

On the Classification and Influence of Allegorical Poems in the Book of Songs

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Abstract: The value of allegorical poetry in The Book of Songs has not been paid enough attention. On the basis of previous studies, this paper divides the development of allegorical poems in The Book of Songs into three stages: complex metaphors, fragmentary allegories and complete allegorical poems. Corresponding poems are sorted out. The characteristics of allegorical poems in The Book of Songs and their influence on Yuefu poems of Han Dynasty are also discussed .

1. Introduction

In his monograph *The History of Allegories in the Pre-Qin Period*, Bensong Bai believes that “there are three types of allegories in *The Book of Songs* in this period. The first type uses 'Bi (comparison)' or 'Xing (association)' in the poem. 'The wolf springs forward on his dewlap, or trips back on his tail.' (*Lang Ba: The Odes of Bin*) 'The nest is the magpie's; the dove dwells in it.' (*Que Chao: The Odes of Shao and the South*). Similar examples are common in the book. The second type compares the same thing in a poem, and the plot is scattered in various chapters and gradually unfolds with the development of the narrative of the poem. The third type is that the whole poem is a complete allegory.”[1] Bensong Bai's understanding of the “storytelling” of allegorical poetry is that, “there must be the plot, even the simple one”. It is a less strict requirement. In fact, the first and second types in his classification are only poems with certain allegorical attribute, rather than real allegorical poems. But this kind of classification method has certain rationality, which can help us understand the development of allegory poems in *The Book of Songs* more intuitively.

2. The Classification of Allegorical Poems

Therefore, based on my own understanding of allegorical poems, and combined with Bensong Bai's three categories of allegorical poems in *The Book of Songs*, the author divides the development of allegorical poetry in *The Book of Songs* into three stages: complex metaphors, fragmentary allegories and complete allegorical poems. Among them, poems of the first two stages are poems with certain allegorical attribute, rather than complete allegorical poems. They are in the transitional stage in the development of allegorical poetry. Only poems in the third stage can be regarded as real allegorical poetry.

2.1 The First Stage: Complex Metaphors with Allegorical Attribute

In *The Book of Songs*, allegorical poems at this stage are poems with simple plots and metaphors.[2] They are different from poems like *Shuo Ren: The Odes of Wei*, which contains simple metaphors. “Her fingers were like the blades of the young white-grass; her skin was like congealed ointment.” [3] These poems already contain simple plots and tell certain stories. They compare certain emotions or philosophies with some simple phenomena or events. For example, in *Jiu Mu: The Odes of Zhou and the South*, the whole poem describes the kudzu vine clinging to the wood, which is compare the attachment and assistance of the wife to her husband or ministers to the monarch. Each chapter of the poem is still divided into two parts, namely the signified and the signifier, with distinct levels. But it has a simple plot.

Bensong Bai called this kind of metaphorical form as “the advanced form of metaphor, that is, the complex form of metaphor. It contains a certain plot and reposes some truth, and is close to the later form of allegory literature. It is a transitional form from simple metaphor to allegorical

literature with figurative attribute... It is the true matrix from which the allegory is produced. In other words, the literary form of allegory is developed from complex metaphors.”[1]

2.2 The Second Stage: Fragmentary Allegories

In *The Book of Songs*, poems at this stage cannot be regarded as complete allegorical poetry in terms of the whole poem. However, some parts of these poems have gradually got rid of the complex figurative forms and began to use relatively complete stories to express certain feelings or explain the truth, which has met the requirements of allegory poetry. For example, in the first chapter of *Fa Mu: Minor Odes of The Kingdom*, the bird's calling to companionship is a metaphor of people's requirements of seeking and keeping close friends. In Chapter 9 and Chapter 10 of *Zheng Yue: Minor Odes of The Kingdom*, to drive the cart is the analogy of governing the country; only by appointing good ministers as assistants can the country get through the danger. Chapter 11 describes the scene that although fish are swimming in the marshes, they still can't be happy because they are still vulnerable to misfortune in clear water. It is a metaphor for the author's situation. In the sixth chapter of *Xinag Bo: Minor Odes of The Kingdom*, there is a fictitious plot to throw the slanderer to wolves and tigers. If the wolves and tigers refuse to eat them, they will be thrown into the barren land of the north. If the northern barren land refuses to accept them, they will be brought to the Great Heaven. It is a story with strange imagination. In the first three sentences of the seventh and eighth chapters and the ninth chapter of *Juan A: Major Odes of The Kingdom*, “the King of Zhou is compared to the phoenix. Birds are flying after the phoenix. The harmonious relationship among various birds and the phoenix means that the King of Zhou lived in harmony with his ministers.”[1] These chapters have relatively complete “stories” and can be regarded as fragmentary allegories.

