for instance *Jiǎgǔwén héjí* 33380; Guō Mòruò 郭沫若 1979–1982) to Warring States Chǔ script (for instance *Tsinghua University Warring States Manuscripts* 1, *Chéng wù* 程寤, slip 1), and so we cannot make the argument that 柏 might have been unavailable for use at the time the Warring States manuscript text was written out. Hence for now, as a thought experiment, we take *bái* 白 ‘white’ for the word it represents. Note, however, that we do not insist on ‘white boat’ as a definite reading. As part of our reading strategy, we suggest that ‘white’, as a symbol of death, might be a compelling option, given how the boat operates as an evocative narrative image,²³ and might even carry the narrative subject of the song.²⁴ It corresponds with the phrase ‘until death’, which gets repeated in line 5 of each stanza, and it is also in line with the consistent use of the graph as ‘white’ in the manuscript text. The words of the two songs—‘white boat’ and ‘cypress-wood boat’—work seamlessly as images, organically crafting meaning in addition to providing contextual clues in their respective version of the song. As such, they are vital for the songs’ image programme.²⁵

In the Máo exegetical tradition, the subject of the song is a certain Gòng Jiāng 共姜, and the object of her love is Gòng Bó 共伯 (d. 813 BC; r. 814–813), the heir to Xī, Lord of Wèi 衛侯/釐侯 (r. 856–815 BC) (according to *Grand Scribe’s Records*), who died as a young man. The Máo Preface explains the song as that of a widow who is determined in her decision not to remarry, despite her parents’ wishes. The song thus extols Gòng Jiāng’s sense of *integrity* by ‘doing what is right’ (yì 義) in virtuously upholding a wife’s *inner strength* (dé 德). *Integrity* and *inner strength* in this sequential combination are the song’s key terms. They produce the code, so to speak, that determines how the reader-writer understands and then actualises the song’s lyrics in writing.

The *Grand Scribe’s Records* explains that Gòng Bó committed suicide, under duress, at his father’s grave (Wáng Xiānqiān 2020: 3.216). The dating of the song in the Máo tradition to the ninth century and its association with these people has been repeatedly called into question in the scholarship about the *Classic of Songs*, particularly in Qīng (1636–1912) scholarship and thereafter.²⁶ We shall not engage with that reading more fully, as our reading strategy is primarily guided by the text as it is written on the manuscript. Since there is

²³ See also Wáng Xiānqiān (2020: 3.217) for a similar observation.

²⁴ Cf. ‘Shào Nán’ 12 (Máo 23): 野有死麕，白茅包之 ‘In the wild there is a dead hornless deer, white cogon grass wrapping it’. Zhèng Zhòng’s 鄭眾 (d. AD 83) commentary on a passage in *Zhōu lǐ* (Zhōu Rites) about cloud divination says, ‘white [clouds] constitute [a sign of] loss’ 白為喪; *Zhōu lǐ zhù shū* 周禮注疏 (Zhōu Rites Commentary and Sub-Commentary) 26.707.

²⁵ As precise semantic content gives rise to distinctive imagery, we refer to the intersection of images in a song’s lyrics, more comprehensively, as its ‘image programme’. We use ‘programme’ because of its association with a systematic application and system-based learning. A song’s images form a series of instructions which control the operation of the song’s meaning. Note that semantic content refers not only to the words signified by graphs but also, and sometimes crucially, the use of signifiers in the structure of the graphs signifying the words.

²⁶ See for instance Yáo Jìhéng 姚際恆 (1647–1715?) (1961: 4.70).

no reference to a boy, there is no need to force a connection with a young Lord of Wèi who died. More interesting for our purposes is to consider phonetic borrowing in early Chinese script and the associations between a song's lyrics and paronomasia as triggers developing hermeneutical approaches to the Songs (Meyer and Schwartz 2022, 'Zhōu Nán' 1, commentary). Phonetic associations between *bǎi* 柏 and *bái* 白 with *bó* 伯 (eldest son), and between *zhōu* 舟 (boat) with *fù* 婦 (wife), detail a reading of the Máo exegetical tradition.

