1. Political—Hermeneutics

“This non-literary material makes it possible to consider the relationship between poetry and political life.”

Around 525 B.C. the envoy Shu Xiang 叔嚮 from the mighty state of Jin 晉 travelled to the smaller state of Zheng 鄭. It was not a brotherly call. As the Annals put it, “Jin wanted to attack Zheng, and so sent Shu Xiang on an official visit to inspect its capacity.” His counterpart in Zheng, Zi Chan 子產, saw through the friendly exterior, saw (so to speak) that the hands hidden in the ceremonial silk garb were clenched into fists. Having assessed the situation, Zi Chan spoke in accordance with contemporary diplomatic mores: he recited a stanza from one of the classic Odes. The poem—read in isolation, at least—is narrated by an enticing, coquettish woman in a river landscape.

If you obediently/caringly desire me
I shall hitch up my skirt and wade the Wei river
If you do not desire me
how could there be no other gentlemen?

Though the situation might appear slightly comical, it is in fact coolly hostile. That Zi Chan assumes the persona of a young woman who promises to lift her skirt and wade the river means that if Jin will not offer their protection Zheng will soon find other, equally powerful but more caring allies. Shu Xiang apparently got the message, because the Annals report that he returned home, saying “There are [able] men in Zheng, Zi Chan is among them. Zheng cannot be attacked because [the mighty states of] Qin and Chu are nearby. His poem had another meaning [其詩有異心; alternatively: ‘his poem had a rebellious intent’].”

1.1

In the early Chinese tradition too, the “political” and the “poetical” (to use Aaron Tugendhaft’s categories) are intimately entwined, but whereas
EKSTRÖM: Tangents: Commentary on Tugendhaft

Tugendhaft persuasively and eloquently demonstrates the political background to, and implications of, the inconspicuous shift from “gods” to “brothers” in the Baal cycle, my brief comments on his article rather go in the opposite direction. First I try to demonstrate how two different “political” uses of the poem above indicate, and exploit, a fundamental tension in that poem, and that “the political”—at least in the Chinese case—is also a hermeneutical activity. Then I argue that in both traditions (the Hittite and the early Chinese) the notion of political usurpation corresponds to a notion of linguistic usurpation.

1.2

“\text{"I Lift My Skirt" (\text{"Qian chang 裾裳"}) is the eighty seventh piece in the \textit{Classic of Odes} (a collection of 305 ancient poems elevated to the status of a Classic during the Western Han Dynasty).}\textsuperscript{2} A number of odes are set in a river landscape, and narrated by young men who describe their longing for attractive but elusive young women who are visible in the distance, but separated from their would-be suitors by the river. What is unusual with \text{"I Lift My Skirt"} is that its two, near-identical stanzas are narrated not by the lustful young men but by the object of desire herself.

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\text{子惠思我} & If you caringly/obediently\textsuperscript{3} long for me \\
	ext{褰裳涉溱} & [I shall] lift my skirt and wade across the \textit{Zhen} river \\
\text{子不我思} & If you do not long for me \\
\text{豈無他人} & How could there not be other men? \\
\text{狂童之狂也且} & You most foolish of foolish boys \\
\text{子惠思我} & If you caringly/obediently long for me \\
	ext{褰裳涉洧} & [I shall] lift my skirt and wade across the \textit{Wei} river \\
\text{子不我思} & If you do not long for me \\
\text{豈無他士} & How could there not be other gentlemen? \\
\text{狂童之狂也且} & You most foolish of foolish boys \\
\end{tabular}

On a cursory reading, the narratrix of \text{"I Lift My Skirt"} appears as an independent, self-assured and sexually emancipated woman who would not hesitate to reject her lover if he did not satisfy her. Conversely, she promises to cross the borderline constituted by the river if instead she finds the man on the other side to her liking. This, precisely, is the reading that Zi Chan presents, or activates, in his recital. Zheng may (like a woman) be physically weak but it knows its own value, and attractiveness.

Thus far \textit{Mr. Lü’s Annals}, and my hasty reading of this poem. When the \textit{Odes} are made an imperial Classic, the poems are augmented by two commentaries, to ensure that they are interpreted correctly, i.e., in keeping with conservative moral and social values. In these commentaries, the often sexually explicit \textit{Odes} are given far-fetched interpretations not unlike Zi Chan’s playful adaptation of \text{"I Lift My Skirt"} above.\textsuperscript{4} According to
one of them, the so-called “Minor Preface,” this poem does not speak of young carnal love but of “a longing to be corrected. A foolish youth acted wantonly [and] the men of the state [of Zheng] desired to be rectified by a greater state 思見正也。狂童恣行。國人思大國之正己也.”

