

Reading Medieval Chinese Poetry

Text, Context, and Culture

Edited by

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Trading Literary Competence: Exchange Poetry in the Eastern Jin

Wendy Swartz

Poetics during the Eastern Jin 晉 dynasty (317–420) was largely shaped by *xuanyan* 玄言, a type of metaphysical discourse that primarily drew topics, ideas, and language from the *Yijing*, *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* (later collectively known as the “Three Mysterious Works,” *san xuan* 三玄), and their respective commentaries.¹ Most of the extant examples of *xuanyan* verse from this period are of the exchange or group variety, products of a social ritual pervasive among the Wei-Jin gentry class.² Exchange poetry in the *xuanyan* mode grew out of “pure conversation” (*qing tan* 清談), a scholarly practice and social activity with its own rules, criteria, and instruments.³ These conversations covered subjects ranging from metaphysics to epistemology to behavior and sought reconciliations between ideas from the Three Mysterious Works and the authority of the classics. As an extension of the conversational genre, Eastern Jin exchange poetry accorded the same priority to the Three Mysterious Works. In such poetic dialogues, the writer often skillfully couches his message to his friend in allusions drawn from these philosophical texts. Literary competence is equally required of the reader to decipher the codes within which the message is inscribed. The exchange of poems that draw from a shared and circumscribed set of cultural meanings ultimately affirmed a collective identity. Marcel Mauss observed that in archaic societies the exchange of goods and services served to establish a “bond of alliance and commonality.”⁴ The gift of

1 *Xuanyan* translates literally to “discourse on the mysterious [Dao].” The term *xuan* appears in the first chapter of the *Laozi* as a reference to the Dao: “These two [being 有 and non-being 無] have the same origin, but different names. Both are called the mystery (*xuan*); mystery upon mystery is the gateway to all marvelousness.” See also Paul W. Kroll’s useful explication of the term *xuan* in “Between Something and Nothing,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127 (2007): 409.

2 For a general survey in English of *zengda* (“presentation and response”) poetry in early medieval China, see David Zebulun Raft, “Four-syllable Verse in Medieval China” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 2007), 284–381.

3 Conversationalists often looked to the golden age of discourse, the Zhengshi 正始 era (240–49), for classic examples of rhetoric, style, argumentation, etc. Many of the written discourses adopted the structure of the dramatic dialogue, in which a “host” and a “guest” argue a topic in numerous rounds.

4 Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls (New

a poem and the return of one between literati men in premodern China was such a form of social compact that identified and banded together a certain group.

Shared appreciation of a select set of texts and interpretations attested not only to the bonds of friendship but also the participants' cultural stock. In an age in which poetic output increasingly became a type of cultural capital that could be converted into political gain or social prestige, poetic exchanges and social poetry allowed one to display one's ability to produce and interpret cultural products, a competence that is cultivated and transmitted within families or social groups.⁵ The degree of success in producing and interpreting cultural products to a great extent hinged upon one's mastery of texts and allusions. The accumulation and transmission of a certain cultural wealth through the subscription to a set of shared texts and methods as well as goals of study identified the membership of the literati elite and ensured its privileges. In early medieval China, cultural currency was very much based on fluency in *xuanxue* 玄學 discourse, a repertoire of arguments, notions, and values that permeated the lives and sensibilities of the literati and informed their views on aspects ranging from office, reclusion, and friendship, to the ideal character type and mindset.

A literary competence that specialized in *xuanxue* topics and terms consummated exchanges between Eastern Jin writers. In a stroke of rare good fortune during the early medieval process of textual preservation, a pair of exchange poems—one by Xie An 謝安 (320–385) and a response from Wang Huzhi 王胡之 (fl. 330–360s)—has been transmitted intact. The other exchange that I will treat in this essay is represented by only the response poem: Sun Chuo's 孫綽 (314–371) answer to Xu Xun's 許詢 (ca. 326–after 347) now lost poem. The value and interest in examining Sun's response here lie in at least two points: it supposedly summarizes the lost poem and it reveals what literary competence Sun Chuo reasonably expected of his audience, which is of as much interest to our discussion as whether the audience did in fact possess it.

Poetic transactions made through the medium of *xuanxue* issues and language did not begin in the Eastern Jin, though the trend reached its peak during this period. It is instructive therefore to review briefly an earlier and

York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 13; originally published as *Essai sur le Don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* (*L'Année Sociologique*, 1923).

5 For a fuller discussion of cultural capital in early medieval China, see *Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook*, ed. Wendy Swartz et al. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2014), 195–99.

well-known set of poetic correspondences from the end of the Western Jin between Liu Kun 劉琨 (271–318) and Lu Chen 盧諶 (285–351).⁶ In Lu Chen's tetrasyllabic poem and Liu Kun's response to it, these two relatives by marriage reflect on recent momentous events in their intertwined lives—from the fall of the north, the death of most members of their families during the turmoil, to Lu Chen's transfer from Liu Kun's staff to a new job with the Xianbei leader Duan Pidi 段匹磾 (d. 322), Liu Kun's rather dubious ally who would eventually order Liu's execution. Lu Chen expresses hope that Liu Kun will appreciate the meaning behind his words, which are reduced to mere expedient vehicles in the process of communication, following Wang Bi's 王弼 (226–249 CE) famous application of the Zhuangzian story of the fish trap and rabbit snare to his reading of the *Yijing*. Lu Chen also invokes the core lesson from Zhuangzi's "Qi wu lun" 齊物論 to place all things on the same level, which would enable one to become free from emotional entanglements. In response, Liu Kun admits his inability to level with equanimity such things as life and death, for he has found the Zhuangzian notion to be incommensurate to real experience and the clinging feelings of loss. What I want to highlight here is that their meditations on loss, both personal and public, are couched in discussions of big *xuanxue* topics of the day, such as the lesson of leveling all distinctions and the question of whether enlightened men are immune to feelings, which developed from Wang Bi's and He Yan's debate on whether sages possessed common feelings (a point that will be discussed below). This is an indication of the purchase that *xuanxue* claimed on poetic exchanges during the period. This type of cultural currency becomes even more pronounced as the primary medium of exchange in poetic dialogues after the move to the south.



The poetic exchange between Xie An and Wang Huzhi holds special interest not only because it is deeply embedded in the cultural discourse of the day but also because it brings into play contrary elements in this type of social interaction, such as camaraderie and competition, and personal communication and public performance. Xie An's life, documented from his early years as a recluse in the Eastern Mountains to his acceptance of office in 360, to his victory over Fu Jian 苻堅 (338–385) in the critical Battle of the Fei River (383), is well known to readers. The addressee of Xie An's poem, on the other hand, requires some

6 For a thorough study and translation of their writings, see David R. Knechtges' excellent article, "Liu Kun, Lu Chen, and Their Writings in the Transition to the Eastern Jin," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 28 (2006): 1–66.

introduction for he is little known today. Wang Huzhi was a prominent member of the illustrious Wang clan of Langye 琅邪 (in modern Shandong). His father, Wang Yi 王廙 (276–322), was the brother-in-law of Emperor Yuan 元 (r. 317–322), and a cousin of Wang Dun 王敦 (266–324) and Wang Dao 王導 (276–339), who dominated the early Eastern Jin court. Although Wang Huzhi regularly ranked among the period's most celebrated of gentry men, including his cousin Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), his friend Xie An,⁷ and the monk Zhi Dun 支遁 (314–366) according to numerous anecdotes from the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (Talk of the ages and new anecdotes), his biography remains no more than a rough sketch.⁸ It would seem that Wang assumed his first post by 334 as Secretarial Aide to Yü Liang 庾亮 (289–340), then garrisoned at Wuchang 武昌, and received his last appointment as the Regional Inspector of Sizhou 司州刺史, but died of illness before setting out for that post. By all extant accounts, he held a steady succession of positions, including Aide 長史 to Chu Pou 褚裒 (303–349), Governor of Wuxing 吳興太守, and Intendant of Danyang 丹陽尹, though the order in which he held these posts is none too clear.⁹ For the date of his death, modern scholars working with various traditional sources have supplied a wide range of years, from 349? to 371.¹⁰ Whether Wang

7 Xie An and Wang Huzhi were also related by marriage: Xie Chong 謝重 was the son of Xie Lang 謝郎, a talented nephew of Xie An, and was a grandson on the distaff side of Wang Huzhi. See *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 79.2087–88.

8 See, for example, *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏, ed. Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), 8/125, 8/131, 9/60, and 9/85.

