

# *The Meaning of Zhousong: The Zhou's Propaganda and Tradition*

Yiwen Xing<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Renmin University of China, Beijing, 100872, China

a. Sysdrin7170@ruc.edu.cn

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** *Zhousong* (周頌, the Hymns of the Zhou) is an important part of Shijing, with 31 poems in the compilation, and these poems were played in the Zhou's ancestral temple for ritual purposes. The character "Song" (頌) has a structure that can be interpreted as a man praising with a gesture of respect, so it has acquired the meaning of countenance. That's why *Zhousong* means the countenance of the Zhou. The kings of the Zhou used *Zhousong* as propaganda that magnified the virtue of themselves, for they claimed to receive mandate from High Heaven because of their virtues. That propaganda not only played an important role in the Zhou's rule, but also gradually became a tradition in Chinese culture after the Zhou Dynasty with the transmission and re-interpretations of *Zhousong*. Thus, *Zhousong*, which can be regarded as a part of Cultural Memory of China, has left a profound impact on Chinese civilization. How people interpret *Zhousong* and the historical studies of *Zhousong* today is related to the understanding of Chinese civilization.


**Keywords:** *Zhousong*, Shijing, Chinese Traditional Culture, Cultural Memory.

## 1. Introduction

This article is to talk about *Zhousong* and its meaning, including the three following parts: first, this study uses an approach of paleography to analyze the character "Song" (頌) and clarify what it means, so that this study defines a hymn in *Zhousong* clearly; then it discusses the contents of the hymns in *Zhousong* in order to clarify the countenance of the Zhou shown in those hymns as propaganda; finally, *Zhousong* and the Zhou's propaganda in the hymns not only played an important role in the Zhou's rule, but also became a part of Chinese Cultural Memory, and this paper talks about how future generations of the Zhou Dynasty narrated *Zhousong* as a classic text and why it can become a part of Chinese Cultural Memory.

Through this article, people can gain more understanding of *Zhousong*, the important pre-imperial text of ancient China, from multiple perspectives, and that would give more inspiration on how to view the meaning of ancient Chinese texts, *Zhousong* included, in the history as well as at the present of China.

## 2. The Character “Song” (頌)

The Chinese character “Song” (頌) can be understood as “hymn.” It means praising, especially praising for ancestors or High Heaven in a rhymed form [1]. It was written as  in bronze inscriptions, made up of two components, “公” and “頁”. In bronze inscriptions, “公” was usually used as a simplified form of “谷”, which means the curvature of the upper palate in the mouth according to *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字), and “頁” is a pictograph of a man bowing his head to the ground [2]. Therefore, the character “Song” (頌) can be interpreted that a man bends his knees, bows his head and says something respectfully. That is why the character could refer to praising ancestors or High Heaven, as well as words for praising them.

Since “Song” (頌) referred to praising with a gesture of respect, it acquired the meaning of a man’s dignified and solemn appearance. So *Shuowen Jiezi* explained the character “Song” (頌) like this: “‘Song’ (頌) means countenance. It takes its meaning from 公 and its pronunciation from 頁.” (頌,兒也。从頁公聲。) [2] According to the Preface of the Mao Poetry (毛詩序), as one of the six principles of Shijing, “Song” (頌) is the countenance and appearance of praising for grand virtue with its success being told to the gods (頌者,美盛德之形容,以其成功告于神明者也) [3]. That part of meaning of “Song” (頌) was later taken over by the character “Rong” (容). Duan Yucai pointed out the difference in the use of characters “Song” (頌) and “Rong” (容) between ancient times and the times in which he lived in his annotations on *Shuowen Jiezi*. He pointed out that “頌兒” was used in ancient times and “容兒” was used in the time he lived, and the character “Rong” (容) had been loaned to express the meaning of countenance for long before the character “Song” (頌) lost that part of its meaning [4].

There were important interpretations of “Song” (頌) made based on the explanation in *Shuowen Jiezi*. Ruan Yuan (阮元), the prominent scholar of the Qing Dynasty, defined “Song” (頌) as countenance expressed in the dance [5], obviously based on the explanation for “Song” (頌) of countenance in *Shuowen Jiezi*.