In Warring States writing, the graph 白 was still consistently used to write the word *bó* (eldest son). For instance, in the fourth century BC manuscript text *Xì nián* 繫年 (*Annals*) from the Tsinghua University manuscripts, it is used in that sense. Wordplay has its limitations, however, in that seven lords of Wèi had *Bó* 'eldest' in their names. Of the forty-six lords of the state of Wèi, Gòng Bó, the tenth lord of Wèi, was the last of the seven to have *Bó* in his name. Significantly, he is the archetype of one who died a tragic death, by suicide at his father's grave, while still a young man. The Confucian philosopher Zhèng Xuán 鄭玄 (AD 127–200) from the Eastern Hàn period (AD 25–220) says in his commentary to the first couplet of 'Cypress-Wood Boat', 'drifting is that cypress-wood boat, in that midst of the River': 'A **boat** (*tśu) in that midst of the River is just like a **wife** (*bu) in her husband's home'.²⁷ *Zhōu* *tśu 舟 (boat) rhymes near-perfectly in Late-Hàn Chinese with *zhōu* *tśu 帚 (broom), the phonetic component spelling *fù* *bu 婦 (wife). Thus, *bó zhōu*, expanding upon the analogies in operation in the reading of the Máo recension, could have evoked, to the Songs communities at the time of the Hàn dynasty, a double meaning for 'the eldest son's wife', viz Wèi Gòng Bó's wife Gòng Jiāng. This reflects a hermeneutical system that correlated Songs to ancient historical events, and, in the case of the song of Yōng, ancient historical events of Wèi. In other words, reading the song through the Máo tradition *sees* (as in 白: 柏 'white: cypress') and *hears* (as in *zhōu* *tśu) the phrase 'eldest son's wife' in the words 'cypress-wood boat'. This gives us 'drifting is that eldest son's wife, in that midst of the River' for Máo. A wife's place is her husband's home, just as a boat's place is in water, according to Zhèng Xuán's elaboration.

To conclude, we can see how at least in the case of the Máo tradition, dynamic reader-writers leveraged primary images from within a song's lyrics to craft an anecdote relating to a regional history starring known personalities.²⁸ Complementary anecdotes and personalities among the songs arranged in a particular sequence per state carried with them different moral implications. In what remains, we shall demonstrate how similar strategies are at work for the song of Warring States manuscript text, where certain key words determine how the reader-writer conceptualises the song overall.

²⁷ 舟在河中，猶婦人之在夫家；Máo Hēng 毛亨 et al. (2017: 3.81).

²⁸ Wáng Xiānqiān (2020: 3.216–27) surmises that the Qí tradition understood the song as having a different historical context. All the major traditions, however, appear to have understood it as representing a widow's song.

Writing out ‘White Boat’

Aside from the thick, black symbol used after the song’s last word marking its end, which occurs regularly throughout the manuscript, the remainder of the text has only three punctuation marks. (We have marked them in red.) A mark occurs after the word ‘river’ ending line 2 in the first stanza; in the second stanza, a mark occurs again at the same point, that is after the word ‘side’ to conclude line 2, and then lastly after the word ‘inner strength’ at the end of line 4. What is noticeable about these targeted marks is that they lead to (stanza 1) and bracket (stanza 2) the major variation (*viz* suspended meaning) in line 3, when comparing the two versions.²⁹ At a minimum, the marks help to separate the song into two complementary stanzas.

The implications of such suspended meaning at the sentence level were pivotal in how reader-writers engaged with the text. It allowed them to create new adaptations of meaning within a prescriptive, aurally fixed tradition. How the communities understood line 3 thus crucially affected how they, in turn, understood the end of the complementary line 4.³⁰ The suspended meaning of line 3 and its direct effect on the word chosen to end line 4 propelled readers and writers to *react*, and subsequently commit to, an organic understanding of the song where other interpretations within a zone of aurally-fixed possibilities were available.

