

Wáng Wéi (699-759)

Seeing Ywǎn Two Off on a Mission to Añ-syī

The huge extent of the Táng empire made partings more frequent and more ominous than in the territorially constricted Six Dynasties. Here is the piece which, under its later name “Yáng-gwān Song,” became the ultimate parting poem. The situation, with a friend leaving for a remote Inner Asian outpost (Añ-syī, “the pacified West”), is one of dread: for a glimpse of the terrain, see Tsún Shǔn (p224). Poet and friend are in the capital (“the city on the Wèi”), where the dreary dust blowing in from Inner Asia is for once tamed by a morning shower of spring rain. Willow-trees are handy for parting friends to break branches from. But ahead, at Yáng-gwān (near Dùn-hwáng), the friend will enter the desert. On that occasion there will be no one to see him off, hence the extra cup of parting wine in line 3. The song is not sung for this departure, but for that later one.

The dust in the City on the Wèi
 with rain is moistened through,
 Thick around the hostelry,
 spring’s in the willows’ hue;
 I urge Milord to drink him down
 another cup of wine –
 When from Yáng-gwān you head west,
 no friends will part from you.

Wáng Wéi (699-759)

Occasional Poem

Wáng Wéi, it is said, was outstanding at three things: he is the father of Chinese landscape painting, his musical compositions have ongoing classic status, and he is on everyone's list, including that of Yīn Yáú, of the three best Táng poets. His main characteristic is quietness (his personal name Wéi, in Táng "Vi," is from the Indian householder-saint Vimalakirti). His persona is retiring, his poems are placid rather than brilliant, but there is learning behind the placidity. The opening of this homesick quatrain echoes a lost Táu Chyén poem also used by Lǐ Bwó, its reluctance to ask directly about his relatives owes a debt to Sùng Jī-wèn (p186), and its artlessness implies study of the studiedly artless Hù Jī-jāng (p187).

The point is not the plumtree; it is everything that is not asked about.

From my native place, milord, you've come;
 Of my native place you ought to know:
 By the silken window, when you left,
 Had the chilly plumtree bloomed, or no?

In Response to the Emperor's "Spring Prospect"

This outing-poem, in answer to one from Emperor Míng-hwáng (the text of which has not survived), subtly reveals the tensions that always underlie these ruler/minister interchanges. For the Emperor, the outing is a respite from the cares of government. The minister, Wáng Wéi or anybody, is reluctant to let it go at that: the occasion ought to be somehow edifying.

Evidently it was both cloudy and rainy, and one task the poet faces is to put a good face on a seemingly washed-out occasion. He begins by emphasizing continuity with past ages (couplet 1): both Chín and Hàn had their capitals here. In couplet 2, the Dàúist note of immortality is sounded. This he complicates in couplet 3, as usual the heart of the poem, by blending this image with a Confucian counter-image: the Palace is indeed within the clouds (Dàúist), but the rain which the clouds bestow is a benevolence to the common people. The last couplet expands on this theme by stating the cosmic duty of the ruler: to order the calendar so that astral cycles and human labors are in harmony. The last line then insists on this. Cosmic duty, and not personal pleasure, is the true purpose of the excursion.

The river lines the border of Chín,
 flowing as it will,
 The hills enfold the Palace of Hàn
 across the centuries.

Riding in his chair of state,
 the Immortals' Gate he threads,
 Gazing from the covered way,
 the Palace Park he sees.

Imperial City amid the clouds:
 a pair of phoenix towers,
 Springtime willows beneath the rain:
 a myriad families.

Sustained upon the power of yáng
 he orders the season well –
 He does not for his pleasure rove
 in surface vanities.

Wáng Wéi (699-759)

Rustic Pleasures

(c759)

These hexameter sketches come in pairs: #1-2 reject court life, #3-4 depict utopian isolation (for peach-flowers, see p110), #5 and 7 praise leisured poverty (Yén Hwéi, p15; Táu Chyén, p129). The ford in #3 is not from Analects 18:6, (p47) but again from Táu Chyén (p130). “Yellow millet” (#7) alludes to a still popular early Táng tale about the vanity of earthly striving.

1

I come and go by a thousand gates, a myriad doors,
I travel past a northern crossroads, a southern square -
What is the point, in pacing about with clanking jades?
What man is that, on Kūngtúng Mountain with loosened hair?