9 In Wang Huzhi's biographical notice (*Jin shu*, 76.2005), the positions he held are listed in the following order: Governor (of Wuxing?), Palace Attendant, and Intendant of Danyang. Wang's service under Chu Pou, the father of the Dowager Empress, is mentioned in Chu's biography. In 345, when the Empress Dowager sought to have her father help administer the state on behalf of the child emperor Mu 穆 (r. 344–361), Wang Huzhi helped persuade Chu Pou to yield that role to the Prince of Guiji, Sima Yu 司馬昱 (320–372). See *Jin shu* 93.2416. *Zizhi tongjian* gives a different order for Wang's posts: in 356, he served as the Intendant of Danyang, and in 364, he served as the Governor of Wuxing.

10 Cao Daoheng 曹道衡 and Shen Yucheng 沈玉成 give the dates of (320?–349?); see their *Zhongguo wenxuejia dacidian: Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao juan* 中國文學家大辭典：先秦漢魏晉南北朝卷 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 20. Cao and Shen seemed to have inferred an approximate birth year of 320, which is the year in which Xie An was born, since Wang Huzhi's response poem contains lines that suggest their ages were proximate: "One still had a child's countenance,/ The other just started to don his kerchief" 或方童顏，或始角巾. See their *Zhongguo wenxue shiliao congkao* 中古文學史料叢考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), 211. This approximate year of birth is improbable, since by 333 or 334 Wang Huzhi was serving as a secretarial aide to Yü Liang in Wuchang, according to two anecdotes in *Shishuo xinyu* (14/24, 16/4). It is unlikely that he held the

Huzhi died before or after Xie An famously came out of reclusion to assume his first post in 360 as Commander under the powerful general Huan Wen 桓溫 (312–373),¹¹ and therefore whether he exchanged the following set of poems with Xie An while the latter was writing in reclusion or from office, is an uncertainty that renders more challenging (and interesting) the interpretation of Xie An's poem.

與王胡之詩 謝安

鮮冰玉凝	Fresh ice solid as jade
遇陽則消	Melts when met with sunlight.
素雪珠麗	Plain snow beautiful as pearls
4 潔不崇朝	Has a purity that won't last the morning.
膏以朗煎	Because of its shimmer, grease will sizzle away; ¹²
蘭由芳凋	For its fragrance, thoroughwort will wither away.
哲人悟之	A wise man understands this,
8 和任不標	He bears himself moderately without flaunting anything.
外不寄傲	Outwardly he does not express pride,
內潤瓊瑤	Inwardly he polishes that fine jade of his.
如彼潛鴻	He is like that hidden goose,
12 拂羽雪霄	Brushing its wing against the cloudy empyrean. ¹³

position as a mere teenager. Cao Daoheng and Shen Yucheng seem to have based their calculation of Wang Huzhi's year of death on the short and terse biographical notice in *Jin shu* (76.2005), which mentions that after Shi Hu 石虎 of Later Zhao 後趙 died (in 349), the southern court wished to pacify and integrate the areas between the Yellow River and the Luo River and hence appointed Wang to undertake the task as Regional Inspector of Sizhou 司州. "After he was invested with the official's tally, he resigned due to his illness. Before he could set off, he died." Richard Mather suggests the date of ca. 364 for his death; see his *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of the Tales of the World*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, Univ. of Michigan, 2002), 619. Mather likely relied on the chronology in *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑, which dates Wang's appointment as Regional Inspector of Sizhou to 364. See *Zizhi tongjian* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956), 101.3196. Hu Dalei 胡大雷 dates his death to 371; see his *Xuanyan shi yanjiu* 玄言詩研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 131.

11 See Xie An's biography in *Jin shu* 79.2073.

12 In *Zhuangzi* 4, "Ren jian shi," there is a passage describing how mountain trees, because they flourish, cause their own destruction by man's axe, and how grease in the flame, because it sizzles, burns itself up. These metaphors speak to a major point in the *Zhuangzi* on the virtue of uselessness for self-preservation. See *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, ed. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004; hereafter cited as *zzjs*), 4.186.

13 I suspect that 雪 is an errant character for 雲.

- 內潤伊何
 亹亹仁通
 拂羽伊何
 高栖梧桐
 頡頏應木
 婉轉蛇龍
 我雖異跡
 及爾齊蹤
 思樂神崖
 悟言機峰
 繡雲綺構
 丹霞增輝
 濛汜仰映
 扶桑散蕤
 吾賢領雋
 邁俗鳳飛
 含章秀起
 坦步遠遺
 余與仁友
 不塗不笥
 默匪巖穴
 語無滯事
- Polishing inwardly—what does this mean?
 He is tireless in comprehending benevolence.
 Brushing its wing—what does this mean?
 Loftily perching atop a *wutong* tree.
 It flies high and low, in accord with the right tree,
 Twisting and turning, now a snake, then a dragon.¹⁴
 Though I tread a different path,
 Our tracks are on a level.
 Our pleasure lies with the divine cliffs,
 We chat together about the wondrous peaks.
 Embroidered clouds structured like tabby-weave silk,
 Cinnabar haze increases its brilliance.
 At Mengsi we admire the sunlight,¹⁵
 At Fusang we watch the scattering blossoms.¹⁶
 Outstanding you are among your worthy peers,
 Surpassing the common in a phoenix's flight.
 With your store of virtue, you graciously arise,
 With an even gait, you lose yourself in the distance.
 You, my good friend, and I,
 Are neither muddled in freedom nor enshrined in
 reverence.¹⁷
 For silence one does not need cliffs and caves,
 In speaking, one does not need to become mired in things.¹⁸

- 36 櫟不辭社
 周不駭吏
 紛動囂翳
 領之在識
 會感者圓
 40 妙得者意
 我鑒其同
 物覩其異
 往化轉落
 44 運萃勾芒
 仁風虛降
 與時抑揚
 蘭栖湛露
 48 竹帶素霜
 藥點朱的
 薰流清芳
 觸地儻雩
 52 遇流濠梁
 投綸同詠
 褰褐俱翔
 朝樂朗日
- The *li*-oak did not mind being a shrine tree,¹⁹
 Zhuang Zhou was not fearful of being a clerk.²⁰
 Scattered movements and noises that conceal,
 Being able to discern among these is perspicacity.
 One who intuits this becomes accommodating,
 One who marvelously gets it, sees the meaning.
 I perceive in all their sameness,
 But things are seen for their difference.
- The ebb and turns of Transformation:
 Fortune concentrates on a slender shoot.
 Beneficent winds descended upon it in vain,
 It rises and falls with the times.
 Thoroughwort perches under a coat of dew,
 Bamboo wears a layer of white frost.
 Stamens are dotted with a vermilion luster,
 Their scent wafts a pure fragrance.
 Any place encountered becomes the Rain Altar,²¹
 Any river met becomes the dam of the Hao River.²²
 I cast my fishing line to the same tune,
 And lift my robe to soar together.
- At daybreak I rejoice in the bright sun,

出 (“going forth” or activism) and *chu* 處 (“staying still” or quietism). The passage underscores a fundamental lesson throughout the *Yijing* on proper timing and adaptability: “The Master says: ‘In the way of the gentleman, there is a time for going forth and a time for staying still; there is a time for silence and a time for speaking.’” Wang Bi, *Wang Bi jijiaoshi* 王弼集校釋, ed. Lou Yulie 樓宇烈 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 2:546.

- 19 The *li*-oak in *Zhuangzi* 4, “Ren jian shi,” was able to live unscathed because it was perceived as a useless tree. Thus, it does not mind being a tree that merely marks the local shrine. See ZZJS, 4.170.
- 20 According to the *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 63.2143, Zhuangzi once held the office of “clerk of the lacquer garden” (*qi yuan li* 漆園吏) in Meng (in the state of Liang). Just as the *yue*-oak did not mind being useless, Zhuangzi did not mind be useful (i.e., in service). Both the *li*-oak and Zhuangzi are represented to have transcended such a distinction.
- 21 In the *Analec*s (11/26), Zengzi had expressed a particular wish to go with some men and boys to bathe in the Yi River in late spring, enjoy the breeze on the Rain Altar, and go home chanting poetry. Confucius heartily concurred.
- 22 *Zhuangzi* once asserted to Huizi that he knows the joy of fish swimming in the Hao River by standing beside the river. See *Zhuangzi* 17, “Qiu shui” (Autumn floods).

