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Ding Xiang Warner/A Wild Deer Amid Soaring Phoenixes

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Introduction

Reading Wang Ji



IF THERE IS ONE achievement for which late-twentieth-century critical theory congratulates itself, it is for disabusing literary criticism of the notion that the text can be a vehicle for the author's unmediated self-expression. But in the West, it was only a relatively late and romantic belief that poetry could convey the essence of the poet—or that readers might consider it a primary aim to grasp the poet's essence through his text. In the history of Chinese literature, in contrast, there is a great body of late-classical and early-medieval Chinese poetry that takes the apparent form of direct expressions of the poet's inner thoughts and feelings. And in the history of commentary and criticism on this verse, so pervasive is the habit of reading it as a mirror of the inner man that modern scholarship has found it difficult to relinquish traditional interpretive assumptions and practices.

Recent studies on the Sui and early Tang dynasty poet Wang Ji 王績 (590–644) offer a case in point. On the one hand, Wang Ji is generally praised in histories of Chinese literature for being a transitional figure whose direct, unpolished style stood in refreshing contrast to the ornate, courtly lyrics of his time; for his reviving of scholar-recluse and country-living themes from the earlier Wei-Jin period (third–fourth centuries); and for anticipating the rise of the regulated verse forms that made the Tang dynasty a golden era in the history of Chinese poetry. On the other hand, the confessional or self-expressive style of Wang Ji's poetry has continued to invite, in studies published recently in China, Taiwan, and Japan, efforts to define Wang Ji's "true identity" through the evidence of his poetry. In particular, the predominant issue has been the extent to which Wang Ji's moral character lives up to his primary literary models of the Wei-Jin period: the "eccentric scholar" Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263) and the "recluse

poet” Tao Qian 陶潛 (365–427). As a result, we have as yet no analytical studies of Wang Ji’s poetry—no efforts to articulate how the textual features of his poetry convey meaning and experience—and, therefore, have only a very imperfect understanding of Wang Ji as a transitional figure in Chinese literary history.

It is this book’s aim to demonstrate that Wang Ji’s central “transitional” achievement is to be located precisely in the function of his poetic “I.” Through analysis that is resolutely literary and historical, rather than quasi-psychoanalytical, we are able to perceive that Wang Ji was not attempting to communicate his “true recluse identity” fashioned after the characters of past recluses. Instead (in a manner that critics recognize is characteristic of certain poets from later periods in China’s history),¹ he is personifying in his literary self-image a set of philosophical concepts rooted in the Taoist texts *Laozi* 老子 and *Zhuangzi* 莊子.

Chapter 1 examines the revived interest in these ideas during the medieval period and outlines the historical circumstances that, in my view, prompted Wang Ji to construct his literary persona as he did. But it is not our apprehension of a set of Lao-Zhuang concepts, for their own sake, that I am arguing constitutes the reward of analyzing Wang Ji’s poetry or qualifies him for a higher place in some canonical hierarchy of China’s poets. I mean to avoid the tendency, which we see in Chinese literary studies published both in the East and in the West, to assume that interpretive scholarship should also confirm the canonical status of a master or to argue that more attention should be paid to a neglected genius. Either course invariably leaves interpretation behind, eliciting instead vague generalizations in praise of a poet’s great artistry and his supposedly profound insights into the nature of the universe. The philosophical ideas that Wang Ji personifies in his poetry, like the ideas to be found in Ruan Ji, Tao Qian, and indeed in Chinese poetry generally, are hardly deep or difficult to grasp: they were commonplaces in China’s literate culture well before they made their way from philosophical to literary discourse. My aim, therefore, is to reveal that Wang Ji’s poetry achieves effects that are profoundly interesting—conveying the experience of Lao-Zhuang ideas once they are taken, in the person of Wang Ji’s poetic “I,” to their logical conclusions.