The interpretive challenge of line 3 resides with the first and last words of the tetrasyllabic sentence. Yet, it is remarkable how the second word of the sentence, *bǐ* *pai? (that), is repeated in the same syntactical position throughout the first three lines of each stanza. Not only does the articulation of the word resonate with *bái* *brāk (white), but more importantly the repeating ‘that...that...that (> those)’ leads the song’s reader-writer to the ‘this’ (*shì* 是) opening in line 4, thus drawing in a more demonstrative focus on the collective pronoun ‘we’ (*wǒ* 我). Line 5 plays a crucial role in each stanza, functioning as a bridge. It connects with the previous line through a sudden end-rhyme, while transitioning to the emotive climax.

Yōng 1 is composed in two stanzas, defined by highly repetitive elements. Each stanza is in seven lines, each line in four words. But while the third line of each stanza of the manuscript text is written *zhàn bǐ liǎng wù* (*drəm/təm *pai? *raŋ? *mu) 淋 (湛) 皮 (彼) 兩 駢 (鷺) ‘submerging are those two wild ducks’, the corresponding line in the *Máo* recension

²⁹ Richter (2023) attempts a comprehensive account of literature on punctuation in early Chinese manuscript texts. However, his study focuses on the semantic dimensions of punctuation, not the semiotic aspects which we highlight here. A comprehensive study of the semiotic features of punctuation in manuscript texts across the linguistic divides is now needed. Codicological features of punctuation are well discussed in Krijgsman (2018) and Xiao (2023). For early Chinese manuscript cultures, the most comprehensive study we find is Chéng Péngwàn 程鵬萬 (2017).

³⁰ And perhaps even the last word of line 5 in the second stanza of the *Máo* recension which literally reads ‘wrong’ (*tè* 慙). The ‘choice’ of the word ‘wrong’ breaks from the parallel ‘other’ (*tā* 它) in the first stanza.

is *dàn bǐ liǎng máo* (*dəm *pai? *raŋ? *mu) 髭彼兩髦 ‘falling are those two tufts of hair’ (said of a young man). This shows a drastic difference in the selection of the written words, while simultaneously adhering to an integral sentence comprised of stable sound moulds. But this semantic difference is not an outlier. The written interpretation of this line is the necessary element of assigning meaning to an aurally fixed song by filling the sound moulds accordingly. Trying to equate the two sentences—and thus the two versions of the song—because of their shared phonetic value, as do the editors of the Ānhuī University manuscript, is, to us, unwarranted and methodologically problematic.³¹ It would negate the ingenuity of the Songs traditions that produced them. It would not just mean we failed *in our reading* to understand how different communities during the Warring States afforded meaning to the Songs. It would moreover mean, that we, out of step, missed the opportunity to understand what may have been the underlying principles guiding how the *Classic of Songs* was written out.

The written display of the song

There is a discrepancy between the tight phonetic texture of the song and its application on one and a half bamboo slips. ‘White boat’ is written from the top of slip 84 to the middle of 85. (We have marked this in the transcription as: ₈₄||.) Based on repetition, but also hinted at by punctuation, the song, as mentioned, contains two stanzas, seven lines each. Lines 1, 3, 6 and 7 are each exact repetitions in the stanzas. Variation in the song only occurs in the final words of the even-numbered lines, and in line 5, with each stanza set to a different rhyme. In line 2 of each stanza the variation is *zhōng hé* *rôn-*gâi 中 (中) 河 (in that midst of the river) becoming *hé cè* *gâi-*tsrək 河側 (側) (in that side of the river); and in line 4 of each stanza it is *yì* *ŋai 義 (integrity) becoming *dé* *tâk 惠 (德) (inner strength). The corresponding words ending line 5 in each stanza—first *tā* *m-lai 它 (other) and then *yì* (tè) *lhâk 弋 (忒) (change)—suddenly and forcefully bring the even-numbered, sentence-ending rhymed lines to a halt. Marking the song’s climactic vow in each stanza, as in the manuscripts: ‘[u]ntil death I swear there will be no other’ (one); ‘[u]ntil death I swear there will be no change’ (two), the sentences in this position function as what in argument-based texts of the time would have been a ‘principal insertion’ (Meyer 2012: 99), carrying the philosophically most significant interventions of a text. That the Máo version at this point in the stanzas has a standout five-word sentence points that way too.