- 56 嘯歌丘林 Whistling and singing through the wooded hills.
 夕翫望舒 In the evening, I take pleasure in the moon,²³
 入室鳴琴 Then enter my chamber to strum my zither.
 五絃清澈 The five strings are pure and stirring,
 60 南風披襟 The southern breeze brushes against my robe.
 醇醪淬慮 Fine ale quenches my worries,
 微言洗心 Subtle words cleanse my mind.
 幽暢者誰 To whom can I express hidden feelings?
 64 在我賞音 The one who understands my tune.²⁴

It would be reasonable for the modern reader, without knowledge of the historical context of the poem's composition, to delineate the following narrative: Xie An praises his friend's outstanding talent as the latter is poised "to take a phoenix's flight," a conventional metaphor for elevation to a post (ll. 27–28). In contrast, Xie An has charted a "different path" (l. 19), whose elevation is instead measured by the heights reached as he soars together with lofty-minded worthies of the past (ll. 51–54). Having recognized the danger of prominence in the examples of grease that burns itself out or the thoroughwort that wears itself out (ll. 5–6), he chooses instead to "cast a fishing line" (l. 53), an activity associated with the quietist life. The image of Fortune's beneficent winds vainly descending upon a slender shoot (ll. 43–46) might then sensibly be taken as a reference to the series of summonses that Xie An has received and declined. Indeed Xie's portrait of his life in the poem's last stanza bears all the markers of reclusion: the leisure and pleasure of roaming through the hills, singing, and playing the zither; a pure and carefree state of mind aided by the temperate southern breeze, fine ale, and the subtle words of *xuan* learning.

However, there is another plausible reading that can be substantiated by other images and even by some of the very same ones discussed above. In the alternate narrative, Xie An tries to persuade his friend that there is no difference between office and reclusion, since it is the mind rather than place that truly matters. Presumably writing from office, then, Xie An alludes to core lessons from "Qi wu lun" on the virtue of setting all things on the same level (ll. 19–20) and of seeing oneness instead of difference (ll. 41–42) as a prelude for

23 *Chuxueji* cites a passage not found in the extant version of the *Huainanzi* in which the term *wangshu* is glossed as "charioteer of the moon." See *Chuxueji* 初學記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 1.8. Wang Yi 王逸 in his commentary to *Chuci* 楚辭 also glosses the term thus. The term, by metonymy and periphrasis, also means the moon.

24 Lu Qinli 遼欽立, ed., *Xian-Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 905–6.

claiming spiritual transcendence over material position. For Xie An, what is important in this process is the ability to adapt with the times or to external circumstances. Previously, Xie An received and declined calls to office, but he understood that one “rises and falls with the times” (ll. 45–46). This echoes an earlier allusion to the *Zhuangzi* in the poem: “It flies high and low, in accord with the right tree,/ Twisting and turning, now a snake, then a dragon” (ll. 17–18). In the chapter “Shan mu” 山木 (Mountain tree), Zhuangzi’s disciple questions him about his definitive view on uselessness, which he generally champions over usefulness as a better strategy for self-preservation. This inquiry was prompted by an observation that worthlessness has led to diametrically opposite results: the worthlessness of a tree allowed it to live unharmed whereas that of a goose which could not cackle ensured that it was the first to be killed for dinner. Zhuangzi’s response is both characteristically playful yet ironically flighty, reinforcing in fact an emphasis in his philosophy on adaptability and freedom from any fixed stance. In his response to his disciple, he stakes a new position, now somewhere between worth and worthlessness, only immediately to undermine the very rationality of that place, in an infinite deferral of a stable determination.

Zhuangzi says smiling: “I, Zhou, would take a position somewhere between worth and worthlessness. Somewhere between worth and worthlessness seems like the place to be, but it really isn’t. Hence you’ll never be freed of trouble there. It would be quite different, however, if one were to ride upon the way and its virtue and drift and roam about: neither praised nor censured, now a dragon, then a snake, changing with the times, and never willing to hold to one thing alone. Now up, now down, using harmony as one’s measure, drifting and roaming with the ancestor of ten thousand things, treating things as things, but not letting things treat you as a thing—therefore how could you be burdened by trouble?”²⁵

莊子笑曰：「周將處乎材與不材之間。材與不材之間似之而非也，故未免乎累。若夫乘道德而浮遊則不然。无譽无訾，一龍一蛇，與時俱化，而无肯專為。一上一下，以和為量，浮遊乎萬物之祖，物物而不物於物，則胡可得而累邪。」

In the *Zhuangzi* story, keeping to determined hierarchies and rigid categories contradicts the Way. Indeed, throughout his philosophy the author continually challenges even his own statements to make that point. In Xie An’s application,

25 ZZJS, 20.667–68.

service and reclusion neither entail definitive stances nor set appraisals. Rather the *Zhuangzi* teaches one to “take harmony as one’s measure” (*yi he wei liang* 以和為量). Moreover, Xie An reminds his reader that even Zhuangzi had accepted office and did not fear that the position would detract from his presumed transcendence and freedom (l. 36). The ability to view service and reclusion with flexibility and parity marks a distinct medieval kind of spiritual superiority: perspective is freed of physical position and derives instead from an elevation of mind. The enjoyment of the quietist life described in the last stanza is made more remarkable, then, by the official position he occupies.

These two rather different narratives pieced together from Xie An’s poem would forever hang in a precarious and uncertain balance had Wang Huzhi’s response poem not survived, as was the fate of many poems during the medieval process of textual transmission, which more often than not left an exchange poem that fortunately survived without its partner. Although Wang Huzhi and Xie An may well have exchanged more than one poem over the course of their friendship which spanned decades, structural similarities and rhetorical resonances beyond thematic commonalities identify the two poems as belonging to a pair, as we will soon see. Wang Huzhi’s response casts Xie An in a role that later readers, whose imagination has been largely shaped by stories of Xie An playing the high-minded recluse in the *Shishuo xinyu*, are less accustomed to seeing: the one who persuades or rallies another to take a post.

答謝安詩

王胡之

荆山天峙
辟立萬丈
蘭薄暉崖
瓊林激響
哲人秀舉
和璧夜朗
凌霄矯翰

Mount Jing rises into the heavens,
Its cliffs stand over ten thousand meters.
A thoroughwort patch glows on the precipice,
An emerald forest stirs making echoes.
A wise man distinguishes himself in his fineness,
Bian He’s jade even sparkles at night.²⁶
Lifting its feathered wings to soar to the empyrean,

26 A popular allusion signifying real worth and the ability to discern it. *Han Feizi* 13 tells the story about Bian He, who found a precious piece of crude jade in the mountains of Chu. He presented the gem to two successive kings of Chu, whose gem experts deemed the stone in question to be only ordinary. Each time, the king ordered one of Bian He’s legs to be cut off as punishment. Legless, Bian He wailed at the foot of Mount Jing, lamenting that the precious gem would go unacknowledged. When the next Chu king heard about this, he had his gem expert examine the stone and this time it was recognized for its worth. See *Han Feizi ji jie* 韓非子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998) 4.95, and *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 7.135–36.

- 32 余與吾生 Me and my good fellow,
相忘隱机 We forget about one another as we lean against an
 armrest.²⁹
- 泰不期顯 To live in “Peace” and not expect prominence,
在悴通否 Misery is linked with “Obstruction.”³⁰
- 36 人間誠難 The world of men is truly hazardous,
通由達識 To navigate it calls for a man of knowledge and perspicacity.
才照經綸 Your talent shines brilliantly in statecraft,
能泯同異 And can also obliterate any differences.
40 鈍神幽疾 I shall dull my spirit, conceal my ailments,
宜處無事 Best to dwell upon no affair.
遇物以器 Approach things according to their nature,
各自得意 Then each gains its own fulfillment.
長短任真 Be it long or short, abide only in genuineness,³¹
44 乃合其至 Then each may be equal to its destiny.
- 疇昔宴遊 In the past, we fêted and roamed together,
繾綣髻亂 A tender attachment formed since our childhood.
或方童顏 One still had a child’s countenance,
48 或始角巾 The other just started to don his kerchief.
褰褐攬帔 I lift my robe and grasp onto my cloak,
濯素□吝 To wash myself in pure water to [dispel?] any base
 thoughts.

29 In the opening of *Zhuangzi* 2, “Qi wu lun,” Nanguo Ziqi “leaned against an armrest” (*yin ji* 隱机) with a look of profound detachment and tranquility. He describes contemplating the piping of Heaven, which blows on the myriad things in different ways so that each may be self-so, and compared it against the lesser kinds of piping of earth and men. See *ZZJS*, 2.43–50.

30 The sequential order of the *Yijing* hexagram 11 “Tai” 泰 (Peace) and hexagram 12 “Pi” 否 (Obstruction) posits that the depletion of Peace leads to (“is linked with”) the rise of Obstruction, during which, according to the *Xiang zhuan* 象傳 (Commentary on the images) warning, the gentleman should not receive rank and salary and should “hold back his virtue to avoid calamity.” *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi*, 1:276–82.