2.3 The Third Stage: Complete Allegorical Poems

In *The Book of Songs*, allegorical poems of the third stage have got rid of the complex figurative form of the first stage and the fragmentary allegory form of the second stage. Through the fictional plot, these poems express some feelings, give opinions or expound the philosophy with a complete story, which fully meets the requirements of allegory poetry.

For example, in *Shuo Shu: The Odes Of Wei*, the exploiter is compared to a rat. The poet pleads with the rat at the beginning and then refuses at the end, which reflects that the exploited can't bear the cruel oppression and yearn for a better life. *Xi You Chang Chu: The Odes Of Kuai* describes the situation, “the government is harsh and the tax burden is heavy; people can't bear hardships.” The poem contrasts the miserable life of people in the dark society with the freely growing sheep and peach trees... There are three chapters in the poem. The first three sentences of each chapter describe the happy appearance of peach trees, and the last sentence expresses people's pain through the admiration of the peach tree.” [1] Today we cannot know whether the poem *Chi Xiao: The Odes Of Bin* was written by Duke Zhou. But the poem is the personification of objects; the fictional plot has deep meaning. In *Huang Niao: Minor Odes of The Kingdom*, the poet was exiled to another country. The grain and trees he planted were harmed by yellow birds. However, the poet does not try his best to drive them away. Instead, he implores birds to stop bullying him. Then the poet tells these yellow birds about his miserable experience. He is exiled to a foreign country, and he has no relatives here. The moral degeneration of the world is getting worse day by day; the people of this country are so heartless and show no sympathy and kindness to him at all. He cannot stay here anyone. He really wants to go back to his hometown and meet with his relatives as soon as possible. For *Zhong Si: The Odes of Zhou and the South*, “this is a poem to wish people have many children and grandchildren. The poet compares locusts with later generations to express his congratulations to those who have many descendants.”[4] But in Bensong Bai's *History of Allegories in the Pre-Qin Period*, “this is an allegorical poem written by working people to satirize the ruling class who reaps without sowing. The poem compares locusts with the ruling class. They never work; they fly around in groups, devouring the crops that peasants have worked hard to cultivate. No wonder they are fat and have so many descendants.” [1] Although this interpretation is somewhat far-fetched, it is unified in terms of satirizing other things through the insect. Although there are only four sentences

and 13 words in each chapter of the poem, it has a simple plot and a complete story. The story also carries implication, so it can also be regarded as an allegorical poem.

In fact, the development of allegorical poems in *The Book of Songs* may not have the clear stage level. The above division is just for the needs of research.

3. Characteristics of Allegorical Poems in the Book of Songs

Allegorical poems in *The Book of Songs* are still in the initial stage of allegory creation. As one of the sources of Chinese allegory literature, allegorical poems in *The Book of Songs* have their own characteristics.

First, from complex metaphors with the attribute of allegories, to fragmentary allegories, and then to the complete allegories, allegorical poems in *The Book of Songs* are constantly maturing. But from the overall point of view, the plot is still very simple. Most of them use the narration of a single role or a symbol of certain phenomena. There are no complicated story images or detailed description. The author simply describes a certain story or a certain phenomenon to express his feelings or opinions, and pay no attention to other literary factors. In fact, the situation does not only exist in allegories of *The Book of Songs*. All allegories in the pre-Qin period are very simple in plot, but in different degrees.

