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The implicit meaning beyond the words in Fang Yurun's interpretation of the *Book of Songs*

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Abstract. The Han Confucian *Poetic Preface (Shixu)* and the Song Confucian *Collected Commentaries on the Book of Songs (Shijizhuan)* are representative works of interpretation of the *Book of Songs (Shijing)*, both of which interpret the poems from the perspective of Confucian classics. *The Original Book of Songs (Shijing Yuanshi),* written by the late Qing scholar Fang Yurun, has earned a lasting reputation for its literary approach to interpreting the *Book of Songs* and is a distinctive and important work in the history of *Shijing* studies. This work places particular emphasis on elucidating the implicit meaning beyond the literal words of the poems, seeking to overturn the long-established interpretations found in *Shixu* and *Shijizhuan*. Implicit meaning beyond the words is a common concept in poetics, which constitutes a branch of literary studies. Examining this concept in greater depth provides an entry point for understanding Fang Yurun's approach to interpreting the *Book of Songs* from a literary perspective.

Keywords: Fang Yurun, *The Original Book of Songs*, implicit meaning beyond the words, overturning established interpretations

1. Introduction

In the Qing dynasty, the schools of *Shijing* studies included not only the Song school, officially promoted by the government, the Han school, characterized by textual criticism, and the New Text school, which emerged in the late period, but also what Professor Xia Chuancai termed the "Independent Thinking School". Its members "stood outside the prevailing conflicts among the various schools, without sectarian or factional prejudice, and were capable of independent thought and free inquiry. They sought to explore the original meanings of the individual poems in the *Book of Songs (Shijing)* and achieved notable results. Among them were Yao Jiheng, Cui Shu, and Fang Yurun" [1]. Earlier, Hu Shi had expressed a similar view: "During that period (the Qing dynasty), several scholars studying the *Book of Songs* indeed surpassed both the Han and Song scholars in their understanding. These included Yao Jiheng, author of *General Explanation on The Book of Songs* (*Shijing Tonglun*); Cui Shu, author of *Occasional Notes on Reading the Odes* (*Du Feng Ou Shi*); and Fang Yurun, author of *The Original Book of Songs* (*Shijing Yuanshi*). They boldly overturned the outdated interpretations of the Han and Song scholars and examined the words, phrases, and content of the *Book of Songs* itself" [2].

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Fang Yurun (1811–1883), mentioned above, courtesy name Youshi, and self-styled Hongmengzi, was a native of Baoning, Yunnan (present-day Guangnan, Yunnan). In terms of independent thinking, Fang distinguished himself even more remarkably than Yao and Cui. His approach to interpreting the *Book of Songs* is primarily embodied in his work *Shijing Yuanshi*, which represents a culmination of premodern literary approaches to interpreting the classic and occupies a significant position in the history of *Shijing* studies. Fang's arguments draw upon three major works: the Han Confucian *Poetic Preface* (*Shixu*), Zhu Xi's *Collected Commentaries on the Book of Songs (Shijizhuan)*, and Yao Jiheng's *Shijing Tonglun*, while occasionally drawing on other scholars' interpretations as well. In his approach to interpreting the poems, Fang shifted his focus away from traditional textual exegesis and philosophical inquiry toward an investigation of the poets' original intentions in composing their works. His approach greatly advanced the literary interpretation of the *Book of Songs*, a mode widely adopted in modern scholarship. In the preface to *Shijing Yuanshi*, Fang stated: "My sole aim is to ascertain the original intentions of the ancients when composing their poems. I pay no heed to *Shixu*, *Shijizhuan*, or *Shijing Tonglun*. I follow what is correct and rectify what is incorrect. I have therefore titled this work *Shijing Yuanshi*, for my purpose is to trace the poets' original ideas at the time of composition" [3]. He further explained in the section *Shizhi* of *Shijing Yuanshi*: "*Shijizhuan* is certainly flawed, but the ancient *Shixu* is not necessarily free from error either. Rather than affirming one while rejecting the other, it is better to treat them equally, set aside both, and directly investigate the original intentions of the ancients in composing their poems. Only then might we hope to discover the truth" [3]. A comprehensive examination of these two statements reveals that, for Fang, the poets' original intentions constitute the central meaning of the poems and represent the initial poetic intentions that he persistently sought to uncover. To recover these original intentions, it was therefore essential to abandon the established interpretations of earlier scholars, particularly those represented by *Shixu* and *Shijizhuan*.