31 In *Zhuangzi* 24, the titular character, the lowly and poor Xu Wugui 徐无鬼, levels his position with that of Marquis Wu before teaching the latter on governance: “That which Heaven and earth nourish is the same. To have climbed to a high position cannot be considered an advantage; to dwell in low station cannot be considered a disadvantage.” The comparison here implies by extension the difference between office and reclusion. *ZZJS*, 24.826.

- 壑無深流 The ravine has no deep current,
 52 丘無囂仞 The hills have no measure of clamor.
 今也華髮 Today both with our white hair,
 卑高殊韻 High and low, we sing to a different tune.
 形跡外乖 The paths we tread may disagree on the surface,
 56 理暢內潤 The truths we freely express nourish us both inside.
- 巢由坦步 Chaofu and Xu You trod an even pace,³²
 稷契王佐 Ji and Xie aided sage kings.³³
 太公奇拔 The Grand Minister was outstandingly rare,³⁴
 60 首陽空餓 Bo Yi and Shu Qi starved in vain on Mount Shouyang.³⁵
 各乘其道 Each journeys along his own way,
 兩無貳過 And neither is wrong.³⁶
 願弘玄契 I wish to advance points of mystery,
 64 廢疾高臥 Handicapped by illness, I recline in loftiness.
- 來贈載婉 What you presented to me is congenial,
 妙有新唱 In its subtlety, there are new notes.
 博以兼濟 It breadthens me with the teaching of bringing succor to all,
 68 約以理當 And it keeps me to correct principles.
 非不悅子 It is not that I do not want to please you,
 駑驥殊量 It is just that nags and chargers have different capacities.
 鳥養養之 Nourish a bird with what would nourish it,³⁷
 72 任其沈颺 Let it plunge or soar as it would.
 取諸胸懷 I gather my various meditations,
 寄想郢匠 And send my thoughts to the carpenter at Ying.³⁸

32 According to the *Gaoshi zhuan* 高士傳 (Accounts of high-minded men), the legendary recluse Xu You washed his ears at the Ying River after hearing sage-king Yao's offer to make him the leader of the Nine States. Later his friend Chaofu berated Xu You for making himself prominent rather than secluding himself as a proper recluse should. See Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐, *Gaoshi zhuan* (SBY), 1.3a.

33 Virtuous ministers who served under sage-kings Yao and Shun.

34 Taigong, or Taigong Wang 太公望, was discovered by King Wen and later aided King Wu in the conquest of Shang and founding of Zhou.

35 The famous pair of Shang dynasty brothers who chose to starve themselves by eating only bracken on Mount Shouyang, rather than live in the service of the new Zhou dynasty.

36 This line draws from *Analects* 6/3, in which Confucius praises Yan Hui for "never making the same mistake twice" (*bu er guo* 不貳過).

37 An allusion to *Zhuangzi* 18, "Zhi le" 至樂, in ZZJS, 18.621. See my discussion below.

38 *Xian-Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 886–87. In a parable about sympathetic understanding between friends from *Zhuangzi* 24, "Xu Wugui," a plasterer in Ying 郢 (capital of

Whereas Xie An noted that he and Wang tread upon different paths but leveled that difference, Wang Huzhi affirms their different tunes and maintains the distinction. Rather than to see the different as really the same, as Xie claimed with reclusion and service, Wang accepts differences as each simply acting according to its own nature. For Wang, neither service nor reclusion is categorically or inherently right or wrong: in stanza 7, he juxtaposes ancient ministers (Ji, Xie, and Taigong Wang) with legendary recluses (Chaofu, Xu You, Bo Yi, and Shu Qi) to illustrate the argument that differences cannot be assessed by any fixed, absolute notion of correctness: they were each celebrated for the different paths they chose. Beyond right and wrong, reclusion or service each allows different natures to find their own fulfillment. In stanza 5, Wang duly distinguishes his nature and destiny from Xie An's. Unlike his friend, Wang believes he lacks the requisite knowledge and perspicacity to maneuver through the perilous world of affairs. Xie An's talent enables him to master the art of statecraft as well as level all differences, a praise covering both his achievement in public service as well as in *xuan*-learning. By contrast, Wang Huzhi pledges to dull his spirit, conceal his ailments, for he deems it best "to dwell upon no affair" (l. 40).

Wang Huzhi seems to have drawn a different lesson from "Qi wu lun" to justify his stance. In the same stanza, he writes:

遇物以器	Approach things according to their nature,
各自得意	Then each gains its own fulfillment.
長短任真	Be it long or short, abide only in genuineness,
乃合其至	Then each may be equal to its destiny.

In the famous parable of the autumn hair and Mount Tai, as interpreted by Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312), difference is not denied, but rather all things are unified by the same act of each fulfilling its own nature:

To make a comparison in terms of physical form, then Mount Tai is larger than the tip of an autumn hair. But if each accords with its own nature and function, and things tacitly harmonize with their ultimate capacity, then the largeness of a physical form is not excessive and the smallness of a physical form is not insufficient. If each is sufficient to its own nature,

Chu) so trusted his friend Carpenter Shi 石 that he would ask the carpenter to slice off specks of mud that got on his nose. The carpenter would wield and move his axe like the wind, while his friend stood without losing his calm countenance the whole time. *ZZJS*, 24.843.

then the tip of an autumn hair would not singularly consider its smallness as small and Mount Tai alone would not singularly consider its largeness as large. If that which is sufficient to its own nature is considered large, then nothing under heaven is more sufficient than the tip of an autumn hair. If that which is sufficient to its own nature is not considered large, then even Mount Tai can be called small.³⁹

夫以形相對，則大山大於秋豪也。若各據其性分，物冥其極，則形大未為有餘，形小不為不足。〔苟各足〕於其性，則秋豪不獨小其小而大山不獨大其大矣。若以性足為大，則天下之足未有過於秋豪也；（其）〔若〕性足者（為）〔非〕大，則雖大山亦可稱小矣。

Large and small are neither absolute nor even meaningful terms: the key is for something to be “sufficient to its own nature” (*zu yu qi xing* 足於其性) and “tacitly harmonize with its ultimate capacity” (*wu ming qi ji* 物冥其極). Wang Huzhi adapts the rhetoric from Guo Xiang’s commentary in his argument responding to Xie An’s insistence on seeing only sameness where others see difference (ll. 41–42). Wang seems to tell his friend this: “‘be it long or short’ (that is to say, office for you and withdrawal for me), we must each abide in our genuine nature. Only then may each of us be equal to our own destinies or capacities.”

We must also consider that Wang Huzhi’s emphasis on acting according to one’s nature and capacity may have been as much a philosophical argument as perhaps an assessment of his own physical circumstances. Although he refers to their “white hair” (l. 53) and proximate age in the poem (“One still had a child’s countenance,/ The other just started to don his kerchief”), he was almost certainly older than Xie An, given the arithmetic possibilities of these known dates: Wang was serving on Yu Liang’s staff by 334 and Xie was born in 320. Wang could hardly have entered service to aid the most powerful man at court as a mere pubescent. As well, the excuse of an illness in line 39 and again in line 64 was surely no gesture of demureness on Wang’s part: he suffered from what was probably epilepsy (*feng xuan ji* 風眩疾) throughout his life. He was said to have “long fits of the shakes, while keeping his wits about him.”⁴⁰ Seen from this light, the implicit comparison of Xie An to a charger and himself

39 *zzjs*, 2.81. I have consulted Wing-Tsit Chan’s translation in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), 329.

40 *Jin shu*, 79.2073

to a nag in the last stanza seems more a realistic appraisal than conventional, polite self-subordination in literary exchanges.

Both Xie An and Wang Huzhi drew from the same *xuanxue* repertoire what each needed to make different arguments about their respective advocacy, office or reclusion. According to Xie An, engagement is no different from seclusion if one's mind transcends physical place. To be able to see all things as leveled renders any place the Rain Altar from the *Analects* and any river the dam of the Hao River from the *Zhuangzi*, both symbolic of spiritual detachment and lofty enjoyment. For Wang Huzhi, differences are differences, but there is neither right nor wrong so long as each acts according to its own nature. Wang reinforces his point with another allusion to the *Zhuangzi* in his final plea to his friend for a sympathetic understanding of his particular nature and capacity, reminding Xie An what Carpenter Shi had shown to his friend the plasterer of Ying in yet another story from the *Zhuangzi*:

鳥養養之	Nourish a bird with what would nourish it,
任其沈颺	Let it plunge or soar as it would.
取諸胸懷	I gather my various meditations,
寄想郢匠	And send my thoughts to the carpenter at Ying. ⁴¹

In *Zhuangzi* 18, Confucius tells the parable of the sea bird and Marquis of Lu to his disciple Zigong. Once when a sea bird landed in the suburbs of Lu, the marquis thought it would be grand to treat it to banquets and entertainment. The bird, confused and sad, did not eat or drink anything and was dead within three days. “This is to nourish the bird with what would nourish oneself, and not to nourish the bird with what would nourish it” 此以己養養鳥也，非以鳥養養鳥.⁴² Wang Huzhi tells Xie An in no uncertain terms the type of nourishment best suited to him: he merely wishes to “advance points of mystery” and “recline in loftiness” (ll. 63–64). For Xie An to attempt to feed Wang his own type of nourishment, that is to say, success in statecraft, could only lead to an unfortunate end for Wang.