The literal meaning of the character “Song” (頌) is about not only visual countenance and expression but also vocal praising and eulogizing. So it should be also interpreted in a way that balances both. According to C.H.Wang, who combined views of Ruan Yuan, Wang Guowei (王國維) and Fu Sinian (傅斯年), “Song” (頌), or what may be called the hymns, could be regarded as hymns and dances with a certain solemn music expressing some specific themes and purposes, which were performed at the ancestral temple [6]. These hymns are solemn and lofty, considering that the character “Song” (頌) shows a gesture of respect when praising the ancestors or High Heaven.

The idea that the hymns are not just rhymed poems, but are also accompanied by music and dance, is persuasive, considering that performances that involve music and dance are always more memorable and easier to transmit. Although these hymns only remain in written form today, it’s still possible to reintegrate the Zhou’s countenance based on the texts.

## 3. The Countenance of the Zhou

The *Zhousong* (the Hymns of the Zhou) part in *Shijing*, 31 hymns contained, is a compilation of “Song” (頌), or what may be called the hymns, for the Zhou’s ancestral temple. The hymns are part of sacrificial rituals and are expressive of the countenance of the Zhou, being intended to magnify the virtue of the kings of the Zhou.

In *Zhousong*, fourteen hymns are about eulogizing the earlier kings, King Wen and King Wu. King Wen and King Wu are the most important two earlier kings of the Zhou Dynasty. King Wen (“the king of civil virtue”) was honored for his magnanimity, while King Wu (“the king of martial power”) had a different virtue from his father. According to Wang Guowei, six hymns in *Zhousong* (No.271 昊天有成命, No.285 武, No.293 酌, No.294 桓, No.295 賚 and No.296 般) showed the ritualistic program of the Dawu (大武) dance, and each of them signified a stage in King Wu’s conquest of the Shang Dynasty [7]. These poems showed King Wu’s virtue of rage and war.

According to Poem 271 (昊天有成命), King Wen and King Wu both received mandates from High Heaven. It claimed that it was High Heaven who gave the kings of the Zhou to establish the monarchy and to govern, and the political legitimacy was not given unconditionally. The kings of the Zhou had to use their right to rule with caution, as the hymn emphasized, “without negligence.” Similar caution can also be found in *The Speech at Mu*, King Wu’s speech before the battle against the Shang. According to that speech, King Wu attached great importance to the discipline and order of his army. He tried to show that it was not his aim to get the right to rule; his aim was to re-establish the order with the right to rule. In his propaganda, that was why High Heaven chose the Zhou to govern and gave up the Shang whose rule brought chaos.

In Poem 285 (武), the success of the Zhou and the defeat of the Shang were recorded. Poem 293 (酌) pictured the triumph of the Zhou. However, neither of them depicted bloody killings, although killings were unavoidable in the war. As Poem 273 (時邁) said, when the war was over, the Zhou’s army wrapped the bows and cased the arrows. No conquest can be carried out without the martial aggression, but the Zhou tried to avoid proclaiming violence when expressing its political ideology. That means, since the rulers of the Zhou Dynasty claimed that they were who received mandate from High Heaven, they tried to prove political legitimacy by portraying themselves as moral rulers. King Wu’s virtue was different from King Wen’s, but the two kinds of virtues led to the same destination, which conformed to the mandate from Heaven as they claimed. Though King Wu’s virtue was about rage and war, it was never about violence and chaos.

Such political propaganda can be seen not only in the eulogies of the earlier kings, but also in hymns of other themes in *Zhousong*. For example, in Poem 278 (振鷺), the King of the Zhou welcomed the guests who had similar countenance to beautiful egrets. According to the *Preface of the Mao Poetry*, these guests were descendants of two royal families who came to assist the Zhou in performing the sacrificial rituals in the Zhou’s ancestral temple (二王之後來助祭也). The two royal families are the Xia and the Shang, and the Zhou embraced them, showing a countenance of lenience, rather than violent repression of the former rulers.