2. What is implicit meaning beyond the words

Implicit meaning beyond the words refers to meanings that are not explicitly expressed in speech or writing but can nevertheless be perceived by listeners or readers. Related expressions include "meaning beyond the words", "resonance beyond the notes", and "the unspoken meaning beyond the strings". This term has been employed in poetic criticism and first appeared in *Six-One Notes on Poetry* (*Liuyi Shihua*) by Ouyang Xiu, which quotes the following remarks by Mei Yaochen: "Although poets compose verses freely and spontaneously, finding the right words is by no means easy. A good poem must be novel in conception and skillful in diction, expressing what its predecessors have never expressed. It must be capable of depicting scenes that are difficult to describe as vividly as if they were before one's eyes, while also containing inexhaustible meaning that emerges beyond the words. Only then can it attain the highest level" [4]. Mei believed that a good poem should feature well-crafted lines and express what previous poets had not yet voiced. If a poem also contains meaning beyond its literal words, it reaches the highest realm of poetic achievement. Wang Fuzhi likewise stated: "When a line comes to an end but its meaning does not, and the rhyme changes but the meaning remains unchanged, this is an essential principle that no poet may disregard" [5]. In his view, implicit meaning beyond the words is a fundamental principle that poets must observe when composing poetry. Qian Mu once recalled his father's instruction to his elder brother on reading historical works: "When reading, one must grasp the implicit meaning beyond the words. A single written character may carry the implication of three unwritten ones; a single sentence may contain three unstated sentences. At such points, you must exercise your own discernment if you are truly to understand a book" [6]. In fact, the diction

of poetry is even more carefully selected and condensed than that of historical works. When studying poetry, one must pay close attention to the implicit meaning to grasp its profound connotations.

Implicit meaning beyond the words constitutes an important dimension of ancient Chinese poetic criticism. Whether a poem possesses such implicit meaning serves as one criterion for judging its quality, hence it is frequently discussed in poetic remarks across successive dynasties. In addition to the examples cited above, Sima Guang of the Song Dynasty remarks in his *Continued Poetry Remarks of Master Wen* (*Wengong Xu Shihua*) : "The *Book of Songs* says: 'The ewe has a huge head; three stars shine in the fish trap'. This signifies that such a state cannot endure for long. In ancient times, poets valued the art of placing meaning beyond words, allowing readers to reflect and discover it for themselves. Thus, those who spoke incurred no blame, while those who heard were sufficiently warned" [4]. In his *Notes from the Four Streams Studio (Siming Shihua)*, Xie Zhen of the Ming Dynasty quotes Li Mengyang: "The subtlety of ancient poetry lies in its suggestive depiction, what is termed 'moon in the water, flower in the mirror'—meaning beyond words. After the Song Dynasty, poets resorted to direct exposition instead" [7]. In the Qing dynasty, Yuan Mei wrote in his *Remarks on Poetry from Suiyuan* (*Suiyuan Shihua*): "A poem without implicit meaning is as tasteless as chewing wax". He then cited two poems by Yu Cangshi, a scholar from Hangzhou. The first, *Watching the Tightrope Walkers*, reads: "Balancing on a single line, one rises through danger and returns to safety; / Going back and forth, one never tires of watching. / Laughing at those who tread upon broad and level ground, / How can they still claim that walking is hard?" The second reads: "Though the clouds part and the evening rain clears, it is still unlike the dawn; / Though chrysanthemums bloom with autumn fragrance, they have already missed the spring". Yuan concluded that both poems contained meanings worthy of contemplation [8]. Here, Yuan recognized that implicit meaning gives poetry a lingering aesthetic appeal. Both poems he cited leave readers with a sense that something remains to be savored after reading, inviting repeated reflection and appreciation. Apparently, in the eyes of numerous poetic critics, the poems with implicit meaning are truly excellent.