Xuanxue notions and values also deeply colored their discourse on the ideal character type. This conversation seems to begin as an exercise in trading compliments. In the opening stanza of his poem, Xie An describes “the wise man” (*zheren* 哲人), or his idealized notion of Wang Huzhi, in terms indicating the early medieval values of outward modesty and inward cultivation:

⁴¹ See n. 37 above.

⁴² ZZJS, 18.621.

哲人悟之	A wise man understands this,
和任不擻	He bears himself moderately without flaunting anything.
外不寄傲	Outwardly he does not express pride,
內潤瓊瑤	Inwardly he polishes that fine jade of his.

In the fourth stanza, description seems to turn into prescription as Xie An appears to give lesson on how the ideal man *should* behave:

默匪巖穴	For silence one does not need cliffs and caves,
語無滯事	In speaking, one does not need to become mired in things.
櫟不辭社	The <i>li</i> -oak did not mind being a shrine tree,
周不駭吏	Zhuang Zhou was not fearful of being a clerk.
紛動囂翳	Scattered movements and noises that conceal,
領之在識	Being able to discern among these is perspicacity.
會感者圓	One who intuits this becomes accommodating,
妙得者意	One who marvelously gets it, sees the meaning.

This calls to mind Wang Bi's famous response to He Yan about whether sages possessed emotions. He Yan had opined that the sages were free from feelings of pleasure, anger, sadness or joy, but Wang Bi argued that sages, like others, have common emotions. However, unlike others, the sages possess an uncommon, numinous intelligence that enables them to identify with nothingness. Thus, according to Wang Bi, their emotions are such that "they respond to things, but without becoming attached to things" 應物而無累於物.⁴³ Just as the sages could possess feelings without being burdened by them, the wise man could enter service without being weighed down by the trammels of office. For Xie An, superior understanding, or perspicacity, consists in the ability to see through and filter out the clutter of movements and noises in the mundane world.

Not exactly in return, Wang Huzhi's portrait of the ideal man seems to apply more to himself than to his friend. The lines emphasizing inward examination and a behavior that is pure, natural, and flawless read like the self-justification of a man trying to deflect an unwanted proposition from a friend.

矯翰伊何	Lifting its feathered wings—what does this mean?
羽儀鮮潔	His bearing and behavior are fresh and flawless.

43 See Wang Bi's biography by He Shao, as appended to Zhong Hui's biography in *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 28.795.

清往伊何	Going to purity—what does this mean?
自然挺徹	He is steadfast and penetrating in a natural way,
易達外暢	His ease of understanding is outwardly expressed,
聰鑒內察	His sharp reflection inwardly examines.

Moreover, the intent of the wise man in Wang's version lies not in the "comprehension of benevolence" (*ren tong* 仁通) as in Xie's idealized version of either the wise man or Wang Huzhi, but rather in a certain purity (*qing* 清), which is consistent with the quietist tenor of his response poem.

Friendship is the context of the exchange between Wang and Xie, but it is also a main subject of discourse in Wang Huzhi's poem. Again Zhuangzian values inform his conception.

利交甘絕	Friendships forged in profit are sweet but doomed to end,
仰違玄指	They contradict the teachings of the mysterious.
君子淡親	Friendships of a gentleman are insipid but lead to affection,
湛若澄水	They are transparent as limpid water.

A passage from *Zhuangzi* 20, "Shan mu," contrasts the friendship of a gentleman against that of a small man: the former is "insipid like water" (*dan ruo shui* 淡若水), while the latter is "saccharine like sweet wine" (*gan ruo li* 甘若醴). "The insipidness of the gentleman's friendship leads to affection, whereas the sweetness of the small man's friendship leads to its end" 君子淡以親，小人甘以絕.⁴⁴ The insipid leads to affection precisely because it can last through the process. Indeed, affects held in reserve tend to retain their strength and longevity. This contrasts with the flavorful, "whose intensity and seductiveness are doomed to wear themselves out," to borrow François Jullien's astute observation on the virtue of blandness.⁴⁵ This lesson on insipid versus sweet friendship from the *Zhuangzi* resonates with that on prominence and reserve, to which Xie An alluded in these lines from stanza 1:

膏以朗煎	Because of its shimmer, grease will sizzle away;
蘭由芳凋	For its fragrance, thoroughwort will wither away.

44 zzJS, 20.685.

45 Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*, tr. Paula Varsano (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 51.

A passage from *Zhuangzi* 4, “Ren jian shi” (Affairs in the world of men), describes how mountains trees, because they flourish, cause their own destruction by man’s axe, and how grease in the torch, because it shimmers, burns itself up.⁴⁶ Expenditure leads to exhaustion, whereas reserve carries to preservation.

Xuanxue values not only articulate Wang’s notion of friendship but ultimately identify his friends. Wang Huzhi reminds Xie An that their relationship has been sustained through a shared pursuit of *xuan*, despite any superficial difference that Xie has (rather relentlessly) attempted to suppress.

我雖異韻 及爾同玄 (ll. 23–24)	Though my tune is different than yours, I share with you a pursuit of the mysterious,
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形跡外乖 理暢內潤 (ll. 55–56)	The paths we tread may disagree on the surface, The truths we freely express nourish us both inside.
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By this account, a pursuit of *xuan* has forged a unity between two men of different vocations, which Wang Huzhi has reduced to a matter of mere superficial difference. More broadly, the early medieval intellectual class used this pursuit as a self-identifying marker, cutting across not only different vocations but even different time periods and religious orders. Sun Chuo provides a good illustration of this point in his “Discussion on Monks and Worthies” (*Dao xian lun* 道賢論), which compares seven monks with the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove. He identifies the monk Zhi Dun with the *xuanxue* scholar Xiang Xiu 向秀 (ca. 227–272) on the basis of a common pursuit: “[both] greatly esteemed the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi*. Although the two masters were of different times, they shared in the same aloof air and a fondness for *xuan*” (*feng hao xuan tong* 風好玄同).⁴⁷

Sun Chuo’s poem to Xu Xun is perhaps one of the most significant examples of the cultural currency in which writers of that period traded, partly because the two were considered the deans of *xuanyan* poets and partly because his poem is steeped in *xuanxue* terms and notions. In Sun Chuo’s poem, the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* lead as the most dominant source texts and references to Lao-

⁴⁶ See ZZJS, 4.186.

⁴⁷ Sun, “Dao xian lun,” in *Quan Jin wen* in *Quan Shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 62.1813a.

Zhuang concepts largely frame the dialogue between the two friends as constructed by Sun Chuo.

答許詢詩九章 Response to Xu Xun, A Poem in Nine Stanzas

	仰觀大造	Upward we observe the Great Design,
	俯覽時物	Downward we watch seasons' things.
	機過患生	When opportunity passes, calamity arises,
4	吉凶相拂	Good and ill fortune press upon one another.
	智以利昏	Wisdom is dulled by profit, ⁴⁸
	識由情屈	Perspicacity is sapped by feelings. ⁴⁹
	野有寒枯	In the wilds, there is withering from cold,
8	朝有炎鬱	While at court, there is stifling from heat.
	失則震驚	If with failure you "tremble with fear," ⁵⁰
	得必充詘	With success, you'll surely "succumb to fullness." ⁵¹
	峨峨高門	Tall and towering may be the lofty gates,
12	鬼闖其庭	Though ghosts can spy into those courtyards.
	弈弈華輪	Sparkling and stunning may be the ornate wheels,
	路險則傾	But perilous roads can overturn them.

48 Wisdom (*zhi* 智) and profit (*li* 利) are discussed in *Laozi* 19 as things to be discarded in order to revert back to simplicity and the Dao.