This interpretation of Wang Ji’s method furthermore resolves the interpretive cruxes that have proved to be most puzzling to Wang Ji’s readers. In the remainder of this introduction, therefore, I summarize these cruxes and show how they have shaped the peculiar reception of Wang Ji’s poetry,

including the ideologically motivated textual transmission of his corpus. At the heart of readers' concerns is the perplexing nature of Wang Ji's supposed personal emulation of the two writers he most often alludes to in his works: Ruan Ji and Tao Qian. Wang Ji's eccentric manner, both as represented in his own writings and as reported by other writers, his somber philosophical musings, and the simplicity of his style clearly are modeled on Ruan Ji's writings and Ruan Ji's character as it had come to be romanticized over the years. Moreover, Wang Ji's idyllic depictions of his own life as a self-sufficient farmer, his attitude of complete detachment from worldly affairs, and his celebration of this personal freedom mimic Tao Qian's poetic self-representation and chronicled lifestyle. As this bare summary reveals, the historical images of Ruan Ji and Tao Qian were very different from each other. This difference, however, did not seem to bother Wang Ji. He echoes in his own writing their contrasting attitudes and poetic themes, and thus readers have found the resulting image of his character problematic. Wang Ji variously portrays himself as a melancholy scholar whose timely withdrawal from the political world saves him from its dangers but who still hopes to gain recognition one day for his merits; at another time he seems an eccentric intellectual who detaches himself from the profane world's values and ritual constraints to live in lofty oblivion; at another time he presents himself as a self-sufficient farmer-scholar who isolates himself from the world of the court in favor of preserving his personal freedom and reveling in the virtues of a simple life.

In Wang Ji's best-known characterization, as a drunkard-poet, he often claims a spiritual kinship with the whole range of famous drunkard-poets of the past—from Ruan Ji, Xi Kang 嵇康 (223–262), and Liu Ling 劉伶 (d. after 265) to Tao Qian. But readers have been troubled by the fact that these men are thought to have had different reasons for drinking. Ruan Ji and Xi Kang are reputed to have deliberately kept themselves in a drunken stupor in order to avoid both emotional involvement and official engagement in times of fallen morals; Liu Ling for his part had an innate love of wine and drank constantly whatever the circumstances; for Tao Qian leisurely drinking and the celebration of simple wine with simple fare was an integral part of the carefree man's rustic lifestyle. How can it be, critics ask, that Wang Ji can blithely ascribe to himself all of the apparently incompatible motives and drinking habits of his different models?

The same critics have been troubled by apparent contradictions between Wang Ji's poetic persona and what they know of his life and times. It has often been argued that there was a vast difference between the

disordered and perilous political climate of the Wei-Jin period, when intellectuals had good reason to seek peace in distant isolation, and the later, more prosperous period in which Wang Ji lived, when a drive to reestablish social order and patronize scholars at court attended the consolidation of the empire. Critics have therefore been inspired to defend or to question the sincerity of Wang Ji's self-representation, and they regularly resolve on one of three opinions. The first is that the political and moral condition of the times did not influence Wang Ji; he had a thorough understanding of the writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi and should be admired for his detached and carefree attitude toward life. The second starts from the argument that Wang Ji's time was indeed one of great political turmoil and danger (as a period of transition, it must have been chaotic, so the reasoning goes), and it defends his conduct either as an astute strategy for self-preservation or as ethical protest. The third stresses the difference between the chaos of the Wei-Jin era and the relative prosperity of the Sui and early Tang and hence denies Wang Ji ethical or philosophical justification for his conduct. On this basis he is criticized for being egoistic and for avoiding responsibilities in life, and his emulation of Ruan Ji and Tao Qian is dismissed as a disreputable attempt to ennoble his failure as a court official.

The overriding concern with the identification of Wang Ji's character and motives can partly be ascribed to the fragmentary nature of his literary corpus. Until the 1980s, no reader since the end of the Song dynasty had recorded seeing the original five-juan collection of Wang Ji's works, which was compiled shortly before his death by a close associate, Lü Cai 呂才 (600–665).² The standard collection until then, the *Donggaozi ji* 東皋子集 compiled by Lu Chun 陸淳 (d. 805?) in three juan, represents slightly less than half of the works included in the five-juan collection.³ In his postface, Lu Chun explains that he extracted from Lü Cai's compilation the works that he regarded as best representing Wang Ji's recluse image, and he expresses his admiration for Wang Ji by calling him a second Zhuangzi and more of an exemplar of complete detachment from worldly affairs than either Tao Qian or Ruan Ji. Furthermore, Lu Chun claims that his own tacit understanding of Wang Ji's character qualifies him to make this abridgment, for he has endeavored to "edit out [Wang Ji's] expressions of desire for accomplishments" in order to "keep intact his resolution to hang up his official's cap and untie his official's tassel."⁴ In sum, Lu Chun made it his mission to capture and transmit to us what he took to be the essence of Wang Ji's character.