There is no essential difference between the poems in the *Book of Songs* and poetic works of later ages. Fang likewise paid close attention to the implicit meanings within poems and sought to appreciate their artistic subtlety. For example, *Lie Wen*in *Zhou Song* is a poem in which King Cheng offers sacrifices to his ancestors and admonishes the feudal lords attending the ceremony. Fang considered the latter part of the poem particularly ingenious, as it depicts how the former kings remained in the memory of later generations because they were able to win the people's support and cultivate virtue. He particularly emphasized that King Cheng uses this example to encourage himself, which constitutes the implicit meaning of the latter part. Thus, the first part admonishes the feudal lords, while the latter part expresses King Cheng's self-encouragement. The ruler and his ministers encourage one another, giving the entire poem "an especially inexhaustible charm". Fang further remarked: "When the ancients interpreted the *Book of Songs*, once the explicit meaning had been conveyed, further layers of implication would emerge beyond the words, one after another without end. Only then could readers savour them endlessly. Consider this: if the latter part of this poem were absent, it would amount to nothing more than an admonition to the feudal lords. What meaning would it have then? Those who interpret the poem fail to understand this and instead invent groundless alternative explanations. How could they possibly grasp the poem's subtle purport?" [3]. Fang believed that the implicit layer of King Cheng's self-encouragement in the latter part gives the poem its lasting resonance and enables readers to appreciate its artistic appeal more fully. He also criticized Confucian scholars for failing to recognize such implicit meaning and consequently being unable to uncover the poem's subtle purport.

To demonstrate the importance of implicit meaning beyond the words in interpreting the *Book of Songs*, Fang offered interpretations of multiple other poems, with a particular focus on satirical poems. In 660 BCE,

the Di tribes invaded the State of Wei and killed Duke Yi of Wei. At this critical moment, when the ruler had been killed and the state was on the verge of destruction, Duke Huan of Qi assisted Duke Wen of Wei in rebuilding the State of Wei at Chuqiu. *Mu Gua* in *Wei Feng* is a poem implicitly satirizing the Wei people's requital toward Qi. Fang commented: "The Wei people never repaid Qi, from beginning to end. Not only did they fail to repay its kindness, but they also took advantage of the disorder caused by the rebellion of Qi's five sons to attack Qi while it was in mourning. What could constitute a greater betrayal of virtue? This is why the poem was composed. The poet dared not express the matter openly and therefore used a seemingly trivial incident to convey a satire, allowing readers to discover its meaning beyond the words for themselves. Poets often employ this approach when satirizing others" [3]. The poet's criticism could not be expressed directly and could only be conveyed through implicit meaning. Similarly, *Yang Zhi Shui* in *Tang Feng* is a poem that subtly satirizes Duke Zhao of Jin for guarding against Quwo. Duke Zhao enfeoffed his uncle Chengshi in Quwo. The junior branch based there gradually grew in strength, eventually eliminating the senior branch and taking its place. Fang commented on the poem: "When poets satirize others, they often place their intentions beyond the words rather than expressing them openly. Moreover, this poem exposes another's concealed schemes and concerns the fortune or misfortune of the ruler and the state! How could the poet dare to speak directly and bring destruction upon himself?" [3]. Since such matters concerned not only the fate of the ruler but also the poet's own safety, the poet naturally could not speak plainly and could only convey the satire indirectly through implicit meaning.

All the examples above convey meaning beyond their explicit words. Without careful and in-depth examination, readers may fail to understand the poets' intentions accurately. This is precisely where *Shixu* and *Shijizhuan*fall short. Their interpretations of poetic meaning often ran counter to reason and human sentiment, often owing to its failure to properly explore the poet's implicit meaning beyond the words. Fang repeatedly criticized these shortcomings. For instance, regarding the meaning of *Kai Feng* in *Bei Feng*, both *Shixu* and *Shijizhuan* interpret the poem as describing the prevalence of licentious customs in the State of Wei, claiming that even a mother of seven sons could not remain faithful to her husband. Fang dismissed this interpretation with evident disdain: "There are no licentious words in the poem itself, nor is there any licentious implication beyond its words. [...] If the mother of seven sons still wished to change her conduct and abandon her principles, there must have been some compelling reason. [...] Yet upon hearing her sons' words, the mother's thoughts immediately changed. Her sorrowful reluctance to part from her sons must have been even greater than theirs and made separation even more difficult for her. How, then, can she be described as licentious? [...] The preservation of this poem serves not only to praise filial sons but also to honor a virtuous mother" [3]. Earlier interpretations had used this poem to elaborate extensively on the prevalence of licentious customs in the State of Wei. Fang rejected this view and instead discerned, through the poem's implicit meaning, its praise of both filial sons and a virtuous mother.

