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Self-Reflexive Vulgarity in Wang Fanzhi's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

A great number of poems unearthed from the Dunhuang manuscripts in the early twentieth century bear the name of a certain Wang Fanzhi. He was praised as an enlightened vernacular poet in multiple literary references from the Tang and Song dynasties. The exact author of these poems remains an enigma, yet the whole corpus speaks for a collective voice of a group of anonymous vernacular poets. This paper explores the sensitive interiority filled with dramatizations behind Wang Fanzhi's corpus, whose persona is portrayed as unabashedly ignoble by a sarcastic brush. Reading Wang's corpus along with that of contemporary Hanshan reveals its eccentricity: its poetic voice blatantly identifies with the vulgar without any protestation of a noble or morally superior mind. While its sarcasm fires at all walks of life, it is also directed against itself.

Keywords: Wang Fanzhi, 王梵志, vernacular poetry, satire, Hanshan, Tang dynasty, Dunhuang manuscript

詩者，志之所之也。在心為志，發言為詩。¹

Poetry is where the heart's will goes. When lodged in the heart, it is will; when expressed in words, it is poetry.

The belief that poetry conveys one's "will" 志 can be traced back to a remark attributed to the legendary sage Shun 舜 (traditional dates 2255–2205 BC).² The idea of 志, signifying at once will, wish, and aspiration, had long been indispensable in classical Chinese poetry. Lofty literati entrusted their wishes for a noble self-portrait to the poetry they wrote and passed down to future generations. On a separate path sprung up light poetry,³ especially satires that shifted centrality away from expressing oneself to deriding others. Written in the vernacular, such works were often deemed inferior to their classical counterparts. Nonetheless, the past several decades have witnessed an upsurge of interest in vernacular poets such as Hanshan 寒山 and Wang Fanzhi 王梵志, both conventionally considered to be active during the early Tang dynasty (618–907 AD). One crucial reason for this phenomenon is the value currently placed on the preservation of the Tang vernacular elements in their works.⁴

Hanshan and Wang Fanzhi are often labeled together as both Zen Buddhist poets and vernacular poets. A first look at their corpora confirms the impression that they indeed share similarities. Both bodies of work contain many satirical poems whose content hardly accords with Chinese literary traditions. A substantial portion of their works draws on Buddhist concepts and cautions against karmic retribution. They both acknowledge that they are considered unorthodox.

¹ Mao Heng 毛亨 et al., *Mao shi zhuanjian* 毛詩傳箋 [Commentary and Annotation of the *Book of Odes* (compiled by Mao Heng)] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), 11.

² "Poetry expresses the heart's wishes in words; songs set words to music" 詩言志, 歌永言. See James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 70.

³ Hu Shi 胡適, *Baihua wenxue shi* 白話文學史 [The History of (Chinese) Vernacular Literature] (Taiwan: Letian chubanshe, 1970), 134.

⁴ Victor H. Mair, "Script and Word in Medieval Vernacular Sinitic," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112, no. 2 (1992): 272–273.

Nonetheless, it is on such self-consciousness that their attitudes vary. Hanshan's persona never considers his poetry vulgar; instead he emanates solitary superiority, a sense that he is unappreciated only because others are not enlightened enough to understand him. His poetic ideal does not stray far away from the mode of self-expression. Wang Fanzhi's poetry, on the contrary, admits its vulgarity with little shame. The speaker does not wish to claim any form of superiority: he finds himself one of the unfortunate trapped in dire poverty, yet he also ridicules people of his own sort. His poetry indulges in a self-referential satire on the lowly and the vulgar.

The identity of Wang Fanzhi is a thorny question. Investigation into Wang's biography usually begins with an account in the *Collected Remarks at the Laurel Garden* 桂苑叢談, an assemblage of extraordinary and miscellaneous tales in the Tang dynasty. The story narrates Wang's mythic birth:

Wang Fanzhi was a native of Liyang county in Wei prefecture (in modern Henan Province). Fifteen *li* to the east of Liyang lived a certain Wang Zude. During the Sui era (581–619), there was an apple tree in Wang's courtyard. A knob as huge as a door grew on it, which decayed after three years. When Dezu saw it, he stripped the bark and found inside the tree an infant wrapped in cloth. He adopted the infant. When the child grew up to his seventh year and could speak, he asked: "Who raised me up?" Then he asked about his name. Dezu told him the truth: "Since you were born inside a tree, you are called Fantian 梵天 (later renamed as Zhi 志);⁵ I raised you, so your surname is Wang." Wang Fanzhi composed poetry to ridicule others, in which there were profound meanings. He was the Bodhisattva incarnate.⁶

⁵ The upper part of "梵" is the character for the word for "forest" (lín), which is written "林" as the combination of two "trees" (木).