Lu Chun furthermore trimmed Lü Cai's original preface by about a thousand characters.⁵ The omitted passages contain what Lu Chun likely perceived as further indications of Wang Ji's "ambition" for success, as well as details that appear to complicate the image of Wang Ji as a completely detached and lofty-minded recluse. These include the passages describing Wang Ji's childhood study of the classics in preparation for eventual official service; a story about his impressive debut in the capital when influential ministers and statesmen exclaimed at his perspicuity; anecdotes of his reputed prescience, which tend to suggest a discerning and politically astute Wang Ji rather than an aloof recluse; and, finally, references to Wang Ji's close friendship with Xue Shou 薛收 (592–624) and Dong Heng 董恆,⁶ disciples of Wang Ji's brother, the Confucian master Wang Tong 王通 (ca. 584–617).

When we read Lü Cai's preface in its entirety, we get the impression that he is intent on portraying Wang Ji as the unorthodox individual he knew him to be but admired all the same. One senses a hint of apology in Lü Cai's tone, perhaps reflecting his desire to defend Wang Ji's character in anticipation of others' puzzlement or even condemnation. In Lu Chun's abridgment and his own postface, by contrast, Wang Ji is represented pursuing his natural course but never transgressing the Confucian moral code. Lu Chun categorizes worthy men into three types: gentlemen engaged in worldly affairs who nonetheless maintain their moral standards; gentlemen "of the yonder realm" living in reclusion without ambition or regard for arbitrary measures and practices of virtue; and lastly the ancient sages. Wang Ji, says Lu Chun, is a paragon of the second group:

In cases of those of the yonder realm, no one is able to fathom them. Can it be that it is easy to tread in others' tracks but difficult to comprehend the principle of neglecting speech?⁷ Or is it that they mingle in the world of men but find contentment within themselves? There have been very few men who could achieve this in the thousands of years since the time of Old Man Zhuang. But I found the model in Mr. Wang!⁸

What Lu Chun specifically found in Wang Ji is a man whose

mind was intuitive of natural things; his inner capacity was not displayed on the outside. He adjusted himself to changes, content with his lot. He was oblivious of his environment, but his conduct was not detrimental to the teachings [of sages]. He discarded burdens [of the profane world], yet his

Way did not cut himself off from it. This is why he withdrew from office like Mr. Tao [Qian] yet did not speak in complaint against his time; he was unrestrained in manner like Mr. Ruan [Ji] yet did not violate principles of conduct. How untrammelled! How profound! He is truly a man whom we can call a naturally happy gentleman.⁹

Of course, this image is as much Lu Chun's creation—a product of his effort to “preserve intact Wang Ji's resolve in detachment”—as it is Wang Ji's. By attempting to edit out Wang Ji's expressions of human desire, his worldly concerns and ordinary emotions, Lu Chun hopes to make Wang Ji's tenure in office look involuntary, accepted out of a necessity to earn a livelihood. This was the fabled justification for Zhuangzi's and Laozi's acceptance of official posts and, as well, the justification for Tao Qian's taking office.

In fact, Lu Chun was unable to eliminate entirely Wang Ji's variety of conflicting self-representations, which remains even in his abridged edition and belies Lu Chun's claim to having established a single, consistent image of Wang Ji. Yet this failure, if we can call it that, did not discourage later readers from following in Lu Chun's footsteps and (though their conclusions varied greatly) trying to define once and for all the real Wang Ji. Xin Wenfang 辛文房 (fl. ca. 1300) of the Yuan dynasty, for example, in his *Tang caizi zhuan* 唐才子傳, praised Wang Ji for having the insight and moral strength to withdraw from the hostile environment of the early Tang period, when “orderly days were few and chaotic days were many”:

Beginning with Mr. Wang onward, there were frequent cases of hidden men, and all were gentlemen who leaped into the distance and departed forever. They were upright in conduct and unassuming in words. Time and again they avoided potential calamity. Official ranks and honors were husk and chaff in their eyes; they hung up their caps, withdrew and retired. . . . Yet, even so, some of them could not escape gleaming blades and ill-fated death. . . . Had they been living in the glorious era of the Three Lords and Five Rulers, even if they were cowards, they would have known to take on an active role. But today they abandon the pursuit for fame and benefit, turning to “nest-dwelling” instead.¹⁰

In contrast to Lu Chun, then, Xin interprets the reclusion of Wang Ji and other Tang recluses not as philosophical detachment but as the preservation of their lives and integrity—the proper course of action according to

the Confucian code of conduct regarding a worthy man's timely withdrawal from worldly affairs.¹¹

Others are skeptical of this image of Wang Ji as a worthy Confucian. After all, Wang Ji more than once challenges and belittles Confucian values, at times even mocking Confucius himself. These readers recognize the contradictions in Wang Ji's self-representation, but they are inclined to be apologetic about them. A representative of this view is Cao Quan 曹荃 (sixteenth century) of the Ming dynasty.¹² In the preface to his printed edition of Wang Ji's three-*juan* collection, Cao admits that his initial impression of the poet was not positive; he thought Wang Ji's language "absurd, unconventional, and unorthodox" and his person "dispirited and self-indulgent."¹³ But he goes on to say that after reading through Wang Ji's complete collection (though, to be sure, Cao is speaking of Lu Chun's three-*juan* abridgment), he began to feel that Wang Ji's behavior was justified and deserved sympathy, because circumstances forced him to behave the way he did. Wang Ji's conduct, in Cao's final assessment, was indeed unconventional but did not violate any moral principle:

I do not know his person, but I can see his deeds. He was unceremonious yet in conformity, untrammelled yet respectful, carefree yet composed. He roamed about on the potency of wine and his literary mind. He is truly a gentleman of the Way. Pushing one step further, is he not on a par with the worthy man in Li Village?¹⁴ ... As to the gentlemen of the bamboo grove,¹⁵ who indulged themselves with their own desires, violated the code of rites, and abandoned moral principles, they ought to concede themselves inferior to Mr. Wang.¹⁶

The pairs of somewhat contrasting traits at the beginning of this passage signal Cao Quan's awareness of the many sides of Wang Ji's self-representation, but ultimately he chooses to emphasize only those qualities that he finds most admirable in order to praise the poet as a lofty-minded recluse.¹⁷

During the Qing dynasty readers were less inclined to overlook or explain away the inconsistencies in Wang Ji's recluse image. In his summary of Wang Ji's collection, the chief editor of *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書總目提要, Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805), criticizes historians in the Song dynasty for including Wang Ji in the "Yinyi zhuan" 隱逸傳 chapter (Biographies of recluses and disengaged gentlemen) of *Xin Tang shu*:

Wang Ji . . . served in the courts of two dynasties [Sui and Tang] but was unsuccessful with his official career in both. So he retired, unbridled and adrift in mountains and woods. *Xin Tang shu* lists his biography in the “Biographies of Recluses and Disengaged Gentlemen”; that was because they did not fully comprehend [the nature of his retirement]. . . . He is the younger brother of Wang Tong, and his resolve is haughty and his interest refined . . . [but] in character he does not measure up to his brother.¹⁸

In the twentieth century, when scholars aspired to more analytical approaches to literature than in the past, Wang Ji’s critics were still pre-occupied with the issue of his character and continued to fall into the two basic categories of apologists and debunkers. In an article published in 1990, for example, Zhang Daxin 張大新 and Zhang Bai’ang 張百昂 argue that Wang Ji’s reclusion cannot be justified by the condition of his times. In their view, it was a careful calculation on his part to achieve official recognition through an insincere presentation of himself as a morally lofty man, and they regard Wang Ji’s frustration in politics as the result of his own political miscalculations and missed opportunities:

An officer from the former court who lacked clear vision in politics, who put his reputation on the line fishing for fame but was also overly cautious, who was impractical, boastful, and very capricious—how could [Wang Ji] be appreciated and trusted by the Tang court? Even though he did all he could to pose as an exceptional lofty man in an attempt to obtain fame and prosperity in officialdom, it was all in vain in the end. In other words, this eccentric character, whose mind was complicated and who regarded himself as highly talented, desired to be accomplished in this period of change of dynasties from the Sui to the Tang, yet did not take action; he designed a totally imaginary and illusory career path for himself and lost his credibility again and again before the newly empowered Tang court. So after several setbacks, he had no better way to turn except to retire to his hut in the country.¹⁹

Once Zhang Daxin and Zhang Bai’ang judge Wang Ji’s reclusion as a deliberate strategy to obtain recognition in court, they consistently read those of his works that seem to express an aspiration for achievement as mere “self-promotion,” while those representing Wang Ji’s resolve to live in retirement they view as vehicles for self-justification and self-consolation. The rest of the collection they ignore.²⁰

In a study published at about the same time, Jia Jinhua 賈晉華 comes to Wang Ji's defense. She suggests that Wang Ji's three short tenures in office betray a deep conflict between his personal values and his consciousness of an individual's duty to society, and this conflict manifests itself in his poetry. Despite Wang Ji's attraction to Wei-Jin recluses as models for his own conduct and philosophy, says Jia, Wang Ji at least in his early days aspired to an official career. But unlike Zhang Daxin and Zhang Bai'ang, Jia argues that Wang Ji did not turn to reclusion merely as a way to advertise his abilities or justify his unemployment. She suggests instead that Wang Ji realized that his chances for advancement in office were hurt by his incidental association at the start of his career with a contender in the power struggle to overthrow the Sui court, Dou Jiande 竇建德, who was himself defeated by the Tang. Though Wang Ji's encounter with Dou was accidental and brief, Jia surmises that it must have damaged his standing with the new rulers. She also gives credence to a report that Wang Ji and his brothers were denied official posts after one of the brothers offended certain court favorites.²¹ It was then, says Jia, that Wang Ji turned to embrace Wei-Jin eremitic attitudes and practices, maintaining his personal integrity to counterbalance his frustrated expectations in life. Jia also argues that Wang Ji did not indiscriminately embrace Wei-Jin eremitic ideas and literary themes but adapted them to suit his particular situation and feelings—and that unlike his idols Ruan Ji and Tao Qian, who used poetry to express their emotions and thoughts about life, Wang Ji employed literature as a means to create an idealized self-image that would be admired both by his contemporaries and by future generations. Thus Wang Ji resolved to acquire through literature what he could not attain in political life: an immortal reputation as a worthy man. Jia concludes with a note of regret that, though Wang Ji's choice of lifestyle and self-image was noble, it was unfashionable at the time, and thus he remained unrecognized and isolated during his life.²²

Jia Jinhua's observation on the function of Wang Ji's poetic persona makes an important distinction between the person and the text. Even so, her study starts from the premise that Wang Ji's literature is primarily to be used to illuminate his character. We have not progressed past the assumption that the goal of literary analysis is to discover the poet's true identity and real motives. This concern stems ultimately from an impulse to judge the moral qualities of writers—hence the propensity to apologize or condemn—as well as a simplistic conception of the truth value of fiction. While a few critics have attempted to describe Wang Ji's literary

merits, without fail they repeat the vague generalities about his “refreshing and simple” style and observe the Wei-Jin inspiration of his writing, urging our admiration of Wang Ji as an important figure in the development of Chinese literature but not undertaking the close scrutiny of his works that would justify such admiration.²³ More helpfully, Stephen Owen has discussed Wang Ji within the larger context of the development of early Tang poetics. He notes that Wang Ji’s fascination with recluses and the ethos of the Wei-Jin era is consistent with the trend of intellectual and literary thought of his time, in which there was a general, shared romantic fascination with the past. But like Jia Jinhua, Owen also rightly asserts that Wang Ji’s poetic “I” is not serving the self-expressive function that critics have assumed we encounter in the poetry of Ruan Ji and Tao Qian. Rather, he says, Wang Ji is interested in “capturing the mood or manner of a historical period and making it live in the present.”²⁴ In this sense, Owen likens Wang Ji’s style and method to the “opposition poetics” of some of his contemporaries: “Wang Ji’s poetry is essentially negative,” he argues, “a counterstatement to the aristocratic and worldly glory of court poetry,” which may take the form of “drunkenness, pastoralism, or Taoist nihilism, but all these responses may be defined in negative relation to court poetry and the aristocratic society that produced it.”²⁵