49 Perspicacity (*shi* 識) has a negative valency in the *Laozi*. In chapter 20, Laozi says: "I alone am doltish and rustic." Wang Bi's commentary explains this line by devalorizing perspicacity: "I have nothing that I want to do. I am so muddled and oafish that I appear to know nothing at all." Wang Bi, 1:48; Lynn, 84. In chapter 38, "foreknowledge" (*qianshi* 前識) is defined as "the embellishment of the Dao and the beginning of dullness." Wang Bi glosses foreknowledge as "knowing something before others," which describes men of "inferior virtue," who are activist and who labor over worldly matters, but only to achieve an adverse end. Better to embrace simplicity and the uncarved block (*su pu* 素樸), explains Wang Bi. See *Wang Bi ji jiao shi*, 1:94–5. The Heshang Gong edition of the *Laozi* has a line from chapter 57 "I am free of feeling, and the common folk achieve purity on their own" 我無情，民自清, in place of "I am free of desires, and the people achieve simplicity on their own" 我無欲，人自朴 in Wang Bi's edition. See the comment in Bi Yuan's 畢沅 *Laozi Daodejing kaoyi*, as cited in *Laozi jiao shi* 老子校釋, ed. Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984).

50 "Tremble with fear" (*zhen jing* 震驚) is drawn from *Shijing* 263, "Chang wu" (Always mighty), a poem praising the Zhou king's conquest of Xu (in the Huai River region).

51 "Succumb to fullness" (*chong qu* 充詘) is drawn from the *Liji* 禮記 (41.894): "Ru scholars do not lose integrity in poverty and low station, nor do they succumb to fullness in wealth and honor 不充詘於富貴."

- 前轉摧軸 Up ahead, the carriage shaft has smashed its axle,
 16 後鸞振鈴 Behind, bird bells shake its grelots.
 將隊競奔 A general leads his troops in a hasty advance,
 悔在臨頸 Regret comes only with an axe on one's neck.
 達人悟始 Men of insight understand the causes:
 20 外身遺榮 Thus set aside self, leave behind honor.
- 遺榮榮在 Leave behind honor, and honor remains intact,
 外身身全 Set aside self, and self stays whole.⁵²
 卓哉先師 Peerless were our former teachers,⁵³
 24 修德就閑 They "cultivated virtue and pursued leisure."⁵⁴
 散以玄風 They relaxed in the wind of mystery,
 滌以清川 And washed themselves in the clear stream.
 或步崇基 One walks on elevated ground,⁵⁵
 28 或恬蒙園 Another is contented in the garden in Meng.⁵⁶
 道足匈懷 If the Way is complete and held within,
 神棲浩然 Then one's spirit will settle in the boundless.⁵⁷
- 咨余冲人 Alas! I am but an adolescent,
 32 稟此散質 Endowed with mediocre qualities.
 器不韜俗 My capabilities don't surpass the common,
 才不兼出 My talents don't stand out from the crowd.
 斂衽告誠 I pull together my lapels and state my sincerity,

52 This paradox of casting aside X, but X remains preserved recalls a similar argument against valorization and meddling action in the *Laozi*: see, for example, chapter 66, which states that "It is because he does not contend that none among all under Heaven can contend with him." Trans. Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-Te Ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1999), 173.

53 "Former teachers" refers to Laozi and Zhuangzi.

54 The phrase is taken from *Zhuangzi* 12, "Tiandi" (Heaven and earth): "When the world is without the Way, then he [the sage] cultivates his virtue and pursues leisure [i.e. retirement]." ZZJS, 12.421.

55 *Chongji* 崇基 may mean either "a high altar" or "a mountain," hence my translation of it as "elevated ground."

56 A reference to Zhuangzi, who according to the *Shiji* (63.2143), held a minor position in the "lacquer garden" (*qi yuan* 漆園) in Meng (in the state of Liang).

57 A reference to a well-known passage in the *Mencius* (2A/2), in which he spoke about being good at cultivating his "flood-like qi" (*haoran zhi qi* 浩然之氣). This *qi*, according to Mencius, conjoins rightness and the Way, and, if unobstructed, can fill the space between Heaven and Earth.

- 36 敢謝短質 How dare I excuse myself because of my inadequate qualities?
 冥運超感 May the unseen workings let me transcend feelings,
 邁我玄逸 And meet me with a mystic detachment.
 宅心遼廓 I lodge my mind in infinite vastness,
 40 咀嚼妙一 And savor the marvelous oneness.⁵⁸
- 孔父有言 Father Kong has a saying:
 後生可畏 “Those later born may be held in awe.”⁵⁹
 灼灼許子 Bright and brilliant is Master Xu,
 44 挺奇拔萃 Outstandingly rare, strikingly singular.
 方玉比瑩 Comparable to jade, likened to gemstone,
 擬蘭等蔚 Matched with thoroughwort, equated with artemesia.
 寄懷大匠 Entrusting his feelings to the Great Carpenter,⁶⁰
 48 仰希遐致 He gazes upward with remote intent.
 將隆千仞 If he were to raise up something to a thousand *ren*,
 豈限一匱 How could he stop short of one basketful?⁶¹
- 自我提攜 Since I last clasped your hand,
 52 倏忽四周 Suddenly four years have passed.
 契合一源 We join in agreement with a single source,
 好結回流 And made a bond of friendship by the returning current.
 泳必齊味 In wading we are sure to harmonize our tastes,
 56 翔必俱遊 In soaring we are sure to roam together.
 懽與時積 Our joys accumulated with time,
 遂隆綢繆 Hence we became deeply close-knit.
 一日不見 “A single day without seeing you,”

58 A reference to the all-embracing unity of the Dao; see, example, *Laozi* 22 and 39.

59 A quotation from *Analects* 9/23 about how those later born may one day surpass their elders. The rest of the stanza reads as an encouraging praise of Xu Xun, who was younger than Sun Chuo.

60 The Great Carpenter in *Laozi* 74 is a figure of the Dao: “It rarely happens that one who tries to do the hewing instead of the great carpenter does not injure his own hand.” Trans. Lynn, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue*, 183. The lesson here is that one should not assume the work of the Dao (or the Great Carpenter) for action, something contrived, is injurious. This underscores the basic argument in the *Laozi* that non-action is best.

61 In *Analects* 9/19, Confucius says, “As in building a mound, if one basketful before completion, I stop, then I stopped. As in leveling the ground, if I tip over one basketful, I am advancing, then I have made progress.” The lesson is to make constant, unceasing effort, presumably in learning and progress toward the Way.

- 60 情兼三秋 Felt to me the same as “three autumns.”⁶²
- 矧乃路遐 All the more now that your road leads faraway,
致茲乖違 Here we have come to part ways.
爾託西隅 You will consign yourself to the western corner,
64 我滯斯畿 While I shall remain in this domain.
寂寂委巷 Quiet and still in a winding alley,
寥寥閑扉 Desolate and deserted: I shut my door.
淒風夜激 A bleak wind stirs at night,
68 皓雪晨霏 Pale white snow whirls at dawn.
隱机獨詠 Leaning against my armrest, I sing alone.
賞音者誰 Who is there to appreciate the tune?
- 貽我新詩 You presented me with a new poem,⁶³
72 韻靈旨清 Spiritual in resonance, pure in meaning.
粲如揮錦 Brilliant as a fluttering brocade,
琅若叩瓊 Sonorous as carnelian when struck.
既欣夢解 You are glad since you have understood the dream,⁶⁴
76 獨愧未冥 But still ashamed for not yet reaching the depths.
慍在有身 Resentment lies in “having a body,”⁶⁵
樂在忘生 Joy lies in “forgetting life.”⁶⁶
余則異矣 I am different from this,
80 無往不平 There is no going that is not leveled for me.
理苟皆是 If Truth were like this in every case,

62 See *Shijing* 72, “Cai ge”: “One day without seeing you,/ was like three autumns to me” 一日不見，如三秋兮。

63 Although Xu Xun's poem to Sun Chuo is no longer extant, Sun seems to be summarizing and responding to the main point of Xu's poem in this stanza.

64 A likely allusion to the dream of the skull in *Zhuangzi* 18 “Zhi le” (ZZJS, 18.617–19); see my discussion in this section. I thank Liu Yuan-ju of Academic Sinica for her insight on this allusion.

65 An allusion to *Laozi* 13: “What is meant by self-importance being ‘a great calamity that can cost one his person?’ The reason I suffer such a great calamity is that I am bound by my own person [*you shen* 有身, i.e. bodily existence]. When I am no longer bound by my own person, what calamity could befall me?” Trans. Lynn, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue*, 71.

66 A likely allusion to two passages in the *Zhuangzi* on forgetting about one's person (*wang qi shen* 忘其身), seeing life and death as equal in value (“the reason I find it good to live is the same as why I find it good to die”), accepting the state of things (*shi zhi qing* 事之情 or *wu zhi qing* 物之情) and the fact that man cannot intervene with it. See *Zhuangzi* 4 “Ren shi jian,” in ZZJS, 4.155 and *Zhuangzi* 6 “Da zong shi,” in ZZJS, 6.241–44.