3. The significance of emphasizing implicit meaning beyond the words

Implicit meaning beyond the words is an important subject in poetic theory. By emphasizing this concept in his approach to interpreting the *Book of Songs*, Fang placed particular emphasis on its literary dimension. Although Fang never explicitly claimed to interpret the *Book of Songs* through literary methods, he nevertheless unconsciously applied literary theories in his actual interpretations. It is therefore hardly surprising that later scholars classified him among "the scholars and poets of the Qing dynasty who discussed the *Book of Songs* from a literary perspective" [9]. For Fang, however, emphasizing implicit meaning beyond

the words served a more immediate and practical purpose: overturning the established interpretations of *Shixu* and *Shijizhuan*.

Shixu and *Shijizhuan* had been handed down over many centuries and contained numerous speculative interpretations. Their influence on scholars' thinking had consequently become deeply entrenched. To recover the poets' original intentions in composing their works, it was first necessary to break free from these intellectual constraints and critically reassess the established interpretations. The numerous problems associated with *Shixu* have long been controversial issues in the history of *Shijing* studies and remain an unavoidable subject in any discussion of the scholarship on the *Book of Songs*. *Shixu* habitually imposed historical events onto the meanings of poems. Fang criticized this tendency, stating: "The problem with the ancient *Shixu* in its interpretation of the poems lies in its excessive reliance on extraneous associations, particularly its tendency toward far-fetched explanations" [3]. Regarding the meaning of *Wan Lan* in *Wei Feng*, *Shixu* claims that the poem satirizes Duke Hui of Wei, while *Shijizhuan* simply states: "It is unclear what this refers to, and I dare not force an interpretation". Fang commented: "This is because (Zhu Xi) was intimidated by what *Shixu* had said and could find no grounds on which to offer an explanation" [3]. There have been various opinions concerning the date and authorship of *Shixu*. Professor Hong Zhanhou's view is representative of the general academic understanding: *Shixu* was originally a set of teaching outlines passed down among scholars of the Mao school of *Shijing* studies during the Han dynasty. It was not composed by a single individual at a particular time but was eventually compiled and finalized by Wei Hong in the Eastern Han dynasty [9]. More than a thousand years separated the great Confucian scholar Zhu Xi from Wei Hong, yet even Zhu Xi was intimidated by the interpretations of *Shixu* and hesitated to express his own views freely. After Zhu Xi was canonized as a sage in the Southern Song dynasty, his *Shijizhuan* became an officially prescribed textbook for the imperial examinations, imposing yet another layer of intellectual constraint on later Confucian scholars. In fact, Zhu Xi's own attitude toward *Shixu* underwent a substantial transformation, progressing from acceptance to doubt and eventually to outright rejection. After turning against *Shixu*, he enumerated numerous unreasonable aspects of its interpretations and then remarked: "Its other errors are too numerous to recount. Later generations, seeing *Shixu* placed at the beginning of each poem, dare not question its validity. When they encounter explanations that cannot be reconciled with the text, they often resort to embellishment and strained arguments to defend it. The harm it has caused to later scholars is considerable". Fang quoted and commented on this statement: "The errors in *Shixu* are indeed as you has indicated. However, the errors in *Shijizhuan* are even more serious than those in *Shixu*. How can this be explained?" [3]. In Fang's view, although *Shixu* contained errors, the detrimental effects of *Shijizhuan* were even greater.

Overturning the established interpretations of *Shixu* and *Shijizhuan* was by no means an easy task. For example, both works interpreted certain poems in *Shao Nan* as depicting sexual violence and coercion. Even when attempting to correct these interpretations, Fang could not express his objections without reservation. Instead, he first offered an extensive justification for challenging the established views: "When former worthy scholars and great Confucian masters interpreted the *Book of Songs* in this way, they must have had their reasons. How could a young and inexperienced scholar like myself presume to question them recklessly? Nevertheless, since these matters concern moral instruction and popular feeling, they cannot be left unexamined. Rather than offend the ancient sages and incur the accusation of distorting the classics, it is better to risk offending later Confucian scholars and avoid the charge of blindly echoing their views" [3]. His underlying argument was that, in order to safeguard moral instruction and popular feeling and ensure the accurate elucidation of the classical texts, even a junior scholar had to summon the courage to challenge the established interpretations of *Shixu* and *Shijizhuan*. Later Confucian scholars treated the interpretations of their predecessors as unquestionable standards, leaving little room for further progress in *Shijing* studies.