The choice of graphs suggests a different reading of the song compared to the Máo version,³² complementing this idea. It shows that the song’s interpretation worked through

³¹ In Chinese-language scholarship, only Cáo Jīnyán 曹錦炎 (2021) and Shī Wòcí 施沃慈 (A. C. Schwartz) (2023), drawing on Meyer and Schwartz (2022), have argued for reading the song as it is written and not trying to equate it with the Máo recension.

³² As does what we have termed ‘targeted punctuation’.

the written, and materially visible, graphs of the song. This marks the nature of the manuscript: songs to be read. To a modern eye, the poor display function of ‘White Boat’ on one and a half slips, organised just by simple punctuation marks and not aided by spatial cues, and with no regard to the phonetic and semantic organisation of the song, further supports this assumption. It supports our hypothesis that the copy at hand was the copy of—and for—an individual to use. And this must have been for reading the song—or else the consistent choice of graphs which claim the song semantically in an internally sound manner is hard to explain. With ‘White Boat’, a song that was clearly read rather than just heard, we see that during the Warring States period, the tradition of Songs has become literature, even philosophy.³³

Language, image and meaning

With two stanzas of seven lines each, fourteen lines altogether, the structure of the song is consistent with *Máo*. We can parse the end of each stanza, that is lines 6 and 7, considering the repeating sentence-ending particles *shì* *ge? 氏: *zhī* *te? 只 in the manuscript text in comparison with the text of the *Máo* recension. Methodologically, as these words with a grammatical function are produced consistently, there is no reason to convert them into the graphs voicing similar but distinct sounds in the *Máo* version (Smith and Poli 2021; Shī Wòcí 2023). As the last two lines of each stanza end with a repeating particle, the dominant rhyme changes to the third word, with *tiān* *thîn 天 (heaven) becoming *rén* *nin 人 (person).

Variation in the song is, as noted, produced in the last words of lines 2, 4 and 5, which in each stanza are set to different rhymes (*-ai; *-ək). The overall sound of the song however is textured by its open vowels *-ai and the pharyngealized *-â-, which also serve as the dominant end-rhyme in lines 2, 4 and 5 of stanza one. Moreover, the *-ai sound of the keyword ‘integrity’ (yì *ɲai 義) in stanza one aligns with the sound texture of the song as an integral piece, amounting to, as we shall detail below, a ‘justified explanation’. In addition to the predictable end-rhymes in the odd- and even-numbered lines, the song through its interspersed words, specifically in positions two and three of each sentence, reveals a more complex phonetic texture that culminates in the final line of each stanza with the word ‘trust’, exemplifying a defence.³⁴ Just taking stanza one as an example, but aware that the

³³ For the latter, see Meyer (under review).

³⁴ The graph used in the manuscript text is 京, which literally writes the word *jīng* *kraŋ (high mound). Phonetically it is the same as *liàng* 諒 (trust) of *Máo*, giving > ‘trust a person’, signified by the addition of a speech classifier (言) to the sound element, 京. *Máo* glosses its meaning as *xìn* 信. There are other common variations to the graph. The Qīng 清 dynasty (1636–1912) commentator Wáng Xiānqiān lists *liáng* 涼 (chilly) and the graphically different *liàng* 亮 (bright). There is no reason not to read the graph 涼 as a phonetic loan writing the word ‘trust’, but the water classifier aligns with the dominant water images occurring at the beginning of the song. Hence, this activated ‘silent image’, which is seen but not heard, weaves into the song’s image programme in its written instantiation. As for the graphically-similar but distinct variant 亮, Wáng Xiānqiān cleverly reads it as serving a double function: while he proposes to read it, as per traditional reading practice, as a phonetic loan for ‘trust’, he seemingly cannot help but