何累於情 Why should we become entangled by feelings?⁶⁷

[Missing line]

- 84 戒以古人 Admonitions come from the ancients.
 邈彼巢皓 Remote are the Nest Dweller and White Pates,
 千載絕塵 A thousand years apart, cut off from the dust.
 Perched on a mountain in “exalted retreat,”⁶⁸
 88 山棲嘉遯 There is also shouldering firewood.
 “Measuring one’s strength” and “keeping to the essential,”⁶⁹
 量力守約 We dare to aspire to the men of the past.
 敢希先人 Store up these honest counsel,
 Store up these honest counsel,
 92 永以書紳 Always to be written on one’s belted sash.⁷⁰

This poem treats an issue central to the early medieval cultural discourse: any *xuanxue* adept worth his salt (or any other kind of mineral) weighed in on the question of worldly ambition versus high-minded disengagement. That the poem revolves around this one single issue further suggests that this problem was raised first by Xu Xun’s poem. We may infer the content of that poem (or at least part of it) from Sun’s answer, in particular stanza 8 (ll. 71–82) where Xu’s poem is directly referenced. Sun Chuo begins with a nod to the conventions of exchange poetry: he expresses high praise for Xu’s poem and acknowledges that he has appreciated the sound and sense of his friend’s communication. Then Sun appears to reiterate a key, if not main, point of Xu’s address: although Xu had expressed joy in having understood the meaning of “the dream,” he is still ashamed for not having attained a more profound level of understanding, that is to say, complete enlightenment: he still views his bodily existence as a

67 This refers to Wang Bi’s argument that the sages possess feelings like others but they respond to things without becoming attached to them. See Wang Bi’s biography by He Shao, as appended to Zhong Hui’s biography in *Sanguo zhi*, 28.795.

68 This is a phrase from *Yijing* hexagram 33, “Dun” (Retreat). The Fifth Yang line statement reads: “Exalted retreat, in which constancy brings good fortune.”

69 In *Zuo zhuan*, Duke Yin 11, the Marquis of Xi sent his general to attack the state of Zheng, “without having first gauged one’s own virtue, measured one’s own strength” 不度德，不量力. This led to disastrous results for Xi. “Keeping to the essential” (*shou yue* 守約) appears in *Mencius* 7B/32, signifying the gentlemanly virtue of holding onto the basic and simple. “Keeping to the essential and giving it broad application is a good way... What the gentleman keeps to is cultivating his own person, and this brings order to all under Heaven.”

70 *Xian-Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 899–900. In *Analects* 15/6 Zizhang wrote down Confucius’ good counsel on the ends of his sash.

source of resentment and being able to forget life as cause for joy. The dream refers not to the famous Zhuangzi-butterfly episode about accessing reality and epistemology in the *Inner Chapters*, but probably alludes to the dream of the skull in *Zhuangzi* 18, “Ultimate Happiness,” whose theme of death’s value in relation to life better accords with the rest of the stanza. In that story Zhuangzi goes to Chu and finds an old, dried-up skull. He asks it: “were you greedy for life and lost your reason” that you came to this? The skull then appears in Zhuangzi’s dream that very night and divulges the secret of the perfect happiness found in death, which signifies in the story a realm of absolute freedom transcending all constraints of time and duty. The skull concludes that he would not trade death for life, which is defined as “troubles” (*lao* 勞).⁷¹ Although Xu may have grasped the signification of this dream, he still *feels* the demands placed on one’s existence (e.g., honor, favor, station) and the burden of valuing life over death. This must remain Sun’s account of Xu’s poem.

Whether or not Sun Chuo made a fair reading of Xu’s poem is an impossible line of inquiry to pursue. What is useful and more germane to the subject at hand is the fact that he uses this characterization of Xu, developed through a series of allusions to the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, to make a major claim about his own attitude: he is different from Xu (“I am different from this,” l. 79), since he suffers neither the resentment nor joy of life or death (“There is no going that is not leveled for me,” l. 80). Given the way things are in the world, Sun knows not to become entangled by his feelings (“Why should we become entangled by feelings?” l. 82). Alluding to Wang Bi’s famous response to He Yan about how sages may respond to things with feelings but without any burdensome attachment, Sun Chuo casts himself in the role of the sage and, by extension, his younger friend the student. At play here seems less an implicit critique of Xu Xun’s alleged spiritual deficiency than an indirect justification of Sun Chuo’s known material choices. Contemporary accounts portray Sun as a shameless braggadocio and careerist with a knack for self-promotion. All of this was forgiven because he was judged to be peerless in his literary talent. Sun Chuo here makes a familiar argument: why should engagement with worldly affairs matter so long as one is free of the emotional weight of it? Sun Chuo’s message to his reader is clear: true enlightenment for him hinges upon the mind, not matter.

Earlier in the poem Sun Chuo describes his real aspirations in the grandest of spiritual terms, transcending all physical space:

或步崇基 One walks on elevated ground,

71 *Zhuangzi* 18 “Zhi le,” ZZJS, 18.617–19.

或恬蒙園 Another is contented in the garden in Meng.
 道足匈懷 If the Way is complete and held within,
 神棲浩然 Then one's spirit will settle in the boundless.
 (ll. 27–30)

冥運超感 May the unseen workings let me transcend feelings,
 邁我玄逸 And meet me with a mystic detachment.
 宅心遼廊 I lodge my mind in infinite vastness,
 咀嚼妙一 And savor the marvelous oneness.
 (ll. 37–40)

Whether one treads the mountainous path (“elevated ground”) of a recluse or finds complacency in a government position, as Zhuangzi did, place and position lose all relevancy if one can harness the Way within, thus enabling one's spirit to ascend into the boundless.

Sun Chuo claims to have transcended the physical distinction between reclusion and office by locating his spirit and mind (*qi* “perch,” *zhai* “lodge”) somewhere in infinite space. This leveling of service and reclusion by introducing a higher gauge, mental state, matches Xie An's strategy as seen in his poem to Wang Huzhi. In an interesting coincidence, it also correlates with an argument Sun Chuo made elsewhere against Xie An's younger brother, Xie Wan 謝萬 (ca. 320–361), who had opined in his “Discourse on Eight Worthies” 八賢論 that recluses were superior to men in office. Sun Chuo contradicted him by declaring, “for those who embody the mysterious and comprehend the remote, service and reclusion are the same.”⁷² This stance may certainly have been pragmatic, as it surely was for many men in Sun Chuo's era, for it allowed one (especially a career climber and *xuan*-learning adept) to lay claim to both the advantages of office and the high-mindedness of reclusion. As with Xie An, Sun Chuo reconciles between the two poles and rids the discourse of its sterile binary nature by casting light on the subtler shades in between.

The opening stanzas of Sun Chuo's poem lay out both options—office and withdrawal—and forestall any quick judgment in favor of the more obvious virtue, withdrawal, within the cultural discourse of the time. To be sure, Sun duly points out the usual difficulties and dangers that beset a courtier: a sense of suffocation (“at court, there is stifling from heat,” l.8); unexpected threats (in the metaphors of ghosts that haunt a household and perilous roads that overturn carriages, ll.11–15); and death (in the blunt, literal image of an executioner's “axe on one's neck,” l.18). Danger lurks behind a grand and

72 See *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, 4/91 (p. 270).

attractive appearance that is courtly life, here figured by towering gates and ornate wheels. But Sun also quite frankly acknowledges the disadvantage of withdrawal: “In the wilds, there is withering from cold.” Without the life-sustaining heat of the sun, metaphor for the emperor, one becomes reduced in consequence, hence suffers desolation. Furthermore, Sun Chuo challenges the conventional early medieval valuation of reclusion as lofty and office holding as base, a view articulated in Xie Wan’s essay, by identifying the source of trouble not in government service, but in emotional entanglement.

The line between service and withdrawal is decidedly and perhaps pointedly blurred in Sun Chuo’s portrait of his quietist life in stanza 7 of the poem.

[...]

爾託西隅	You will consign yourself to the western corner,
我滯斯畿	While I shall remain in this domain.
寂寂委巷	Quiet and still in a winding alley,
寥寥閑扉	Desolate and deserted: I shut my door.
淒風夜激	A bleak wind stirs at night,
皓雪晨霏	Pale white snow whirls at dawn.
隱机獨詠	Leaning against my armrest, I sing alone.
賞音者誰	Who is there to appreciate the tune?

