

## **The Shih Ching**

Document:

The *Shih Ching* (also known as the *Book of Songs*, *Classic of Poetry*, or *Book of Odes*) is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, dating from approximately the 11th to 7th centuries BCE. Traditionally attributed to Confucius, who is said to have selected and edited the poems, it is one of the “Five Classics” of ancient Chinese literature. The historical document contains 305 poems encompassing folk songs, hymns, and ceremonial songs from the Zhou Dynasty, offering rare insight into early Chinese society, politics, family, and ritual.

Written in early Classical Chinese, the *Shih Ching* was originally transmitted orally and later canonized during the Han Dynasty. Alongside the “Four Books,” the Five Classics were taught as part of state-sponsored education and civil service examinations. Confucius instructs readers in the *Analects* to read the *Odes* for inspiration and evaluation, demonstrating the nature of public life and service.

### **Bibliography / Primary Sources**

Documents:

Shih Ching (詩經) – Confucian Canon, compiled ca. 1000–600 BCE

Early bronze inscriptions and bamboo manuscripts

Han Dynasty editions and commentaries by Mao Heng and Mao Chang

Standard edition: Mao Commentary (*Mao Shi*)

### **Birth Date / Death Date (or Publication Date)**

Composed: ca. 1000–600 BCE (Western Zhou to early Spring and Autumn Period)

Compiled and edited: Attributed to Confucius, ca. 6th century BCE

Canonized: During the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) as one of the Five Classics

### **Notable / Best-Known For**

The earliest collection of Chinese poetry

One of the Five Confucian Classics

Contains 305 poems of various forms and functions

Captures ancient Chinese life: agriculture, ritual, war, and governance

A key source for studying early Chinese language, music, and social values  
Central to Confucian moral education and civil service exams for centuries

## **Famous Quotes (Expanded)**

“The virtuous man is careful of his speech.”

Emphasizes Confucian values of moderation and propriety.

“Heaven’s will is not easily known. The spirits do not make this clear.”

Gives insight into ancient Chinese religious beliefs.

“Heaven sees as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear.”

Reflects the divine understanding of rulers and the importance of popular will.

## **Major Works / Textual Contents (Expanded)**

The *Shih Ching* is divided into three main sections:

Feng (Airs of the States): 160 folk songs from 15 different regions, often about love, labor, and everyday life

Ya (Court Hymns): 105 poems used in royal court rituals, subdivided into Lesser Ya and Greater Ya

Song (Eulogies): 40 ceremonial hymns and religious praises used in ancestral worship and court ceremonies

Each poem is typically composed of four-line stanzas with four-character lines, emphasizing repetition, parallelism, and subtle metaphor.

## **Influences / Intellectual Context (Expanded)**

The *Shih Ching* was foundational in Chinese intellectual history:

Confucianism: Used by Confucius as a moral teaching tool, stressing harmony, respect, and hierarchy

Ritual and Governance: Poems used in rites and state ceremonies

Mandate of Heaven: Reflected the moral accountability of rulers

Influence on Chinese Literary Tradition: Inspired later poetic forms

Parallels:

Comparable to Homeric epics in oral transmission

Similar moral function to Biblical Psalms

Used like the Vedas in shaping religious and ethical consciousness

## Legacy and Modern Significance (Expanded)

Philosophy and Ethics: Central to Confucian ethics; studied for over two millennia in Chinese education

Linguistics and Poetics: A primary source for early Classical Chinese syntax and meter

Global Cultural Heritage: Influenced East Asian literary traditions (Korea, Japan, Vietnam)

Civil Service Exams: Core reading for over 1,000 years in imperial examinations

Contemporary Relevance: Studied for insights into ancient ecology, gender, and political legitimacy

## Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society (Expanded & Factual Entries Only)

2003: Included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register

2006–Present: Core curriculum in Chinese literature and philosophy programs worldwide

2010: Full digital edition launched by Academia Sinica and the Chinese Text Project

Ongoing: Referenced in debates about moral education, environmental poetry, and traditional values in modern China

## Suggested Reading & Resources (Expanded & Formatted)

### A. Secondary Literature (Scholarship):

Legge, James. *The Chinese Classics: The She King*. Oxford University Press, 1871.

Owen, Stephen. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*. W.W. Norton, 1996.

Van Zoeren, Steven. *Poetry and Personality in the Shih Ching*. SUNY Press, 1991.

Kern, Martin. "Ritual, Text, and the Formation of the Canon." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 2001.

### B. Archival or Online Sources:

Chinese Text Project: <https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry>

UNESCO Memory of the World Register: <https://en.unesco.org/programme/mow>

Academia Sinica Digital Resources: <http://www.sinica.edu.tw>

World Digital Library: <https://www.wdl.org>