2

Made the lord of a myriad homes on second meeting,
Given a pair of scepters in an interview -
Does it excel together ploughing a southern field?
Can it match being pillowed high with an eastern view?

3

I gather caltrop beside the ford; the wind grows sharp,
I lean on my staff to the west of the woods; the sun sinks low:
A fisherman, by the altar-site of apricot-trees,
Families, in the hidden land where peach-flowers blow

4

Springtime grass in autumn still is densely green,
Changeless pines in summer too send coolness down;
Oxen and sheep of themselves return through the village lane,
The little boy has never seen a cap and gown

5

Beneath the hills, from a distant village, lonely smoke,
Against the sky, on a high plateau, a single tree;
Yén Hwéi with “one dipperful” in his humble lane,
The Gentleman of “Five Willowtrees” across from me

7

Pouring wine, by a flowing spring we come together,
Holding my cithern, on changeless pine I lean my head;
Dewy mallows I pluck at dawn in my southern garden,
Yellow millet is hulled at night in an eastern shed.

Hwángfǔ Rǎn (714-767)

Rustic Pleasures

(c759)

Wáng Wéi's poem #7, at left, implies that the set was improvised at a spring gathering of the Orchid Pavilion sort (p119-123), with wine, a winding stream, and poems from all the guests. As on that occasion, the host's piece has tended to overshadow the contributions of the guests. One of the guests was Hwángfǔ Rǎn, who managed to come up with one quatrain to match Wéi's six. One can see him taking inspiration from Wéi's fourth poem, and finishing after Wéi had completed his fifth; in any case, his poem is now (as its placement here suggests) the sixth of what has come to be celebrated as Wéi's set of seven. It is utterly different in tone from the other six. Not only is the speaker self-identified as a guest in the scenery, the scenery itself is seen with a sensuous rather than a retiring eye.

Posterity, itself tending toward the sensuous, finds this the most appealing poem in the set; it has racked up many anthology inclusions, ancient and modern. In its own time too, it represented a popular sensibility; Mǜng Hàu-rán's famous quatrain (p209) has a similar feeling for pretty rather than profound nature.

6

Peach trees' red with drops of last night's rain is wet,
 Willows' green in strands of morning mist is deep;
 Flowers fall; the houseboy has not swept them up –
 Orioles cry; the mountain guest is still asleep

Wáng Wéi (699-759)

My Estate in Jūng-nán Mountain
(c758)

All this was interrupted by the rebellion which broke out in northeast China in 755. Its leader, Añ Lù-shān, headed all the troops on that frontier. He was on intimate terms with the Emperor's favorite, Lady Yáng, and was in fact "adopted" by her. Seeking at last a more direct route to power, he led his quarter-million soldiers first against the eastern capital Lwò-yáng, and then against Cháng-ān. Wéi did not leave the capital with the emperor, and thus did not witness the mutiny of the fleeing Emperor's guards at an insignificant but ever afterward celebrated place called Mǎ-wéi, at which Lady Yáng was killed to pacify them. Nor did he rally to the flag of the son to whom the emperor presently abdicated, who was organizing resistance west of Cháng-ān. He kept his post in Cháng-ān under the rebels. For this he was duly censured when the capital was retaken by loyal troops, and only escaped punishment through the intercession of his brother. Wáng Jìn, who had played an honorable civil and military role in the reconquest.

This intensified Wéi's desire (which had begun with his wife's death, twenty years earlier) for the quiet life. Here he enjoys the pleasures of contemplation in the nearby mountains. He is moved by spontaneity in line 3, and without effort but naturally (dž), and in an emptiness recalling Cháng Jyèn (p189), he comes to know what he knows. The poem climaxes in the next couplet, which has the head-and-tail parallelism of Wáng Wān's model (p197): he follows the stream (physical reality) to its source, where it dwindles to nothing. He watches the nothing of the sky, as it produces clouds (physical reality). Wáng Wān (p196) left his mountain behind when he descended, but Wáng Wéi brings its naturalness back down with him: chance meeting, unrestrained laughter, disregard of conventions.

He is free.

In middle years, I came to love the Way,
Of late, I dwell the Southern Hills below:
When I like, I wander off alone,
All things in Emptiness I come to know.
I walk to where the stream runs into nothing,
I sit and watch as cloud shapes rise and flow;
By chance I meet an old man in the woods –
We talk and laugh; no time when I must go.