⁶ Feng Yi 馮翊, "Shiyi" 史遺 [Omissions from the Histories], in *Guiyuan congtan, Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 [Complete Library of the Four Treasuries] (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1983–1986), 13.

The same story is retold with slight modifications in a Song dynasty (960–1279) encyclopedia, *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* 太平廣記.⁷ Interestingly, the account is placed under the category of “the Extraordinary” 異人 amid other figures with variegated supernatural shades. It suffices to say that Wang Fanzhi as a mythological figure was widely known throughout this period. Nonetheless, one can hardly take this account as a biography, as it follows the formulaic mythical birth-inside-tree and might likely be a variation.⁸ Despite the questioned reliability of this account, the existence of Wang as a poet is attested in various literary records through the Tang and Song periods, especially in the two genres of Remarks on Poetry 詩話 and Brush Notes 筆記,⁹ most of which acknowledge the philosophical insight of his poetry, cloaked as it is with vulgar expressions.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, scholars around the globe have attempted to trace the period during which Wang was active and writing, achieving little consensus. Conjectures range from the Sui–Tang transitional period to the mid-Tang.¹⁰ Xiang Chu 項楚 proposes that the whole corpus was composed during a span of a hundred years rather than in a definite historical era. He categorizes the extant corpus into three parts based on different themes. Associating social problems described in the poems with socio-political milieu in the Tang, he suggests that each part was completed in different stages of the Tang dynasty. The major portion of the corpus consists of three scrolls discovered at Dunhuang, which date to the early Tang during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian 武則天

7 There are three major modifications: the temporal phrase “during the Sui era” 當隋之時 is replaced by a more precise indication: “during the era of Emperor Wen of Sui (r. 581–604)” 當隋文帝時; the description of “composing poetry to ridicule others” 作詩諷人 is replaced by a more neutral statement “composing poetry to demonstrate to others” 作詩示人; the final comment “he was the Bodhisattva incarnate” 蓋菩薩示化也 is deleted. See the story in Li Fang 李昉, “Wang Fanzhi,” *Taiping guangji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 82:525.

8 Pan Chonggui 潘重規 reads the account literally as telling the story of Wang Zude adopting an orphan found inside a tree. In questioning this view, Xiang Chu 項楚 lists six pre-modern accounts of similar tales of birth inside hollow trees and argues that such stories have become a narrative template and cannot be taken seriously. See Xiang Chu, *Wang Fanzhi shi jiaozhu* 王梵志詩校註 [Wang Fanzhi’s Poetry Proofread and Annotated] (hereafter *WFZ*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2019 rpt.), Preface, 1–3.

9 A succinct list of Song sources that mention Wang can be found in Hu, *Baihua wenxue shi*, 141–142.

10 For a summary of leading scholars’ analyses of Wang’s era, see Zhu Fengyu 朱鳳玉, *Wang Fanzhi shi yanjiu* 王梵志詩研究 [A Study of Wang Fanzhi’s Poetry] (Taiwan: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1986), 43–66.

(624–705). The second portion, also discovered at Dunhuang, contains primarily didactic texts that resemble *The Family Education of Taigong* 太公家教, a popular primer for children during the Tang dynasty. Since the poems in it are not context-specific, it is difficult to trace its era of composition, but Xiang believes that it could date to the late Tang. The third portion consists of miscellaneous poems gathered from both Dunhuang manuscripts and scattered anthologies from the Tang and Song. Xiang contends that these works were composed and collected between the late Tang and early Song.¹¹

One textual critical issue surfacing from the Wang miscellany is that of ambiguous attribution. One poem collected in a Tang Brush Note, *Remarks of Yunxi* 雲溪友議, under Wang's name, "No one lives to a hundred years" 世無百年人, finds variants in multiple other records attributed to different authors. The same situation applies to several other poems in Wang's corpus.¹² This unique phenomenon gives rise to the hypothesis that the whole corpus derived from multiple hands, who likely were anonymous vernacular Tang poets. The very name Wang Fanzhi came to be a symbol for vernacular poetry, to which vernacular poets could freely attribute their works, in a time when vernacular poems were deemed beneath orthodox writers' dignity. This potentially composite authorship explains the inherent inconsistencies and contradictions prevalent throughout the corpus.¹³

The controversial authorship adds to the thematic diversity of the corpus, as it represents not a single but a collective personality. The corpus also unlocks a treasure house of vernacular poets' sensitive interiority, full of mindful observations of the world and inadvertent revelations of themselves.