The places to which “western corner” and “this domain” refer cannot be ascertained since there are too many blanks in the biographies of Xu and Sun, though the poem was most likely written in the 340’s. Sun Chuo and Xu Xun became friends during their youth while both lived in Guiji and were said to have shared lofty-minded intentions.⁷³ According to extant accounts, Xu Xun was once summoned to office but did not accept the post,⁷⁴ whereas Sun Chuo

73 See Sun Chuo’s biography in *Jin shu*, 56.1544.

74 Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝標 cites the following from Tan Daoluan’s 檀道鸞 (fl. 459) *Xu Jin yangqiu* 續晉陽秋 in his *Shishuo xinyu* commentary (2/69): “[Xu Xun] was summoned as Clerk to the Minister of Education (*situ yuan* 司徒掾), but declined to serve.” He Fasheng’s 何法盛 (Liu Song) *Jin zhong xing shu* 晉中興書 corroborates this information, which is cited by Li Shan in his commentary to Jiang Yan’s poem in imitation of Xu Xun. See *Wen xuan* 文選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 31.1469. In several entries of *Shishuo xinyu* (e.g., 4/40), Xu Xun is referred to as “Clerk Xu,” which suggests that Xu held such a post. However, this contradicts all other sources about Xu’s resume (or lack thereof). Cao Daoheng seems to believe that Xu was referred to as “Clerk Xu” in *Shishuo xinyu* simply on the basis of having been summoned to the post. See Cao, *Zhonggu wenxueshi lunwenji* 中古文學史論文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 314. More recently,

successfully climbed the official ladder and held a string of posts throughout his life.⁷⁵ It is for his perceived irresoluteness that Sun was mocked and despised by many of his contemporaries, according to the *Shishuo xinyu* and Tan Daoluan's 檀道鸞 (fl. 459) *Xu Jin yanqiu* 續晉陽秋 (Continuation of the annals of Jin).⁷⁶ Whether the "western corner" refers to the capital and "this domain" Guiji, and by extension, Xu Xun is leaving for the capital to assume a post while Sun Chuo remains away from court, is beyond the reach of historical research, especially given the extreme paucity of records on Xu Xun. It should be noted, however, that by available accounts, Xu Xun traveled west to the capital twice and neither trip involved assuming office. Thus, even if "western corner" indeed refers to the capital, Xu Xun may not necessarily be traveling there to assume office.⁷⁷ What is clear in this stanza, however, is an illustration of the poet's consistent point throughout the poem that the virtue of reclusion consists in the mind, rather than the place. Sun's portrait of his quietist life is set in the midst of civilization (alleyway in a town), not in the mountains, thereby highlighting the primacy of a detached mind. His poem does not offer us enough clues to determine whether he was in fact living in retreat (none of the available historical sources indicate that he was ever out of office for any substantial period of time), but that seems irrelevant to the poem's overall suggestion: given a transcendent mental state that is without emotional entanglement, the difference between service or withdrawal entails little consequence. This serves as a reminder that the rhetoric of quietism and hiddenness cannot be easily grafted onto biography and did not readily translate into actual withdrawal from office during medieval China. A picture of a quietist life that blurs any meaningful boundary between the court and the wilds and that espouses

Gu Nong explicitly makes such an argument in his essay, "'Yi shi wenzong': Xu Xun de xingshuai" 「一時文宗」: 許詢的興衰, *Gudian wenxue zhishi* 5 (2007): 89–92.

75 *Jin shu*, 56.1544. *Wenzhang zhi* 文章志, compiled under the Liu-Song Emperor Ming (r. 465–72), sharply contrasts the lives of the two men: "Chuo was widely read in the Classics and histories, and excelled in literary composition. He and Xu Xun both talked in terms of turning their backs on the world, but while Xun, to the day of his death, never compromised his determination, Chuo became deeply enmeshed in worldly affairs." Quoted in *Shishuo xinyu*, 9/61; trans. Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 285.

76 See *Shishuo xinyu* 9/61.

77 According to one entry in the *Shishuo xinyu*, Xu Xun left the hills of Zhejiang to go to Jiankang to meet his elder sister (8/144; a similar account in 8/95, which states that he went to the capital to escort his mother home, may be an error). Another *Shishuo* entry (2/69) describes Xu Xun's visit with Liu Tan, who became Intendant (*yin* 尹) of Danyang, which lies just outside the capital, in the twelfth month of 347, according to Xu Song 徐松 (1781–1848), *Jiankang shilu* 建康實錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 8/216.

spiritual transcendence above all else certainly fits within the parameters of a defense for having chosen a careerist path.

It seems to me that the main interest of Sun Chuo's response to Xu Xun lies in the nuances of his discussion of reclusion, rather than its obvious exaltation of famous recluses, cast in broad strokes. The Nest Dweller and the Four White Pates, token symbols of reclusion, are evoked in the last stanza as models to which Sun and Xu might aspire.

[Missing line]

戒以古人	Admonitions come from the ancients.
邈彼巢皓	Remote are the Nest Dweller and White Pates,
千載絕塵	A thousand years apart, cut off from the dust.
山棲嘉遯	Perched on a mountain in "exalted retreat,"
亦有負薪	There is also shouldering firewood.
量力守約	"Measuring one's strength" and "keeping to the essential,"
敢希先人	We dare to aspire to the men of the past.
且戢讜言	Store up these honest counsel,
永以書紳	Always to be written on one's belted sash.

Yet the concluding lines of the poem suggest that this evocation is far from being a simple, unqualified valorization of reclusion. Sun points out the material fact that even those who enjoy "exalted retreat" in the mountains still have the burden of shouldering firewood. He also turns to lessons from the *Zuo zhuan* and *Mencius*, core texts from the classicist canon, that call for application according to individualized circumstances: "measuring one's own strength" and "keeping to the essential," or cultivating oneself, respectively. He wraps up his communication to his younger friend by asking that Xu Xun take note of his "honest counsel" in the manner of Zizhang 子張, who recorded Confucius' wise words on the ends of his sash. This counsel has conveyed the difficulties of a career at court, the disadvantages of life in withdrawal, and the view that the highest measure of transcendence is not one's material position (as a courtier or recluse), but rather one's spiritual detachment and lack of emotional entanglement.

If taken at face value, this counsel seems oddly inappropriate given that the poem's recipient was a famed resolute recluse, whose high-mindedness was elsewhere acknowledged by Sun Chuo himself. According to the *Shishuo xinyu*, Zhi Dun once asked Sun Chuo to compare himself with Xu Xun. Sun replied thus: "as far as exalted feelings and remote intent [*gaoqing yuanzhi* 高情遠致] are concerned, your disciple has long since inwardly conceded Xu's superiority. But in the matter of a single humming or a single intoning of poetry, Xu will

need to sit facing north [as a student before a teacher].”⁷⁸ Sun Chuo’s self-representation and representation of Xu Xun in this poem puts into question to what extent he did in fact renounce any pretension to a superior state of mind. The “counsel” he bestows upon his friend seems more an opportunity to make a case for himself, his choices, and his superior understanding.

A gift of a poem not only demanded the return of an affirmation of a social bond but also often initiated the social sport of one-upmanship.⁷⁹ The aspects of performance and competition in “pure conversation” carried into the poetic exchanges of the Eastern Jin. The literati quoted extensively from the Three Mysterious Works to make arguments as well as counter-arguments about big topics of the day, such as office versus reclusion and self-cultivation. *Xuanxue* furnished early medieval writers with a diversified repertoire of textual sources, methods, and interpretations from which they may choose and adapt to their purposes. Through *xuan* discourse writers could treat such gross categories as service, quietism, and the ideal character, with nuance and subtlety. We have seen in two examples above how one such move—to nullify the distinction between service and withdrawal—advanced and refined the debate on this dichotomy, regardless of whether the motivation was philosophical sophistication or material pragmatism, or a combination of both. The same cultural toolkit could be selectively appropriated by writers to make different claims: *Zhuangzi*’s “*Qi wu lun*” (and its commentary) could be used to support an argument that there is no distinction between service and withdrawal, or it could be used to make the claim that while differences do really exist, the true measure is for each to fulfill its own nature and capacity. Poetic communication through allusions from the Three Mysterious Works reached new heights during the Eastern Jin. Exchange poetry gave the gentry elite an important venue to trade in literary competence (and sometimes best their interlocutor), to exhibit their possession of the cultural currency of the day, and to identify members of their own group.

78 *Shishuo xinyu*, 9/54. I have used Mather’s translation with a slight modification; see *Shishuo Hsin-yü*, 283.

79 For a fuller discussion of performance and competition in social poetry, especially group composition, see my article, “Revisiting the Scene of the Party: A Study of the Lanting Collection,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 132 (2012): 275–300.