Consequently, a recurring pattern emerged in the history of *Shijing* studies after the Song dynasty: sometimes the school upholding *Shixu* gained prominence, while at other times the school following *Shijizhuan* prevailed. As Fang observed, "The two positions have repeatedly succeeded each other. When will this cycle ever end? Scholars devoted to the study of the classics have no way of knowing which direction to follow" [3]. As a result, research on the *Book of Songs* failed to make substantial further progress. Fang's approach to interpreting the poems differed fundamentally from that of many Confucian scholars. Despite his firm commitment to academic inquiry, even when challenging established interpretations, he still found it necessary to invoke broader principles such as moral instruction and popular feeling to justify his position.

The language of the *Book of Songs* is inherently implicit and therefore difficult to explain. Moreover, neither the Han nor the Song schools of *Shijing* interpretation were adept at uncovering meanings beyond the literal words. How, then, could they possibly grasp the poets' full intentions? In the *General Principles* (*Fanli*) of Fang's book, he offered the following assessment:

"Of the *Six Classics*, the *Book of Songs* is both the easiest to read and the most difficult to interpret. This is partly because it lacks titles and prefaces, but also because its diction and meaning are often subtle and implicit, containing layers of significance beyond the literal words. It is therefore unlike other books, whose meanings are generally explicit and readily understood. Moreover, the Confucian scholars who have interpreted the *Book of Songs* belong primarily to two schools: those devoted to textual criticism and those concerned with the explication of philosophical principles. Yet the temperaments of both schools are fundamentally at variance with the nature of poetry. Consequently, their interpretations often resort to far-fetched associations and rigid, mechanical reasoning. They inevitably fall either into excessive rigidity or into groundless speculation. How, then, could they possibly be expected to grasp the implicit meanings intended by the poets?" [3].

Fang held that among the Confucian classics, the *Book of Songs* was considered relatively easy to read. This view is not difficult to understand. *The General Catalogue of the Complete Library of the Four Treasuries* (*Siku Quanshu Catalogue*), in its bibliographic note on Zhu Xi's *Shijizhuan*, likewise states: "Of the Five Classics, only the *Book of Songs* is easy to read, and seven or eight out of ten learners study it" [10]. This stems from its harmonious rhythmic organization as a literary work, rendering it smooth and euphonious to read. Although many people studied the *Book of Songs*, interpreting it was by no means easy. Fang's observation that it "lacks titles and prefaces" reflects his consistent distrust of the Han dynasty *Shixu*. Indeed, in the preface to his own work, he explicitly denounced it as a "forged preface" [3]. As we know, later writers customarily added a short preface to their works to introduce the text and help readers understand the author's intentions. The *Book of Songs*, however, lacks such a feature, and its ancient meanings have long since been lost, making interpretation particularly difficult. As Pi Xirui observed: "Since the ancient meanings have been lost, even those that have survived to the present may not necessarily represent the original meanings of the *Book of Songs*. Although those who interpret the poems attempt to understand the poets' intentions through the texts, they struggle to find reliable evidence to support their interpretations. How, then, can they bring poets who lived thousands of years ago back to life and ask them to explain their own intentions? This is why the *Book of Songs* is even more difficult to interpret clearly than the other classics" [11]. Fang's assessment above also reveals two further reasons why the *Book of Songs* is difficult to interpret. First, its language and purport are implicit, rich in implications beyond the literal words. Second, the Han and Song schools of *Shijing* interpretation either concentrated exclusively on textual criticism and exegesis or devoted themselves entirely to expounding philosophical principles. The temperaments of both schools were too far removed from the nature of poetry, so they often failed to capture its implicit meaning. Since so many people studied the *Book of*

Songs, the negative influence of misleading interpretations was all the greater. It was therefore particularly urgent to overturn established interpretations.