This interpretation is superficially similar to the earlier one: the poem is read as a product of the state of Zheng, and as a plea directed to a mightier state. But a closer look reveals that it is predicated on wholly different assumptions than those held by Zi Chan (and shared by his adversary but comrade-in-interpretation Shu Xiang). Let us return briefly to the poem itself. My tentative interpretation of the narratrix as a “strong” woman, a pre-Confucian feminist who knows precisely what she wants, may be countered by a second reading that instead exposes her as a “hollow subject.” My lapse into psychoanalytical parlance is not unfounded here because the narratrix in fact promises that she can be had simply on the condition that her hypothetical partner does what he always has done, that is desire (si) her. In this reading, the girl at the borderline is endlessly narcissistic but lacks a true personality, or psychic kernel: she has no other demand than that the man whose desire she desires should desire her. She does not look to him for any positive characteristics, such as good manners, education, beauty, bravery, or noble ancestry. The man she approaches therefore appears to her, and to the reader, to be as hollow as herself.

Thus, if the first interpretation is seemingly anti-Confucian and construed the narratrix of “I Lift My Skirt” as a willful and full subject, the second reading is almost shocking in its ultra-Confucian, misogynic description of woman as hollow and devoid of positive characteristics.

Despite their differences, in the readings of this ode presented in Mr. Lü’s Annals and the “Minor Preface,” respectively, the ambiguity and ambivalence that characterize the poem itself are absent. In the “Minor Preface,” for the original man/woman dualism a strong state/weak state dualism has been substituted in which the young woman who in the poem itself so forcefully demands to be desired now allegorically refers to the Men of the State, and their rather more submissive request that they be “rectified” by a greater state which, in turn, corresponds to the man who “loves and protects” in the original.

This hermeneutic maneuver is both deft and illogical. It is remarkably economical, because in one sweep the “Preface” manages to transform all components of the original into an allegorical unity: the lovers become two states, the “crazed boy” a perverted and power-hungry aristocrat (identified by later commentators as a certain Tu 突), and sexual desire becomes the longing for political change. Yet the cracks in the allegorical facade are clearly visible. Most conspicuously, the claim that it is the Men of the State (who correspond to the young woman) who “desire” is
blatantly inconsistent with the implicit analogy between the two lovers and the two states, since in the original it is the “foolish boy” who desires and pines for the girl. The “Preface” is here so keen to incorporate all components of the original poem into an allegorico-political whole that it ends up contradicting itself. The “political” use of the “poetic” here leads to a hermeneutic short-cut.

2. Usurpation—“Usurpation”

“This Hittite monarch assumed kingship, after all, by means of a coup, usurping the throne from his nephew Urhi-Tessub.”

“So you’ve become a “Great King,” have you?”

My second comment—the second Sino-Hittite tangent—concerns a conceptual connection between political usurpation and linguistic “usurpation.” With my limited knowledge of the Hittite and Semitic traditions, I will do little more than underline the troubled and asymmetric correspondence between “brotherhood” and “force of arms,” and how the word brotherhood vacilliates between a primary and secondary meaning. The letter the Hittite king Urhi-Tessub writes to the king of Assyria is not simply an indignant message to a brutish upstart. It is also a reaction against what Urhi-Tessub feels is an usurpation of language: “On what account should I write to you about brotherhood? Were you and I born from one mother?” As Tugendhaft observes, Urhi-Tessub knows full well that the word “brotherhood” need not refer exclusively to the relationship between men sprung from the same womb, but may also indicate the intimate “relationship” (within quotation marks) that obtains between the most powerful kings. Urhi-Tessub’s protestations thus signal both an unwillingness to accept that brute force is a way to become a brother (that brute force, in other words, is the “womb” of political brothers), and his knowledge that this is the case.

Were you and I born from one mother? By drawing attention to the primary meaning of the word brotherhood, Urhi-Tessub—in a confused, anguished and contradictory manner—acknowledges that political “brotherhood” is not really brotherhood, and that this extended usage of the word therefore constitutes an act of linguistic abuse. Urhi-Tessub hereby shifts, at least unconsciously and momentarily, the topic from politics to language use. My point is the following. As the documents Tugendhaft cites show, in Urhi-Tessub’s time the word brotherhood is conventionally used to designate, in a positive way, the intimate relationship that obtains within a group of legitimate kings who recognize each other as kings, but who were not born by the same mother. True, non-usurped kingship (i.e., “brotherhood”) is thus expressed by a word that itself has been usurped. Differ-
ently put, usurpation is allowed in language but condemned in political life. Let us call this Urhi-Tessub’s paradox.

2.1

Let me go off on this tangent. It is precisely by usurping a sign that the self-destructive last king of the Western Zhou Dynasty, King You (r. 795–771 B.C.) paves the way for the usurpation of the Western Zhou Dynasty. This is how the story is narrated in *Mr. Lü’s Annals*.

