Introduction

The big never talks about the little; the little talks only about the big.

大的不曾說小的，小的專一說大的。

A Critic in the Borderlands

In the seventh or eighth decade of the Common Era, the central government of the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) sent an official to the southwest margins of its empire, to a place now part of Sichuan province. Zhu Fu 朱輔 spent several years learning about the inhabitants under his jurisdiction, counting them, and cultivating friendly relations with them. As evidence of the indigenes’ placable disposition, he dispatched to court samples of their songs that promised friendly submission to the Han state. He prefaced these with other lyrics. “Your subject has heard,” he wrote in the conventional language of a memorial, “that the Poems says: ‘Where they went was [Mount] Qi, / there was a smooth route.’”

臣聞《詩》云：「彼徂者岐，有夷之行」。 His readers in the capital recognized two lines from the Book of Poems (Shi 詩), for any educated bureaucrat would have read, and likely memorized, this collection of just over three hundred pieces from the Zhou dynasty (1045?–256 BCE). The quotation would have brought to mind its source in “Heaven Made” (“Tianzuo” 天作), a hymn that celebrates early Zhou kings and their establishment, in the recently cleared wilderness around Mount Qi, of a settlement that became the basis for the Zhou state. Yet even though his readers knew the poem,

epigraph: Riddle from Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646), attrib., Guangxiaofu, 145. The solution: “classic and commentary” (jingzhuan 經傳).
they might not have seen its relevance to Zhu Fu’s situation, so he clarified his purpose with a snippet of commentary:

"Although the path to Qi was remote, people did not find it far." The poets’ chanted praise serves as confirmatory evidence. The Whitewolf king Tangzou, who with his ilk desires moral transformation and is turning to righteousness, has now composed three stanzas of poetry.1

《傳》曰：「岐道雖僻，而人不遠」。詩人誦詠，以為符驗。今白狼王唐菆等慕化歸義，作詩三章。

The line of exegesis draws a clear connection to the situation at hand: although Tangzou’s followers dwell on a remote frontier, under proper guidance they will not feel far from the imperial center. The canonical poem was a model twice over for Zhu Fu. As a historical document it recorded a perfect example of moral-political suasion erasing geographic distance, a past achievement that could be imitated. But it was the hymn “Heaven Made” itself that set the real example. According to Han commentators, it had been performed in conjunction with Zhou ancestral sacrifices, so the “chanted praise” created a lasting model of how to preserve a historical moment. The ancient poets’ creation proved the success of the kings and showed Zhu Fu how to demonstrate his own success to his superiors. His “proof” comprised the three songs recorded in two parallel forms, as phonetic transcriptions of the original language and as translations undertaken with the aid of a native informant. He presented the songs both as a genuine expression of the Whitewolf people’s feelings and as an equivalent of the canonical Poems. He made this equation by calling the songs shi 詩, the word that also names the canon and its individual entries, and by describing its division into three stanzas, or zhang 章, the term by which scholiasts identified sections within canonical poems.

This administrative document thus practices comparative literature avant la lettre, grappling with problems of representing genre, sound, form, and sense. In it Zhu complains about the difficulty of working with these border people, contradicting his assertion that their good will has effaced their distance from the capital. The journey there was “precipitous and dangerous, a hundred times worse than the route to Mount Qi” 崖危峻險，百倍岐道, and although he had studied their language and customs, “the meaning of words in the tongue of these far-flung Yi tribes is hard to get right” 遠夷之語辭意難正. This kvetch doubly undoes any feeling of closeness: “far-flung” echoes the “far” in the line of quoted commentary,
though here it is not negated, and Zhu classifies his protectees as Yi 夷, an ethnonym written with the very graph for the “ease” with which that distance should have been traversed. To shorten this gap, the memorial develops—indeed has to develop, to make possible the translatability of the songs as songs—a literary theory. Explicating the new, foreign text required referencing an old, familiar one. Shi, “poetry,” became not just transhistorical, applicable to ancient, recent, and possible future texts, but intercultural as well, with potential analogues in other tongues and traditions. The path to this transvaluation of genres was not smooth. It led ahead while looking back toward the origins of poetry and, to use another meaning of the toponym Qi 崤, it forked, demanding decisions at every turn. And the choices Zhu Fu made signposted the road ahead: he decided to render the Whitewolf poem in four-syllable lines with recurring rhyme, the most common pattern in the Poems. He selected prefatory lines from this canon and interpreted them to suit his purpose. With all these choices he justified a broadened understanding of shi, the genre, and propagated a particular understanding of Shi, the canon.