Fang even proposed multiple possible interpretations of a single poem's implicit meaning, with the aim of encouraging readers to break free from the constraints of established interpretations. For example, regarding the meaning of *Pao You Ku Ye* in *Bei Feng*, Fang rejected both the *Shixu* interpretation that the poem satirizes Duke Xuan and the *Shijizhuan* interpretation that it generally condemns licentious individuals. After a detailed analysis of the structural layout and logical thread of this poem, he proposed several possible interpretations: "The poet's intention was not necessarily to satirize solely Duke Xuan, nor was it necessarily unrelated to him. The poet responded emotionally to the circumstances of the times and was moved by what he encountered. This is generally how the meanings of poems in *Feng* are formed. Therefore, it may be interpreted as a satire on the age, or as a satire on Duke Xuan; it may be understood as a warning to the world, or even as a warning to oneself. It is for readers skilled in interpreting the *Book of Songs* to draw broader connections from particular objects, immerse themselves in the text, and explore its implicit meanings. Only then can its meaning be grasped" [3]. Poets may be emotionally stirred by the circumstances of their times or by the things they encounter. Once such emotions arise, they need to be expressed; otherwise, they may remain suppressed and cause inner distress. Fang believed that the emotions expressed in this particular poem were not necessarily singular in nature. They might reflect criticism of society, criticism of Duke Xuan, a warning to the world, or even a warning to the poet himself. These could all have represented the poet's immediate state of mind and intended expression. Readers who are adept at interpreting the *Book of Songs* should therefore draw broader connections from particular objects and explore the poet's implicit intentions from multiple perspectives. Fang's interpretation of this poem may be regarded as a practical application of Dong Zhongshu's concept of "The Classic of Poetry has no fixed exegesis" (*Shi wu da gu*) in the section *Jinghua* of his *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu Fanlu*). The idea itself was not particularly novel. What makes Fang's discussion distinctive, however, is that he first devoted considerable attention to refuting the interpretations found in *Shixu* and *Shijizhuan*. This gives his argument a particular significance. It is not difficult to imagine that, having lived thousands of years after the poets, how could the authors of *Shixu* and *Shijizhuan* possibly have known their precise intentions? Their interpretations should not be treated as unquestionable doctrines. The urgent task for later scholars was to break free from such established views.

Let us now examine Fang's general discussion of *Zhou Nan*:

"*Shixu* associates nearly every poem with the Queen Consort; only *Han Guang* and *Ru Fen* touch upon King Wen. *Shijizhuan* follows this interpretation, maintaining that the first five poems all describe the virtue of the Queen Consort, while those following *Tao Yao* demonstrate the effects of King Wen's regulation of his family, and governance of his state, through which the world gradually comes to be at peace. In the final part, it returns to the interpretation of *Shixu*, holding that it echoes *Guan Ju* and that the Queen Consort also played a supporting role to King Wen. According to this interpretation, all the poems in *Zhou Nan* were composed in praise of the Queen Consort. In that case, why not simply call it *Zhou Song*? Or even *Taisi Song*? Why, then, is it called *Zhou Nan*? Since these poems are classified as *Feng*, they must have originated as folk ballads from villages and lanes, rather than as court compositions belonging to the *Ya* or *Song*. Furthermore, since they are classified as *Feng of a State*, they must reflect the customs of an entire state, rather than the practices of a single household. If every poem is now interpreted as praising the Queen Consort, yet the collection is still called *Zhou Nan*, does this not fundamentally contradict the meaning of its title? Moreover, who would deny that King Wen cultivated himself, regulated his family, governed his state, and ultimately brought peace to the world? Why, then, must the *Great Learning* be invoked to interpret the poems in *Feng*, thereby allowing philosophical principles to obstruct their wording and dust to obscure their purport? How can their gentle and

sincere purpose be understood, and how can their satirical implications be recognized? When Confucius expounded on the *Book of Songs*, he spoke of stimulation, observation, fellowship, and resentment. He invariably sought meaning beyond the literal words, rather than contriving far-fetched interpretations" [3].

