

\*Shì-shwō Syīn-yǔ+

Wáng Hwèi-jǐ's Impulse (SSSY 23:47)  
(c430)

*This illuminating anecdote from the Shì-shwō collection illustrates the new intensity of landscape appreciation that emerged after the shift of cultural focus to the rich scenery south of the Yángdz River. Wáng Hwèi-jǐ (Dǔ-yóu; died 388) was the fifth son of the great calligrapher Wáng Syī-jǐ; Dài Kwéi (Ān-dào), his friend, was a musician who held no office. The emotional logic of the tale is even more consistent than it looks. Snow was rare in the south, and any snowfall at night is very beautiful. Dǔ-yóu naturally gets up to enjoy it. He thinks of Dzwō Sǔ's hermit poem (p106), not because a line in it mentions snow, but because it expresses an elegant appreciation of nature in general. The hermit of the poem reminds him of his reclusive friend Dài Kwéi. Wishing to share the sight with him, he naturally climbs in his boat and sets out. The trip to Shǎn is a good distance upstream, and naturally takes time in a small boat. The end of night spoils the scene, and naturally Wáng's impulse vanishes with the night.*

*The rationale of this logic, which no reader of the tale has ever missed, is that no action is valid unless sustained, at all points, by genuine feeling. In this view, actions undertaken just because they are the conventional next thing to do (such as going on in to see Dài Kwéi) are the height of absurdity. What would they have had to talk about? Their own conventionality?*

One night when Wáng Dǔ-yóu was living in Shǎn-yīn, there was a great snow. He woke from his sleep, opened up the room, and ordered wine to be poured. As far as one could see in all directions, everything was shining white, H arose and walked back and forth, intoning Dzwō Sǔ's poem "Summoning the Hermit."

All at once he thought of Dài Ān-dào. At this time, Dài was in Shǎn. In the middle of the night, he got into a little boat, and set out to see him. He traveled all the night, and arrived just as night was ending. At the gate he stopped, turned, and went back. Someone asked him "Why?" Wáng said "I went on an impulse; when the impulse was spent, I returned. What need was there to see Dài?"

Wáng Hwēi-jī ( -388)

Orchid Pavilion Poem  
(353)

*Hwēi-jī was the fifth son of the famous poet and calligrapher Wáng Syì-jī. His public persona, as we have seen, was one of Jwāngdzian spontaneity (p52) carried to extremes. He held a modest position as Palace Attendant under the Jìn. He lived nearby, and so was present at the Orchid Pavilion gathering.*

*It is the third day of the third month of 353, and Wáng Syì-jī's relatives and friends have gathered by a winding stream to celebrate the occasion in traditional style, as had Shí Chūng's guests years before (p104). Hwēi-jī's contribution, when the floating winecup reached him, was two poems, one a studied longer piece in archaic tetrameter (so also several other guests), and this quatrain, reflecting Jwāngdzian spontaneity, but also speaking in a learned way to the Jwāngdzian rejection of office (p44). Syw Yóu, often mentioned in the Jwāngdz, had refused Yáu's offer of the Empire by fleeing to the fastness of Jī-shān (Mount Jī).*

My teacher had a treasure which he cherished:  
 What use to be snared in the world's complexity?  
 Better to keep one's inner Truth unsullied –  
 I am at one with the Jī-shān refugee.

Tsáu Hwá

Orchid Pavilion Poem  
(353)

*Tsáu identifies the stream before him with the one above which Jwāng Jōu once roamed (p52). With the allusion comes the intuitive flavor of that passage: Tsáu is in tune not with one or two fish, but with all of nature. The last two lines, with their unrestrained (“crazy”) song and their spontaneous meandering, evoke still other passages from the Jwāngdž. Not only does man find freedom in not caring what he may meet in this life, the river itself does not care where it is going. The whole world is united in a vast network of unconcern.*

*As with Wáng Hwēi-jī, at left, this is Tsáu Hwá’s only preserved poem; indeed it is the only preserved fact about him, preserved only because included in Wáng Syì-jī’s record of the occasion. Which, owing to the celebrity of its preface, itself became an emblematic event in Chinese literary history.*

With men of Understanding would I roam,  
To the Weir on the Háu with loosened sash I go;  
My crazy singing wanders where it will,  
Nor care these ripples whither they may flow