The relationship between these two is the topic of this study. Its central finding is that Shi 詩, the Book of Poems, and shi 詩, poetry, were always related and never identical. Since pre-modern orthography did not distinguish proper names or titles, the same character could be used in either sense, and key passages in several influential texts can be read as referring either to “poetry” in general or to the Book of Poems in particular. They can also, plausibly, be about both, since the canon represented the epitome of the category of poetry for many writers. Untangling these references is an important part of the process of mapping the configuration of canonical and non- or post-canonical poems. A difficult choice falls to both the translator, who must decide whether to capitalize and italicize, and the modern Chinese editor, who places quotation marks around book titles but not common nouns. This typographic dichotomy is a simplified reflection of a complex pattern of shifts and overlaps in these two semantic fields, or rather between two poles that between them create a field. The tension between these two readings of the same word remained productive for over two thousand years. It depended on equivalences, like that which Zhu Fu made between the Whitewolf King’s songs and the Poems. It also depended on differences, such as the centuries that separated the canon from his era and imbued it with timeless authority.
From Margin to Footnote

In reading “Heaven Made,” Zhu Fu made another crucial choice: one character in his quotation differs from the now-standard text. That recension, the only version of the Book of Poems fully extant, is known after the surname of its early commentators as the Mao Poems (Mao Shi 毛詩). The Mao school was not well known in Zhu’s time, though it would come to prominence a few decades later. Rather, three other schools were firmly established, each with its own interpretations based on slightly different versions of the text, all promulgated by state-sponsored erudites and taught to private and government students. Zhu’s reading of the poem is thought to be from one of these three, the Han School. Although some of the Three Schools’ texts and commentaries survive, mostly in fragments, Zhu Fu’s version of “Heaven Made” is not otherwise attested. His version has one particle where the Mao text has another, leading to a different parsing that, in combination with the sentence of commentary, made the line suit Zhu’s purpose (for details see Appendix I).

A thousand years later, this reading of the poem would find its way into the most influential Song dynasty (960–1279) commentary on the Book of Poems, which is now better known as Shijing 詩經 (Poetry Classic).⁴ The polymath Shen Gua 沈括 (1031–95) noticed this passage and highlighted its preservation of an otherwise lost variant. Although he misremembered and mangled the wording, mistakenly changing another character as well, his remarks brought it to the attention of later readers, notably Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).⁵ Zhu Xi kept the then-standard Mao text, but his interpretation of “Heaven Made” follows the variant reading that Shen Gua quoted and is thus ultimately based on Zhu Fu’s first-century memorial.⁶ Zhu Xi’s commentary on the Book of Poems, in turn, became the most widely read one from the thirteenth through twentieth centuries. It was studied and memorized by millions of boys, girls, and adults, including all those preparing for civil service starting in the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), when his version became the standard. Back in the first century, Zhu Fu had tried to imitate the ancient kings who, a thousand years before, had set in motion a chant of praise that had endured thanks to the canonization of the Poems. The translated songs he submitted were largely forgotten, but his reading of “Heaven Made” was not. By historical accident it survived and, after another thousand years, became the basis of a new orthodoxy. Its original use, which grew out of an attempt to apply the term shi in an
exotic context, did not, however, carry over into these readings of the canon.