Secondly, the main characters of most poems are human beings; animals, plants or other natural phenomena are mostly used as the theme of the story, such as *Zhong Si: The Odes of Zhou and the South* and *He Ming: The Odes of Zhou and the South*. *Chi Xiao: The Odes Of Bin* is the only chapter with the animal as its main character. In poems like *Shuo Shu: The Odes Of Wei* and *Huang Niao: Minor Odes of The Kingdom*, people and animals appear at the same time, but animals do not have distinct images. At that time, allegories with historical stories as the theme are often seen in essays of various philosophers. But in *The Book of Songs*, there's only one poem with this theme, namely *Dang: Major Odes of The Kingdom*.

Third, "generally speaking, allegory is a kind of narrative style, which expresses the author's implied meaning through a story." [1] However, as a special kind of allegory, allegorical poems in *The Book of Songs* express strong emotions in stories with simple plots. The author praises sincerely, satirizes the society, or vent his sorrow. The poems have strong lyrical features. In the pre Qin period, most scholars expounded their own theories by allegories, while authors of *The Book of Songs* reposed their spiritual voice with allegories. It can be said that this is the most remarkable feature of allegorical poems in *The Book of Songs*; this lyricism is also a fine tradition of Chinese allegorical poetry.

4. The Inheritance of Allegorical Poems

Allegorical poems in *The Book of Songs* are unique among a large number of allegorical works in the pre-Qin period. Afterwards, allegorical poems disappeared until Yuefu poems of the Han Dynasty, which follow the creation methods of allegorical poetry in *The Book of Songs*. From *The Book of Songs* to the Yuefu poems of Han Dynasty, the creation of allegorical poetry has its own continuity.

First of all, *The Book of Songs* and allegorical poems in Yuefu of Han Dynasty were bred on the basis of folk literature. During this period, they may have been processed or modified. But the forms were flexible; the contents were vivid, and there were distinct features of folk songs.

Secondly, Yuefu poems "express emotions and are caused by events". [5] They repose strong emotions in narration. As a special form of Han Yuefu, allegorical poems also contain profound emotions. The poem *Wu Sheng* describes that the mother crow and her nestlings were shot and killed for no reason. Then the author thought about the suffering of white deer, yellow swans and carp. Although they live far away from the human environment, they still cannot escape the tragic fate of being cooked by people. It expresses the author's deep emotion about the difficult living situation and the changeable fate. This kind of expression is the same as the lyricism in *The Book of Songs*.

Thirdly, there are many allegorical poems about animals in Yuefu poetry of the Han Dynasty, such as *Zhi Zi Ban*, *Wu Sheng* and *Die Die Xing*. The authors narrate their own experiences with animals as main characters, so as to describe their tragic fates of being persecuted and ravaged. These poems should be influenced by *Chi Xiao: The Odes Of Bin* to a certain extent.

On the basis of inheriting some characteristics of allegorical poems in *The Book of Songs*, allegorical poems in Yuefu of Han Dynasty also developed greatly. First of all, the story becomes more interesting. The plot is obviously more complicated than that in *The Book of Songs*, and there are descriptions of actions, language and mentality. In addition, there are also allegorical poems with the form of dialogue in Yuefu poetry of the Han Dynasty. *Dong Jiao Yao* written by Zihou Song adopts the form of dialogue to unfold the story.

After allegorical poems in Yuefu poetry of Han Dynasty, the creation of allegory poems gradually turned from the folk to literati, and developed continuously along the tradition of allegorical poetry in *The Book of Songs*.

5. Conclusion

In *The Book of Songs*, allegorical poems can be divided into three stages: complex metaphors, fragmentary allegories and complete allegorical poems. The development trend shows that the literature creation was becoming mature in the pre-Qin period of China. Allegorical poems in *The Book of Songs* are simple in plot, but they have certain influence on the allegory literature of China, which can be found in Yuefu poems of Han Dynasty.

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