Wáng Syì-jī (321-379)

Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Poems

(353)

*The gathering produced scores of poems, and it fell to Wáng Syì-jī to compose a preface to introduce them. He begins by dating the occasion, once in terms of the current imperial reign period, and once in terms of the 60-year cycle. He notes the pleasure of the occasion, deprecating as he does so the lavishness of the prototype party of Shí Chún (p104). He then meditates on human feeling, with its temporary joys made ultimately sad by their impermanence, and the brevity of life itself. This is a gloomy enough way to leave a record of a pleasant occasion. How will he get out of it?*

In the ninth year of the reign Eternal Peace, the 50th of the cycle, at the beginning of late spring, we gathered at the Orchid Pavilion in Shān-yīn near Gwèi-jì, for the ablution ceremony. All the worthy were there, young and old assembled together. In this spot there are lofty mountains and majestic peaks, thick woods and tall bamboos. There is also a clear stream with dimpled rapids, making a sparkling zone to left and right, which we used as a winding river to float winecups on. We sat down along it, and though we lacked the splendor of silk and bamboo, of pipe and string, with every cup we sang a song, and it sufficed to express our quiet feelings.

On that day, the sky was bright, the air was clear; a gentle breeze softly blew. We looked up, and beheld the vastness of the universe; we looked down, and contemplated its profusion. What we saw, and what we felt, were enough to encompass all the joys of sight and hearing. Indeed, it was delightful.

When men come together to consider the world, some find inspiration among themselves, talking together within the confines of a room. Others rather send their ideas forth, stirring up waves beyond the realm of physical existence. Though tastes are different, and calmness and activity are not the same, as they each delight in what they have found, they briefly attain inner satisfaction, and are so happily content that they never realize that age will soon be upon them." But once pleasure has palled, their feelings will change again, and melancholy will enfold them: what before they delighted in, will in a moment have become only so many traces, incapable of stirring feeling. How much more when bodily vigor decays, and they follow the course of change, with extinction the only outcome? The men of old said "Great are Death and Life" – how can it but be painful?

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*He gets out of it by transcending it: not by departing the human realm, but by asserting its continuity from generation to generation. The very fact that he is pained by the past guarantees that the future will in its turn be moved by the present – that the constant fact of human mortality is itself a sort of continuity. The poems cease to be mere records of momentary pleasure; they attest a permanent human capacity for feeling, and they become immortal as occasions of that feeling in future readers. The Orchid Pavilion works because you and I, gentle reader, and those who will come after us, are of the company.*

*And just at that point – the last two words of the preface – something very special happens. Wáng has written, or in fact scribbled, since he intends this manuscript merely as a draft, his final sentence of affirmation: “will be moved in turn at these compositions (s̄z̄ dzwò)”. But no sooner has he written it, than it reminds him of the phrase s̄z̄ w̄n (“this culture,” but also construable as “these writings”) in Analects 9:5 (p19). He sees that by using this phrase, with its overtones of cultural continuity, he can greatly heighten his ending. This he does, scrawling w̄n “writings” over dzwò “compositions” in his rough draft.*

*Following which, he neatly copies out his draft for posterity. But try as he will, he never surpasses the spontaneous power of his draft, scribbled out in the heat of invention, and blotted over in the heat of inspiration. And so it happens that this scribble, and not his own fair copy, becomes his masterpiece: China’s most celebrated single piece of calligraphy. As a cultural artifact of vast importance, it was first owned by, and finally buried with, the Táng emperor Lǐ Shì-mín (p177); it exists now only in a number of early copies, each of which respectfully preserves the stutter into greatness at the very end.*

When I examine the things by which the men of former times were stirred to enthusiasm or emotion, it is as though one fitted the halves of a tally together. I have never failed to sigh as I study the texts, nor can I find expression for it in my thoughts. Indeed I realize that to give equal value to death and life is vanity; to equate long life and early death is folly; but that the future will look upon the present as we in the present look upon the past – *that* is poignant indeed!

Thus I have set down in order the names of those present on this occasion, and recorded what they have written. Though ages will differ and circumstances will change, yet in that which inspires feeling, they are in the end the same; and those who in time to come may look upon them, will in their turn be moved by these 斯 compositions [作] writings 文.