This book is a study of such significant but often hidden motions between ideas about literature and interpretation of the canonical poems. From at least the time of Confucius (551?–479? BCE) to the present, the *Poetry Classic* has been a major point of reference and source of inspiration for ideas about poetry and literature in China. Over the centuries, as the poems were wrapped in thickening cocoons of commentary and interpretation, spinning a new theory required selecting and teasing out a few promising threads. Basing an understanding of “poetry” on the *Classic* thus meant, first of all, understanding that book’s poetry. Yet readings of the *Classic* often depended on notions about poetry and literature originating outside the canon and its exegesis. These apparent paradoxes lie at the intersection of scriptural studies and the history of poetics, and it is there that I situate this study. My objective is not to tell a complete story covering twenty-five centuries but to identify revealing cases, such as Zhu Fu’s memorial and its consequences, of a phenomenon that recurred in and helped give shape to poetics and classical studies alike.

*The Formation of a Canon*

The assemblage of hymns, chants, and folkish songs that became the *Poetry Classic* was known in something like its present form since the time of Confucius. Portions date back as far as the tenth century BCE, so the *Classic* seems naturally to hold pride of place in the history of Chinese literature. But what has made it appear natural to situate the canon in this position of authority? I will argue that it was only after the late second century CE, when composing verse in the shi form became a widespread practice among the elite, that readers imagined a domain of “poetry” of which the *Poetry Classic* served as both source and standard. Until then, one read shi, but few wrote them. Thereafter, many wrote, and wrote and wrote: named poets appear by the hundreds from the late second century on. Although the majority of early works have been lost, the poems of some later writers number in the thousands.

Given that the same word could refer both to the closed canon of three-hundred-odd poems and to the living form in which a person could compose that many in a year, the connotations of the two senses were clearly very different. My interpretation of studies of the *Classic* thus highlights a
contrast between the first seven centuries or so (five before and two after the start of the Common Era), when there was little talk of making new shi, and the eighteen subsequent centuries, when shi were writ much larger. What counted as “poetry” depended on slippery choices that can be tracked through both explicit definitions and the selections made by anthologists and literary historians. In the first, formative centuries rhythmic, rhyming texts, often sung with instrumental accompaniment, were a vital part of many of the rituals by which elites defined themselves. The inscriptions on metal and stone artifacts that were typically associated with such ritual contexts often rhymed in whole or in part. People of all classes sang songs, the lyrics to a few of which have been fortuitously preserved. Some books consisting mainly of prose contain long or short passages demonstrating rhyme and other prosodic features. And last but not least, literary works were composed in regular, rhymed forms, of which several, most notably fu 賦 (variously rendered as “prose poem,” “rhapsody,” and “exposition”) took shape in the latter part of this period. Seldom were these called shi by contemporaries. That term came to name a widely practiced, living genre only around the second century CE.7 Most critics thereafter would maintain that all these shi flowed from the well of the first anthology, though like any offspring none could rise above it. This originary status of the Poetry Classic is imprinted on modern anthologies of Chinese literature in translation, which almost invariably begin with a sampling of its verse. Of course, the Poetry Classic does more work in contemporary scholarship, among other things as a cache of data about ancient language and a source for the study of history, folk customs, and music. We recognize that the text is used variously by various fields, even delighting in this diversity and exhorting ourselves to make the most of it through greater interdisciplinarity. Plunked down amid the disciplines of contemporary academe, the text can generate new interpretations and conclusions. It has provoked reflections on orality and literacy in ancient China, the function of imagery, and the nature of metaphor. A future historian of sinology might center on the Classic a case study of how the fields differ in their use of the text and interact with each other—how a literary reading relies on the work of historical linguistics, or refers to Aristotelian theories of metaphor.