The two capitals of the Zhou Dynasty, Feng and Hao, were both close to the territory held by the Rong people. Therefore, [the royal house] and the various vassals agreed on *yue* building a fort by the Royal Road, and putting on its roof powerful drums that could be heard for miles. In the event of an attack from the Rong, the drums would spread the news and the vassals’ troops would hasten to assist the Son of Heaven. When the Rong finally attacked, King You beat on the drums, and the vassal’s troops duly arrived. Bao Si was exuberant and took great pleasure in the spectacle. King You desired his queen’s laughter, so he pounded the drums a great many times and the troops kept coming to the capital, only to find that there was no attack. It went so far that, when the Rong finally did attack again, no vassal responded to the king’s drum. The king expired at the foot of Black Horse Mountain, and the whole world laughed at his death. With the “No Attack” he lost the “Real Attack.”

King You makes an “agreement” (*yue*) with his vassals as to the meaning of the drum signal. The two parties agree that it shall mean “attack” (or “intruder,” *kou*), but when King You attempts to please Bao Si he breaks that agreement and so causes a fatal glitch in the communication, and the meaning of the drum signal mutates from “Real Attack” to “No Attack.” This tells us that signs can be misleading if they seem to mean one thing when they in fact mean another. But the story also demonstrates that a person can consciously alter or manipulate the (linguistic) sign so that it acquires a meaning which is un-conventional, and, as in this case, the very opposite of its “agreed upon” meaning. King You consciously usurps the agreed-upon meaning of the drum signal, i.e., the sign “Attack.”

Compared with Urhi-Tessub’s furious letter to the Assyrian king, the relation between political and linguistic usurpation is here straightforward and one of cause and effect: the former evolves directly out of the latter. And, unsurprisingly, King You’s usurpation of the sign’s meaning is unequivocally condemned. However, another chapter of *Mr. Lü’s Annals* contains an analysis of the word *bao* ("treasure")—a key term in the political rhetoric of Warring States China—that displays an affinity
not only with King You’s linguistic method but also with Urhi-Tessub’s paradox.

In the introduction to the chapter called “Other Treasures 異寶,” we are told that “It was not that the ancient sages lacked treasures: what they treasured was other [things] 古之人非無寶也，其所寶者異也.” What follows are several narratives in which high-minded men loftily refuse the precious swords, the jade and the cash—the treasures, in other words—that they are offered. One of these men, a high official of the state of Song called Zi Han 子罕, is offered a piece of jade found in the earth by a peasant. When Zi Han refuses the gift, the man exclaims in astonishment that “this is a peasant’s treasure,” to which Zi Han replies “you, sir, consider jade a treasure, I consider not accepting [the jade] a treasure 子以玉為寶，我以不受為寶.” The Annals laconically comment, contextualizing and explaining the sentence with which the chapter began, that “it was not that Zi Han lacked treasures, what he treasured was other [things].”

The logic is the following. There are things more precious, or nobler, than precious things: an “other” treasure is nobler than a conventional treasure, consisting of jade, swords and cash. It is absolutely crucial that these “other” treasures (for instance: virtue, integrity, lack of greed) are not named but only exemplified, because the narrator argues that nowadays, in these degenerated times, one can only conceptualize virtue, integrity and selflessness in terms of vulgar, material riches. Or, differently put, we—as opposed to The Sagely Ancients—can only conceptualize and know them negatively, as non-treasures or “other-treasures.” Thus, the difference between treasure (jade, sword, cash) and “treasure” (virtue, integrity, lack of greed) is exactly what the author wants to bring attention to.

2.2

When Zi Han points to the precious piece of jade, saying “that is not a treasure,” he activate an “other,” secondary meaning of the word bao 寶. Urhi-Tessub’s distinction between brotherhood and “brotherhood” is by comparison more tangled, and goes in the opposite direction, in that he refuses to accept the “other,” secondary meaning of the word that the king of Assyria invokes. He thus exposes the political term “brotherhood” as an usurpation of the primary meaning of that word.

I would argue that the narratives about King You and Zi Han in Mr. Lü’s Annals illustrate a very similar paradox. King You and Zi Han both suspend, usurp or pervert the primary, agreed-upon meaning of a sign (the drum signal and the word bao, respectively). But whereas King You’s action is condemned, Zi Han is portrayed as expressing a profound and elevated truth. This contradiction, as I argue elsewhere, is a point of entry to a hitherto untrodden path in studies of early Chinese poetics.
Is this Sino-Hittite tangent a coincidence, or may Urhi-Tessub’s paradox inform us further of the poetics of Hittite politics?

Notes


3. Hui惠 can mean both “caringly” and “obediently,” and this ambiguity is fully realized by the poet.


6. As a layman, I wonder if the many repetitions in the letter are a rhetorical strategy, or merely a result of its being a draft, reflecting the writer’s struggle to formulate his anguish and anger in the right wording.


8. See “Does the Metaphor Translate?,” 143n35.