Anchored in this recognition, I study three motifs prevalent in Wang's corpus: the pastoral, the theme of destitution, and the imagery of the grisly human body, so as to unfold such interiority. None of these themes is entirely original. Nonetheless, what distinguishes Wang's poems is a blatant sarcasm toward the lowly class, including the poet's ignoble self. While both classical and other vernacular poets might differentiate between the mundane and the transcendent, the morally inferior and the superior,

¹¹ *WFZ*, Preface, 11–20.

¹² *WFZ*, Appendix, 703–709.

¹³ Xiang Chu observes that, in general, Wang's corpus demonstrates different levels of understanding of Buddhism. Specifically, several poems present contradictory views regarding consuming meat. See *WFZ*, Preface, 5–11.

no one escapes the ridicule expressed by Wang's caustic brush. The style works in a self-reflexive way that renders Wang's poetry a commentary on the very idea of vulgarity.

Although Buddhist doctrines and ethical didacticism comprise a substantial portion of Wang's corpus, there is a special space, though not considerable, left for rustic depictions. The inclination toward carefree reclusion and serenity of mind amid austerity resembles the literati mentality. Two of Wang's poems, read in parallel, show an attempt to achieve the spiritual ideal conveyed in belle-lettres:

吾有十畝田，種在南山坡。青松四五樹，綠豆兩三窠。
熱即池中浴，涼便岸上歌。遨遊自取足，誰能柰我何。¹⁴

I have a field of ten *mu*, planted on the slope of the southern mountain. A few green pines, several mung vines.

I bathe in a pool when it is hot, sing along the bank when it is cool. Rambling and contenting myself, who can do anything to me? (no. 133)

我家在何處？結宇對山阿。院側狐狸窟，門前烏鵲窠。
聞鶯便下種，聽雁即收禾。悶遣奴吹笛，閒令婢唱歌。
兒即教誦賦，女即學調梭。寄語天公道：寧能那我何？¹⁵

Where is my home? I built it in a nook of the mountain. Beside the courtyard are fox caves, before the gates are bird nests.

Upon hearing orioles I sow seeds, hearing wild geese I gather crops. Bored, I ask the servant to play the flute; idle, I ask the maid to sing a song.

I teach my son to recite poetry, make my daughter learn spinning and weaving. I send my words to Lord Heaven: how can you do anything to me? (no. 124)

¹⁴ WFZ, 3:324-325.

¹⁵ WFZ, 3:303-305.

The first poem, though simplistic, well evokes the bucolic bliss attributed by convention to the life of literati recluses. The self-sufficiency in a rural setting as well as the adequate hermitage that nature bestows are recurrent tropes in classical poetry as well. The second poem, following a similar pattern, introduces more details into the picture of rustic daily life and advances the idyll through a depiction of the harmony between nature and humanity: the physical dwelling embedded in the wild, the agricultural activities conducted based on signs from animals, and the human interactions among different family members blend into the overall serenity. One formal feature of these two poems is the rigid parallelism. Hu Shi 胡適, in discussing the landscape poetry of the Jin dynasty (266–420), criticizes Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433) for using stiff and studied parallels to portray natural scenery and thus falling short in preserving the naturalness.¹⁶ The same criticism might be applied to Wang's poems. Nonetheless, the speaker's intention seems to lie somewhere else than in a spontaneous representation of rustic life, as will be demonstrated shortly.

In speaking of the poetic motif of reclusion deep in mountains, one can hardly omit a reference to the pioneer Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365–427), who has always been perceived as an icon of the ideal hermit. The "southern mountain" mentioned in the first couplet in Wang's poem also recalls Tao's best-known poem "On Drinking Wine (no. 5)" 飲酒 (其五):

I built my hut in the midst of men,
 Yet hear no clamor of horse and carriage.
 You ask how it can be done?
 With the mind detached, place becomes remote.
 Plucking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge,
 At a distance I catch sight of the southern mountain.
 The mountain air becomes lovely at sunset,
 As flying birds return together in flocks.