I propose here another, analogous genealogy: one of studies of the Poetry Classic in imperial China. Rather than tracing its well-known main
branches, however, or brushing off long-buried roots uncovered by archeology, I will emphasize a less obvious feature of this family tree. Of the many seeds it scattered over centuries of pollination, some grew to a height and splendor rivaling their progenitor's. After these seeds had grown, sometimes, by dark of night, the keepers of the original tree clipped a branch from a healthy child and grafted it onto the parent. In other words, ideas inspired by the Classic that developed in fields separate from classical scholarship were put back to use for the study of the canon. This feedback loop is common in the history of scholarship: mathematicians, for example, may lend a useful equation to physicists, who extend and return it with some added wrinkle. What I find noteworthy about the history of the Poetry Classic, and helpful for understanding relationships among fields of study in imperial China, is how and when borrowing was noted, and, by contrast, when it was not. As a rule, for most of the imperial period lending out from classical studies to other fields was acknowledged while transfers in the opposite direction were not.

One useful group of markers that helps us trace these borrowings comes from the keywords 篡, 比, and 赋. No set of tropes—if that is the phylum in the garden of European criticism with which to equate them—has yielded more interpretive fruit than this trio. They make up half of the six Principles of Poetry (liuyi 六義) first enumerated in Zhouli 周禮 (Rites of Zhou) and repeated and explained in the Great Preface (Daxu 大序) to the Mao version of the Poems. The other three, Airs, Odes, and Hymns (feng, ya, song 風雅頌), were relatively fixed as names of the three divisions of the Classic, but the identification and interpretation of 篡, 比, and 赋 was and remains contentious. To the extent that a consensus exists, it asserts that 篡 involves straightforward conveyance of meaning, while 比 and 赋 encode meaning indirectly by appealing to some connection, often of similarity, between thing mentioned and sense intended. Beyond that, especially on the difference between 比 and 赋, discord reigns. Since 比 implies “likening,” it was often taken as a term for images that in some way correspond to the true topic of the a poem; 赋, which has been translated as “evocation” or “stimulus,” was often seen as designating images whose mode of reference was more indirect. Even these distinctions, however, were not universally shared and the details and emphasis varied greatly. This study attempts to tease from a history of their usage some patterns that may map the fields in which the canon is
imbricated. To sketch that map, which consists of traces left by intermittent motions, some taking centuries to complete, I make strategic soundings. Rather than attempting to resolve debates about what *fu*, *bi*, and *xing* really mean, this book tells a recurring tale of ideas and how they move.

Recent scholarship on the *Book of Poems* has highlighted some aspects of this story, in particular the tension between classicism/classical studies (*jingxue* 經學) and literature/literary studies (*wenxue* 文學). Liu Yuqing, for example, has written and co-authored important studies of the Classic’s passage “From Literature to Classicism” in Early China (pre-Qin through Han) and “From Classicism to Literature” in the Ming period (1368–1644), respectively. This research has usually been guided by the hope, most clearly expressed by early twentieth-century scholars of the May Fourth Movement, that a literary approach to the ancient poems would reveal the poems’ “true face” (*zhenxiang* 真相 or *zhen mianmu* 真面目) hidden beneath a mask of “sagely” classicism. Favoring the literary over the classical has yielded novel interpretations of the poems themselves and of the history of scholarship about them; even if one does not share the assumptions behind such research, its findings are valuable. The most important of these assumptions, one that is often stated but rarely explained or defended, is that the literary is a universal category and that historical actors such as scholars in pre-modern China treated the *Book of Poems* as either included in this category or excluded from it. I find it more fruitful to turn this assumption into a question: how did literature come to serve as the name for a domain comprising certain kinds of texts and certain ways of reading them? An immediate answer can be found in modern history, since “literature” and its equivalent in modern Chinese, *wenxue* 文學, are imports or significantly new usages, neologisms relative to the twenty-five centuries of *Poems* studies. Yet if the use of these terms in relation to the past risks anachronism, it is not always inappropriate. Sources that twentieth-century scholars read as pushing or pulling the *Book of Poems* across the line separating the literary from the classical can instead be understood as records of fluid boundaries, even as acts of boundary-making or -breaking. If a field of the literary or something like it did exist in pre-modern China, one way to get at its shifting outlines would be to examine corner cases like that of the *Book of Poems*.