Even after Zhu Xi rejected *Shixu*, quite a number of his interpretations continued to follow its ideas implicitly. For instance, in explaining the poems in *Zhou Nan*, he routinely began with the Queen Consort and King Wen, without demonstrating any substantial improvement over the ancient *Shixu*. Fang pointed out that *Zhou Nan* belongs to *Guo Feng* and that its poems must therefore have originated as folk ballads from villages and lanes, reflecting the customs and moral climate of an entire state. If every poem is interpreted as praising the Queen Consort, why not call the collection *Zhou Song* or *Taisi Song*? By challenging the established interpretations through an examination of the collection's title, Fang struck directly at the heart of the problem. *Shijizhuan* implicitly follows *Shixu*, together with its failure to investigate the poems' implicit meanings and offer fresh interpretations, constituted a significant shortcoming. More seriously, *Shijizhuan* imposed the principles of self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and bringing peace to the world from the *Great Learning* onto the poems of *Zhou Nan*. In its introductory explanation of *Zhou Nan*, the work states: "These poems serve to illuminate the flourishing customs of the former kings, enabling people of later generations in the world, who seek to cultivate themselves, regulate their families, govern their states, and bring peace to the world, to take them as models" [12]. Its general discussion of *Zhou Nan* further states: "The first five poems all describe the virtue of the Queen Consort. [...] Although their wording primarily concerns the Queen Consort, in essence they all serve to demonstrate the effects of King Wen's self-cultivation and family regulation. As for *Tao Yao* [...], it illustrates the effects of a well-regulated family and a well-governed state. *Han Guang* [...] reveals that the world had already begun to show signs of becoming peaceful" [12]. Once this interpretation was established, the wording and underlying purport of the poems became permeated with a strong Neo-Confucian atmosphere. Fang also pointed out that poets sometimes conveyed criticism implicitly through their words. If the poems were interpreted through far-fetched associations in *Shijizhuan*, would their satirical intentions still be discernible? Interpreting the *Book of Songs* requires an exploration of implicit meaning beyond the literal words, but implicit meaning is by no means far-fetched associations. Confucius's concepts of stimulation, observation, fellowship, and resentment involve discerning meaning beyond the words, whereas Zhu Xi's use of the *Great Learning* to explain the *Book of Songs* is clearly an instance of far-fetched associations.

Fang did not explicitly elaborate on the precise distinction between discerning implicit meaning and imposing far-fetched interpretations. Nevertheless, his opposition to using the *Great Learning* to interpret the *Book of Songs* was unequivocal. He also quoted Yao Jiheng's remark: "The *Great Learning* was not written to explain the *Book of Songs*. How absurd, then, to treat it as an interpretative work for the *Book of Songs* and use it to explain the poems!" [3]. The *Great Learning* originally had no direct connection with the *Book of Songs*. It was only after the Song Confucian scholars developed Neo-Confucianism that they began to cite this book in their interpretations, thereby taking the discussion far from the original subject. Viewed in this light, far-fetched interpretation can be understood as an extreme form of implicit meaning beyond the words. The distinction between the two lies in their starting points: implicit meaning takes the poem itself as its foundation and develops interpretations in accordance with its purport, whereas far-fetched interpretation takes other theories as its foundation and imposes them upon the poem. In short, in order to break through established interpretations, Fang emphasized the concept of "implicit meaning beyond the words" in his interpretation of the *Book of Songs*. At the same time, to prevent the excessive expansion of such interpretations, he established "far-fetched associations" as the outer boundary of interpretation.

4. Conclusion

In the history of *Shijing* studies, the Han Confucian *Shixu* and the Song Confucian *Shijizhuan* represent the two dominant paradigms of classical interpretation. Although they differ in their theoretical foundations, both take Confucian moral instruction as their central interpretive principle. For a long time, they dominated scholarly understandings of the *Book of Songs* and established a deeply rooted interpretive tradition that, to some extent, obscured the literary significance of the poems. In *Shijing Yuanshi*, Fang attempted to break away from this tradition by interpreting the *Book of Songs* from a literary perspective, making his work a distinctive contribution to the history of *Shijing* studies. As a long-established and important concept in classical Chinese poetics, implicit meaning beyond the words belongs to the field of literary studies. Examining Fang's interpretive practice through this concept helps clarify the distinctive approach that sets his work apart from the Han and Song tradition of Confucian classical interpretation. By elucidating the implicit meaning of the poems, Fang made persistent efforts to overturn the established interpretations of *Shixu* and *Shijizhuan*. In doing so, he contributed to a shift in the interpretive paradigm of the *Book of Songs* and provided important intellectual resources for subsequent literary studies of this classic.

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