sequence is repeated in the following stanza, we have marked in red all the words *in the inner positions* carrying this sound and put a square around the culminating word ‘trust’.³⁵ For demonstration, we render the manuscript text in a loose, modern transcription, and to the right of the transcription, we translate only the lyrics in red.

泛**彼**白舟， that
 在**彼**中河。 that
 湛**彼**兩鵞， that/those
 是維**我**義。 we
 死矢**靡**它， not have
 母**可**天氏， (particle, but literally) ‘can’
 不**諒**人氏！ trust

We may further choose to read just these ‘inner’ words as though they conveyed an embedded code expressing ‘internal’ feelings. By doing so we see that the repeated ‘that’, and the evocative natural imagery it points to, become ‘this’ (the opening word of line 4, *shì* 是), and thus ‘we’; the pair of wild ducks submerging into the depths of a river in unison become a metaphor for the love the narrator longs for but against the wishes of the mother ‘does not have’; yet, the narrator’s true heart, given her vow and willingness to die for it, ‘can or may be trusted’.

To summarise: The song on bamboo opens with the evocative image of a white boat adrift in the middle of the river. A pair of wild ducks then submerge in unison. The narrative voice relates this scene to their own experience, commenting in line 4 of stanza one that ‘it is in this we find integrity’, and countering this with ‘it is in this that we find inner strength’ at the same juncture of stanza two.

The song changes its tone, and mood, in lines 5 to 7 of the first stanza where the oath (‘I swear’) never to part from the silent other is uttered in despair (‘Oh heaven!’), as it goes against the mother’s will. The promise that their heart will remain true to this shall last until the speaker’s death.

Stanza two takes this even further. Repeating the essentials of stanza one, line 5 of stanza two hints at the inevitable, namely forced departure. A show of anxiety comes to the fore

see it also serving, as a specific actualisation, to ‘clarify’ (he uses the synonymous *míng* 明 as a gloss) the rationale behind the speaker’s vow (Wáng Xiānqiān 2020: 3.218). We might furthermore add that ‘bright’ corresponds, through association, with the word ‘heaven’ in the preceding line, as though revealing in code that Heaven by showing its light would provide assistance (another meaning of 亮) and thus signal approval. In either case, none of the variations is meaningless.

³⁵ While the culminating word *jīng* (*liàng*) *kraj (*raŋ) ‘trust’ does not rhyme in its coda with the *-ai/*aj words in the same ‘inner’ syntactical positions, and thus it does not rhyme in its coda with the particle *kě* *khâi? (corresponding to *yě* *lai? 也 in Máo) at the same position in the previous line, the initial consonants of the two words have alliteration, are both voiceless aspirated velars sharing the same place of articulation, and share the main vowel.

that again echoes the image of the submerging ducks disappearing, as their togetherness is not sanctioned by the family.

Assigning meaning in a sound way

The song of the *Máo* recension differs substantially from that of the bamboo slip *Songs*. *Máo* does not feature the naturally arising image of two wild ducks submerging together. Rather, it presents a young male with two tufts of hair falling to the sides of his forehead. A young lady is in love with a young man, confessing that ‘really he is my partner’, and ‘really he is my singular one’. Before the word *sǐ* 死 ‘death’, the *Máo* recension also has another verb *zhī* 之 added, thus reading ‘moving towards (> unto) death, I swear to be without any other’. This produces an unbalanced five-word line as opposed to the regulated four-word lines throughout the remainder of the song. The reason for doing so may have been to make explicit that *sǐ* 死 (usually ‘to die’; here ‘until death’) was adverbial. The line in the bamboo slip version, perfectly understandable as it is, reflects a more archaic usage of 死.³⁶ The speaker’s mother, it confirms, does not agree with her child’s choice of partner.