Tracing boundaries like these has become an increasingly important way to understand the history of classical texts in China and a supplement to
approaches emphasizing unilinear traditions developing in relative isolation. Since late imperial times at least, scholars have recognized that some of the most important developments “within the Confucian tradition” in fact resulted from complex interactions with other scholarly lineages, including ones that classical scholars deemed heretical. It has long been clear, for example, that concepts fundamental to the cosmology of the Song school of Dao Learning (Daoxue 道學), of which Zhu Xi is the preeminent representative, were drawn from religious Daoism, while key aspects of Dao Learning practice, such as meditation and the designation of genealogical lines of transmission, hew closely to precedents in Chan 禪 Buddhism. Denunciations of the heterodoxies of Laozi and the Buddha voiced by Dao Learning masters do not nullify these observations—on the contrary, they highlight the work that the borrowed concepts were performing, whether it was to counter these other schools on their own terms, to incorporate novel and powerful intellectual tools, or simply to reflect a natural process of assimilation by which the ideas became so familiar that their origins were forgotten. 

An analogous process, I contend, was at work in studies of the Book of Poems from the appearance of the earliest surviving commentaries into late imperial times. Rather than a heretical school, commentators on the Poems were contending with a field of literary practice and theory which grew up alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, scholarship on the “Confucian” canon. Although recent scholarship based on both fresh inquiries into existing evidence and archeological discoveries of new material has called into question received wisdom about the establishment, as early as the Western Han period, of a state-sponsored Confucian orthodoxy around a closed canon, a dense network of intertextual reference links some of the earliest texts about the Poems to those in every subsequent period. These connections, running from the pre-Qin era to the Late Imperial period of the Ming and Qing dynasties, point to the existence of a hermeneutical tradition—though not a hermetically sealed one. For example, Robert Ashmore shows that, in the early medieval period between the Han and Tang (618–907), rewriting and imitation drove interactions with ancient texts, most notably the Book of Poems; in evoking canonical models writers also put forward many powerful and striking readings (though since few commentaries survive we cannot always judge their originality). This engagement with classical sources, in turn, helped to define and develop the new
genres in which these poets worked, including especially shi. As Ashmore notes, studies of Chinese literature have tended to focus on reading poems in light of authors’ biographies, paying less attention to “questions of changes or historical discontinuities in the guiding assumptions about the nature of literature and its functions, or in the analysis in those dimensions that pertain more to the ‘how’ and ‘for what purpose’ than to the ‘what’ of the propositional content of the literary text.” This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing project of addressing these difficult questions, which have recently been fruitfully studied for the early medieval period during which literati shi developed. These lines of inquiry can be extended into later periods as well, for even when shi seemed to have become stable as a genre (or, more aptly, a supergenre that contained many subgenres), its interaction with Shi remained vigorous and sometimes tense.

**Structure of the Book**

The organizational principles of this study are thematic and chronological. Each chapter traces a topic in the history of the relationship between the Book of Poems and non-canonical literature. For lack of a pithy antonym to “canonical” or “classical,” I call such writing “secular,” to emphasize the contrast between its worldly origins and the sagely perfection often attributed to the Poems. The progression from chapter to chapter, and the internal organization of each chapter, is largely chronological, but the narrative moves backward and forward through time as it traces broader themes across chapters.

Chapter 1 opens in the Eastern Zhou (771–256 BCE), with an examination of Confucius’ treatment of the Poems as recorded in the Analects (Lunyu 論語). It argues that when early Ru 儒 (“Confucians”) tried to interpret secular verse they did so with techniques developed for the canonical poems, and that this mode of reception set a pattern for later readings of the Songs of Chu (Chu ci 楚辭) in the Han dynasty. When the writing of shi poetry patterned on the Book of Poems became part of elite practice in the second century CE, it too was framed as an heir to the canon. The chapter pays close attention to the rhetoric of stele inscriptions because they represent an abortive alternate history in which such memorial verse was a prominent descendant of the classic. Although both monumental epigraphy and personal poetry claimed this mantle, only the latter developed into a self-conscious art of shi with its own critical discourse. The homology
between canon and creation was expressed in multiple ways during the medieval period (from the fall of the Han dynasty in the third century to the end of the Tang in the tenth). Direct imitation of canonical models was one approach, but more frequently parallels were drawn between books of poetry and the *Book of Poems*. Some writers posited collections of poetry, their own or others’, as successors to the canon on the basis of scale (most notably, by assembling three hundred poems) or wording (often, by giving their works titles that recall the *Classic*).

