Chinese Poetry

*The Book of Songs*

**(c. sixth century b.c. )**

*The Book of Songs,* also known as *The Book of Odes,* is an anthology of 305 ancient Chinese poems. According to tradition, Confucius chose the poems to be included. It is doubtful that Confucius actually selected the poems, but he did know them well and recommended their study.

Because of the book’s honored status and its association with Confucius, traditional Chinese interpreters of the poems have stressed their political and social importance. These interpreters have sometimes gone to great lengths to find hidden meanings in what appear to be simple love songs. In recent years, however, scholars have begun to interpret the ancient songs more literally, appreciating them for their simplicity and directness and using them as a window into the lives of the early Chinese people.

## Background

The poems in *The Book of Songs* come from many different regions of China. Most of them were originally folk songs describing people’s daily activities, such as farming, fishing, or gathering herbs. Others focus on love or courtship. The book also contains a group of poems written by courtiers in praise of kings, describing banquets and court ceremonies.

All of the songs were originally set to music. Some, especially the songs of the court, may have been accompanied by dancing and by musical instruments, such as bells and drums. The tunes are long lost, but the songs’ powerful rhythms are preserved in their four-beat lines.

## I Beg of You, Chuang Tzu

 I beg of you, Chung Tzu,

 Do not climb into our homestead,

 Do not break the willows we have planted.

 Not that I mind about the willows,

5But I am afraid of my father and mother.

 Chung Tzu I dearly love;

 But of what my father and mother say

 Indeed I am afraid.

 I beg of you, Chung Tzu,

10Do not climb over our wall,

 Do not break the mulberry trees we have planted.

 Not that I mind about the mulberry trees,

 But I am afraid of my brothers.

 Chung Tzu I dearly love;

15But of what my brothers say

 Indeed I am afraid.

 I beg of you, Chung Tzu,

 Do not climb into our garden,

 Do not break the hardwood we have planted.

20Not that I mind about the hardwood,

 But I am afraid of what people will say.

 Chung Tzu I dearly love;

 But of all that people will say

 Indeed I am afraid.



 Thick grow the rush leaves;

 Their white dew turns to frost.

 He whom I love

 Must be somewhere along this stream.

5I went up the river to look for him,

 But the way was difficult and long.

 I went down the stream to look for him,

 And there in mid-water

 Sure enough, it’s he!

10Close grow the rush leaves,

 Their white dew not yet dry.

 He whom I love

 Is at the water’s side.

 Up stream I sought him;

15But the way was difficult and steep.

 Down stream I sought him,

 And away in mid-water

 There on a ledge, that’s he!

 Very fresh are the rush leaves;

20The white dew still falls.

 He whom I love

 Is at the water’s edge.

 Up stream I followed him;

 But the way was hard and long.

25Down stream I followed him,

 And away in mid-water

 There on the shoals is he!

## Critical Reading

**1. (a) Recall:**In “I Beg of You, Chung Tzu,” what are the speaker’s fears?**(b)Analyze:**What conflicting feelings does she have?

**2. (a) Recall:**In “Thick Grow the Rush Leaves,” what words describe the rush leaves and their growth?**(b) Interpret:**In what way might the rush leaves be symbolic of the speaker’s feelings?

**3. (a) Compare:**In terms of their subjects, how are these two poems similar?**(b) Contrast:**What makes them different?