The song in the *Máo* recension presents the struggle and deep disagreement between mother and child over the latter’s love interest that is laid bare by the word ‘wrong’ (Legge’s ‘evil’) in the final stanza. Both songs are characterised by voices of anxiety and despair but differ in how this plays out.

As we mentioned, line 3 is the key to the different conceptualisations of the songs’ theme. It determines how the communities in question situated, and committed to, their reading of the song. The way central terms of the song are dealt with—here we focus on the words ending line 4 of each stanza: *yì* 義 ‘integrity’ (manuscript version) *versus* *yí* 儀 ‘mate’ (*Máo*); *dé* 德 ‘inner strength’ (manuscript version) *versus* *tè* 特 ‘only one’ (*Máo*)—is dependent on this. We understand the variance between the two versions like this: lines 4 in each stanza of the *Máo* recension required words delimited by aural possibility and semantic correspondence that agreed with the appearance of the young man, in the same way the reader-writer of the bamboo slip found corresponding words that metaphorically elaborated from the appearance of the two wild ducks in the middle of the river submerging in unison. Thus the sound mould **-êk*, filled with the word **têk* > *dé* ‘inner strength’ in the manuscript version, was filled with the word **têk* > *tè* ‘only one’ in *Máo*;³⁷ and the sound mould **-ai* was filled

³⁶ The adverbial usage of *sǐ* occurs frequently in Western Zhōu bronze inscriptions in the phrase *sí sí* 死司 ‘until death, supervise’, and in reference to a royal command to an officer; *Yin Zhōu jīnwén jíchéng yǐndé* 0602 (*Zhāng Yàchū* 張亞初 2001: 379). The *Máo* commentary (*Sòng běn Máo Shī gǔxùn zhuàn* ‘(Sòng Edition of *Máo Songs* With Explanations’) 3.83) defines *shǐ* 矢 as *shì* 誓 ‘swear, promise’; see also Ēryǎ, ‘Explaining Words’; Guō Pú 郭璞 and Xíng Bǐng 邢昺 (2000: 3.70). *Sǐ shǐ* 死矢 ‘Until death, [I] swear’ is similar in meaning to *yǒng shǐ* 永矢 ‘eternally [He] swears’ in the *Classic of Songs*, ‘Kǎo pán’ 考槃 (*Máo* 56).

³⁷ The Hán version of this song has *zhí* 直 ‘straight’, which is 惡 without the ‘heart’ signifier. It is glossed as *xiāng dāng zhí* 相當值 ‘equivalent’ (Wáng Xiānqiān 2020: 3.218). For another song in the received *Classic of Songs* that uses

with two words identical in sound, *ɣai, that share a common phonophore in the written script, 義 ‘integrity’. The graph selected by the writer of the *Máo* recension, yí 儀 ‘mate’, which had to correspond in meaning with tè 特 ‘(my) only one’ in the following stanza, required a commentarial gloss by *Máo* as it was afforded with the rare meaning of pǐ 匹 ‘pair; mate’.³⁸

By contrast, the words yì ‘integrity’ and dé ‘inner strength’ of the manuscript text are widely used pre-Classical terms, and their coupling is part of the very fabric of the topos of justified explanation in early Chinese literature.³⁹ We cannot help but associate the ‘pair’ of terms with the ‘pair of ducks’, and thus a human pair. In the bamboo slip *Songs*, the oath mentioned in the song is afforded with a force that is absent in the *Máo* tradition.

Lastly, in the *Máo* recension, the appearance of a young boy with hair to the eyebrow parted in the middle—also a clever image of ‘separation’—reveals that the song is sung in the narrative voice of a young lady. In the manuscript text, the non-appearance of a young boy and simultaneous appearance of two ducks opens the possibility that the song might be sung from either a female or a male perspective.