Chapter 2 examines some of the fruits of this ideology of collection as sources for understanding the evolving category of shi. The first attempts to create complete collections of early poetry were made in the late-Ming dynasty, with reference to precedents from the Tang and Song. These projects were founded on an analogy between the earliest secular poetry and the canon, one that extended the moral, didactic function of the *Classic* to at least some extracanonical verse. Yet the compilation efforts often brought about disagreement over what to include. Although much early textual material contained rhyme, editors disagreed over what of it should count as shi. Were stone monuments, rhymed adages, or inscriptions on bronze vessels part of the early history of poetry? The stakes were high, for very different pictures of the cultural world from which the *Classic* emerged would result from editors’ decisions to include or exclude such material. Moreover, extending linguistic and rhetorical analysis to the study of early texts tended to undercut the boundaries that separated the sages’ Classics from secular texts. If “poetry” and “prose” were general categories that could be used to classify any piece of writing, placing the Classics into such categories might lessen their enchantment. The eventual inclusion of portions of some canonical texts in literary anthologies, which began in the Song and reached its zenith in the late Ming, is a measure of the porosity of this boundary.

Chapter 3 deals with another practice that brought secular poetry into contact with the canon: the use of the *Classic* as a model for poetic composition. From early medieval times, writers sometimes closely patterned their verse on it, but in the Tang and thereafter, annotations such as prefaces and indications of the number of lines and stanzas in a poem could frame poems written in a range of forms as canonically inspired. The chapter closely examines a set of early-Song political hymns to show how these devices were deployed at a nexus of political, ritual, scholarly, and literary discourses. This manipulation of structures drawn from the canon may, in
turn, have inspired scholars later in the Song to question the reliability of the equivalent elements in the received Mao Poems and ultimately to reject the Prefaces that had been touchstones of interpretation since the late Han.

The Song commentator who most influentially abandoned the Prefaces, Zhu Xi, also created a layout for the Poems that was strikingly different, visually, from the received Mao text. Part of his innovation was a new layer of commentarial apparatus that identified the three tropes of _fu_, _bi_, and _xing_. Earlier commentators had generally noted only _xing_, and even that they did inconsistently; Zhu Xi, by contrast, marked every stanza as made up of one of the tropes or a combination of them. Chapter 4 examines critics’ changing understanding of the tropes and offers a new explanation of how Zhu Xi developed his annotations. Although the tropes are loosely defined in the Great Preface to the Mao Poems, commentators never agreed on what exactly they were or how to locate them in particular poems. Moreover, in the new literary criticism of the Southern Dynasties (the series of states centered in the Southeast between 420 and 589), writers devised increasingly complex definitions and made them applicable to secular poetry as well. The major Tang dynasty commentaries on the Poems, in turn, copied these definitions without acknowledging their source, presumably because the application of the theories of belles-lettistes to the canon would have been unbecoming. When Zhu Xi devised his new scheme for blanket analysis of the tropes in every stanza of every poem, he was doing something similar, save that the literary theorist from whom he borrowed was himself. Although Zhu’s predecessors in the Dao Learning school had reflected on the three tropes at increasing levels of detail, the proximate model for his application of _fu_, _bi_, and _xing_ in the Poetry Classic was his study of the non-canonical, or at best semi-canonical, Songs of Chu. Zhu came up with the scheme for labeling the tropes in his commentary on the Poems, which was absent in the first drafts, only after he had worked extensively with the Songs of Chu. Yet he obscured this origin because he, like his predecessors, was wary of acknowledging a source outside of classical studies. His innovations could not stay within the realm of the Classics, however, and literary critics soon began to apply analysis of the sort Zhu Xi had made of the Poems to secular poetry. These critics also expanded the repertoire of tropes, devising new combinations to explicate a broader range of poetry.
These new hybrid tropes migrated back into the study of the *Classic*, and Chapter 5 examines, in part, this movement. Like some of the transfers described in earlier sections, much of it was surreptitious. Classicists in the mid-sixteenth century applied novel techniques to the reading of the *Poetry Classic*, but the text that was most successful at disseminating these ideas was, on the surface, an ancient one, a commentary from the Lu 魯 School (one of the three that had flourished in the Han). Among other features, it contained detailed readings of the tropes in the poems, in combinations of greater complexity than those Zhu Xi had discerned. The Lu version of the *Poems* and the commentary that accompanied it, however, were forgeries, passed off as ancient in order to make innovations acceptable. Their popularity in the late imperial period reflects an ongoing desire to reconcile *Shi* and *shi*, the canonical and the literary.