From this assessment we see Owen’s characteristically productive foregrounding of questions of literary technique and literary history; but because they come within the broad scope of a survey of early Tang poets, his observations on Wang Ji are not pursued further. His association of Wang Ji with an “opposition poetics,” however, is a key concept that I purpose to elaborate in this study. It is one that underlies much of the praise, blame, and bafflement in the history of Wang Ji’s reception—including the admiring assertion of the Qing scholar Weng Fanggang 翁方綱 (1733–1818) that confronting “the pure, direct, unembellished style” of Wang Ji, after reading the palace-style poetry of his contemporaries, is “like suddenly encountering a wild deer amid a crowd of soaring phoenixes and simurghs.”²⁶ This is an image, we shall see, that appropriately emblemizes Wang Ji’s poetry in several respects, not just in terms of his unembellished style or even in its symbolizing Wang Ji’s philosophical opposition to the court-sanctioned, intellectual trends of his times. It serves, as well, to symbolize the reader’s experience of the personified Taoist ideas in Wang Ji’s poetry—the experience of constant change in an illusive world—which can be likened to the movements of a wild deer that is out of its element, skittish and darting now this way and that.

In sum, then, this book aims to supply the in-depth study of Wang Ji's poetry that is needed to define his "opposition poetics" fully and bridge our understanding of the transition from Wei-Jin to Tang and Song literary practice. It begins with the claim that Wang Ji's poetic self-representation is foremost a personification of concepts central to Lao-Zhuang thought—namely, that the enlightened man follows "the natural way" (*ziran* 自然) by means of "nonaction" (*wuwei* 無為) because he recognizes that reality is ever-changing or "inconstant" (*wuchang* 無常). Thus he perceives that the phenomenal world—and our knowledge of things in the world—is illusory. Again, I am not saying that these commonplace ideas are the "lessons" that Wang Ji's poems inevitably teach or that the reason for reading him is to discover his repeated statements of precepts that he found in *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. Much more rewarding, and more challenging, is the discovery and articulation of the many different ways that the precepts are manifested in the textual features of Wang Ji's poetry—and how they shape the experience of reading it.

Toward this goal, Chapter 1 surveys what we know of Wang Ji's life and times. But more important, it places an interpretation of his poetic method within the context of intellectual, literary, and political developments in Sui and early Tang China against which Wang Ji's "oppositional poetics" can be contrasted. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I extend Owen's remarks on Wang Ji's shift away from the self-expressive function of poetry to show that in Wang Ji's works we see the introduction of a deliberate distancing between the poet and the poetic "I" for the purposes of dramatizing an idea or proposition. In each of these chapters I examine a different dimension of Wang Ji's literary persona—the recluse as philosopher, as country farmer, and as drunkard—first surveying the range of self-representational styles that comprise each of these facets of Wang Ji's persona and then explicating the manner by which this persona manifests the conception of an ever-changing world and, in some of the most obscure and interesting of his poems, compels readers to experience with their speaker the illusoriness of perceived reality. The most elaborate example of this latter type is the subject of Chapter 5, Wang Ji's "*Fu* on Roaming the Northern Mountains" (You Beishan fu 遊北山賦), in which the speaker exhibits a series of perspective shifts and transformations of purpose that deny any confident apprehension of his character and his world. In conclusion I return to the issue of Wang Ji's historical reception—first to reveal how the critical commonplaces attached to Wang Ji have shaped editorial decisions concerning the textual and attribution problems in his literary

corpus and, second, to consider the implications of this study's methodology and conclusions to the practice of Chinese literary studies generally. For, as we shall note, the history of Wang Ji criticism has contributed to a history of misreadings and missed opportunities in scholarship on later Chinese literary history—most of all in critical studies of the major Tang and Song poets who explicitly imitated Wang Ji.