Conclusions and outlook

It is through a performative use of text that a particular interpretive reading of the *Songs* from a suspended but delimited range of possibles could be ascertained and committed to by different (regional?) Warring States communities. As *Songs* were committed to meaning in writing, the written word offered semantic precision within an aurally fixed tradition, thus enabling different sub-groups with sufficient knowledge in the tradition to make a song suit their choices. These semantic choices were likely different between the communities and their reading of the *Songs*. But in each case, these choices will have mirrored an internally coherent understanding, as held the group of reader-writers in question. Both *Máo* and the bamboo slip song support this hypothesis.

the word tè in speaking about relationships, as referring to a ‘singular one’, see ‘Wǒ xíng qí yě’ 我行其野 (‘I Walked This Wilderness’; *Máo* 188).

³⁸ Máo Hēng 毛亨 et al. (2017: 3.81). The *Máo* definition has had to be consistently reinforced by commentators in the *Máo* tradition thereafter. Wáng Xiānqiān (2020: 3.218), for instance, knowing yí does not usually have this meaning, first defines it by its more commonly used meaning ‘rules; imitate’, and then, with some hermeneutical gymnastics, agrees with *Máo*. The meaning of the word in this context is however clear when understood as a cognate of yí 宜 (suitable, proper). See Rèn Hé 任荷 and Jiǎng Wén 蒋文 (2022).

³⁹ See for instance *Shàngshū zhèngyì* (Correct Meaning of the Venerated Documents) ‘Lì zhèng’ 立政 (‘Establishing Government’), *Shàngshū zhèngyì* 尚書正義 (2000: 17: 560–561); the Warring States manuscript text *Zūn dé yì* 尊德義 (Revering Inner Strength and Integrity) from Guōdiàn; *Zuǒ zhuàn*, Lord Xī, Year 27: ‘The *Songs* and *Documents* are the treasuries of yì; rites and music are the principles of dé. Dé and yì are the roots of benefit’ 詩書，義之府也；禮樂，德之則也。德義，利之本也; Durrant et al. (2016: 402–3).

Phonetically, ‘White Boat’ of the bamboo slip *Songs* and its counterpart in the *Máo* recension, ‘Cypress-Wood Boat’ of the *Classic of Songs*, are entirely stable. The sound moulds into which the different graphs are placed are intact and the phonetic texture of the song remains consistent. But the way these sound moulds were filled by the different communities reflects an entirely different grasp of the song, one which in both cases follows wholly coherent considerations guided by internally sound choices to accentuate a song’s suspended meaning. Line 3 determines how each community conceptualises the song. In particular, the pairs yì 義 (integrity) in bamboo slip *Songs* versus yí 儀 (proper one = mate) in *Máo*; and dé 德 (inner strength) in bamboo slip *Songs* versus tè 特 (only one) in *Máo*, are dependent on this, with the different items of the pairs being fully consistent phonetically. This demonstrates that the appropriation of a song by a community followed a consistent logic. Variation between the two versions of the song is therefore not random, based on an instability of how a graph is composed. Quite the opposite: reflecting coherent choices, the instability of the writing system is precisely what leads to the stability of the interpretation of a song that comes without external commentaries. Phono-semantic signifiers can be added to a certain graph, just to introduce a further layer of signification to a song as the community behind the articulation of that song saw fit. Denying this and forcing the *Máo* recension on this iteration of the *Songs* would effectively mean to undo the manuscript’s significance.

The bamboo slip *Songs* enable us, for the first time—as a thought experiment—to carry out an emic reading of how a community worked to assign meaning to the *Songs* as literature. But our story does not end with this rediscovered manuscript text. Based on our approach and its findings, some of which we presented here, it is now possible to go back to the major Hàn dynasty traditions and take a fresh and honest look at them too. With *Máo*, we are keen to see whether we can detect similar principles behind the appropriation of the *Songs* by the communities that would come to define and ultimately control the appearance of the *Classic of Songs*.

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