*Implications*

This study adds to the already extensive scholarship on the *Book of Poems* by approaching it from a new perspective: its interaction with secular literature. What I hope to add is less additional detail within this picture than a new way of illuminating it, one that could be useful in other domains of scholarship as well. I seek to refigure and perhaps disfigure the history of classical studies in China by showing how classical studies developed not atop but within and against different modes of intellectual activity. These other fields did more than provide ideas, techniques, and critiques; they grew together, sometimes competitively, sometimes complementarily. Above all, they defined each other. The notion that they are mutually constitutive is inherent in certain conceptions of the notion of field, such as that Pierre Bourdieu applies to the analysis of the academic culture of modern France. Yet the logic of such an analysis has yet to be drawn out for the intellectual endeavor to which, in aggregate, more scholarly energy was devoted than any other in the pre-modern world: the study of the “Confucian” classics. This particular intellectual pursuit could be situated in relation to other kinds of activity such as the observance of family rituals, the writing of *belles lettres*, the study of ancient language, the practice of Buddhism and the reading of sutras, speculation about metaphysics, inquiry into recent history... all of which intersected, for many historical actors, with classical studies and thus helped define it.
**Introduction**

In pre-modern China, most scholars working within the classicist tradition approached canonical works such as the *Book of Poems* with a number of constraints on which methods were applicable and what claims were valid. Classicists would generally not, for example, follow a line of reading that concluded that the *Poems* contained factual errors or that they promoted immorality (with the exception, I will show below, of arguments that a corrupted text had deviated from a perfect original). From at least the Warring States period (479–221 BCE), many scholars put a small canon of texts including the *Poems* in a special category, distinguished from others by modes of reference (how and why these texts were cited) and probably by method of transmission and storage (some books were memorized and/or given distinctive physical forms). By the late Western Han (206 BCE – 9 CE), bibliographic conventions put classical works in a special category, separate even from works that they resembled more in form and content than they did their fellow classics. Although the boundaries of the various canons recognized by imperial states and private scholars shifted repeatedly, the *Book of Poems* always remained a core work, falling under the most prestigious heading of Classics (*jing* 經) in every major bibliographic scheme, along with the rest of the Five Classics (the *Book of Documents*, the ritual canons, the *Book of Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*). The most prevalent classification of the last millennium of the imperial period, that of the Four Parts (*sibu* 四部), put Classics first and ended with Collections (*ji* 集), works neither historical/administrative (the second class) nor representing specialized knowledge in theoretical and practical domains (the third). Non-canonical poetry generally fell under Collections, the last and least prestigious class, as did works about it, such as books of criticism and studies of compositional method.

These hierarchies of prestige and differences in expectation and method created divisions between texts that might otherwise have been considered similar and related, such as poems within the canon and those outside it. *Shi* and shi lived on different shelves of the physical and mental library. Of course, the same people visited both parts of the library, and their readings and creations in one section affected what they did in another. The following chapters trace their footsteps.