In Poem 288 (敬之), King Cheng of the Zhou warned himself to revere High Heaven and encouraged himself to learn about good virtues from the earlier kings. That means that, the propaganda that the Zhou’s rule were following mandate from High Heaven became a motivation of self-examination for the kings of the Zhou after King Wu. In the manuscript of *Zhougong zhi Qinwu* (周公之琴舞) found in the *Tsinghua Bamboo Strips* (清華簡), this poem (敬之) is ordered as the first of all poems, and that shows its importance [8]. The political legitimacy of the Zhou’s rule was claimed to come from High Heaven. So once the king was no longer moral, the legitimacy would be taken back. That forced the kings of the Zhou to use their power of rule with caution, so as to avoid the fate of King Zhou of the Shang.

#### 4. *Zhousong* as Cultural Memory

Martin Kern introduced the theory of Cultural Memory into the study of ancient Chinese literature in his *Culture Memory and the Epic in Early Chinese Literature: The Case of Qu Yuan (屈原) and the*

*Lisao* (離騷). According to this paper, Cultural Memory is about how people narrate their myths, reconstruct the past and establish identity with repeating texts and rites [9].

*Zhousong* showed propaganda about the Zhou's political legitimacy based on the kings' moral rule. The hymns were written by the rulers for political purposes, and showed the legend of the kings of the Zhou selectively. They were performed continuously in rituals at the Zhou's ancestral temple, and played an important role in the Zhou's continuing and solidifying governing. Therefore, *Zhousong* and its transmission can be considered a realization of Cultural Memory that narrates legends of the Zhou Dynasty and constructs an ideal ruling pattern that the ruler is virtuous and following the mandate from High Heaven. After the Zhou Dynasty collapsed, they still survived in textual form and became an important tradition in Chinese culture.

The manuscript of *Confucius' Discussion of the Poetry* (孔子詩論) in the *Shanghai Museum Bamboo Strips* (上博簡) contains a discussion of *Zhousong*. According to the manuscript, Confucius commented that the hymns were excellent poems eulogizing the virtue of making the world settled with peace and slow music, soft and long singing as well as profound and forethought lyrics, and a poem about succeeded career should be included in the hymns [10]. It was not important if that was really Confucius' Discussion or not, but that showed a perspective of interpreting *Zhousong* from the Warring States, with which we can know how people interpreted *Zhousong* in that era. It showed a deep desire for moral rule and peaceful governing.

In the Western Han Dynasty, the *Three Schools Poetry* (三家詩) were popular and authoritative readings of *Shijing*. Of these three schools, the Lu School asserted cautious conservative proposition and attached importance to the ritual system; the Qi School paid attention to prophecies and portents that they thought could be used to infer current politics and valued solving practical issues when interpreting *Shijing*; while the Han School were influenced by both the other two schools.

When *Three Schools Poetry* were scattered and disappear, the *Mao Poetry* and scholarship of the Mao Poetry showed the main way people of ancient China read *Shijing* over a period of thousands of years. The *Mao Poetry* used historical events to explain the verses in *Shijing*, and emphasized the importance of virtue and ritual through the interpretation of historical events. With the same core propositions as *Confucius' Discussion of the Poetry*, it became the mainstream interpretation of *Shijing* because it was exactly what the rulers needed and wanted. It became a part of Chinese Cultural Memory because the political wishes of moral rule and peaceful governing was always alive.

## 5. Conclusion

The character "Song" (頌) means a man's dignified and solemn appearance and it can express the meaning of countenance, thus, *Zhousong* means the countenance of the Zhou. Through *Zhousong*, the hymns they played in their ancestral temple for ritual purposes, the kings of the Zhou showed their propaganda of the so-called mandate they received from the High Heaven. And their propaganda of ruling with moral virtues still existed after the Zhou Dynasty was collapsed and gradually became an important tradition of ancient China, and *Zhousong* also became a part of Chinese Culture Memory with interpretations and re-interpretations by people of different generations and dynasties.

Cultural Memory is about how people narrate their myths, reconstruct the past and establish identity, and the interpretation of *Zhousong* in every era depends on the needs of people at that time. So the most important question we need to answer is how we interpret and how we should interpret it today.

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