¹⁶ Hu, *Baihua wenxue shi*, 84–85.

In these things there is true meaning,
I wish to explain, but have forgotten the words.¹⁷

The literary critic Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927), who values the “ambience / state / realm” of poetry above other literary elements, interprets Tao’s poem as exemplifying the “state without the self” through the technique of “perceiving objects with the perspective of objects.” With such state and perspective, Tao’s poem confounds the differentiation between the self and the object.¹⁸

While Tao’s persona sinks into complete self-oblivion, Wang’s paints a different, if not opposite, picture. Tao’s poem begins with a paradoxical statement, which is quickly unraveled in the second couplet. It presents reclusion as “less about physical place than a state of mind,”¹⁹ evident in the subsequent depiction of a pleasant natural atmosphere that echoes a peaceful mind. Wang’s poems, on the other hand, attempt a divergent path. The first couplets immediately draw the reader’s attention. The speaker does not dwell in the noises of the world but far away in the southern mountain. It is the remote residence rather than a detached mentality that makes him a recluse. The focus of the main exposition is also different. Wang’s poems are saturated with human interactions, which serve to render the poems’ self-conscious depictions of an idyllic and satisfactory life. In contrast to Tao’s persona, which implicitly entrusts his feelings to nature, the carefree mentality of Wang’s speaker is explicitly expressed through the daily activities unfolded in a narrative picture.

The distinction becomes more emphatic at the end of Tao’s poem. It ponders the limitation of language to convey a certain epiphany and describes a heightened philosophical state in which the “true meaning” is understood only by the speaker. Though he has a wish to explain, it is not an urgent or anxious one. It is sufficient that the speaker alone experiences this state, which is ultimately impossible

¹⁷ Wendy Swartz, *Reading Tao Yuanming: Shifting Paradigms of Historical Reception, 427–1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 75.

¹⁸ Wang Guowei, *Renjian cihua* 人間詞話 [Remarks on Lyrics of the Human World] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), 1.

¹⁹ Swartz, *Reading Tao Yuanming*, 75.

and undesirable to express via words.²⁰ The final couplets of Wang's poems, however, exhibit a need to address others. The almost identical verses at the end of the two poems break the previous composed poetic voice with an accentuated defiance. The speaker's mind never reaches the transcendental state that obliterates the boundary between the self and the object, nor does it seek to. Instead the speaker strives to reach "Lord Heaven" (or possibly the reader) for a substantiation of the spiritual autonomy that it claims. The previous parallel descriptions are displays of contentment leading up to the final climax, where the need to address an audience is manifest.

The divergence between Wang Fanzhi's and Tao's pastoral poems lies not merely in the poetic state of the self vis-à-vis the object, as Wang Guowei theorized, but also in their self-perception as hermits and their attitude toward the "common" 俗. Tao's reclusiveness is portrayed as a natural disposition toward nature elsewhere, as in his daring declaration: "From early days I have been at odds with the world; My instinctive love is hills and mountains. / By mischance I fell into the dusty net, And was thirteen years away from home."²¹ Not only is he inclined to retreat to the mountains and hills, he also harbors a distaste toward the common world. As Swartz shows, this construction of a spontaneous preference for the natural over the mundane came to be a much-favored literary trope among the High Tang poets to explain their own withdrawal.²² In the perception of both Tao himself and his contemporaries, it is not a simple case of poverty, but rather a moral and principled retreat into contenting oneself with a simple life rather than grudgingly entering the troubling world of officialdom, the realm of the common.²³

One finds heavily imitative traces in those of Wang's poems examined above, yet the self-proclaimed partiality for the natural is absent. What remains, which also sets them apart from pure mimicry, is the defiant final couplets, whose meaning is puzzling.

Another poem in which the speaker philosophizes on life sheds some light:

²⁰ Ibid., 76.

²¹ Ibid., 176.

²² Ibid., 177.

²³ Ibid., 107–109.

共受虛假身，共稟太虛氣。死去雖更生，回來盡不記。
以此好尋思，萬事淡无味。不如慰俗心，時時一倒醉。²⁴

We all possess this illusory body; all hold the breath of the Grand Void.
Though we begin a new life after death, we remember nothing from the previous one.
When I ponder this, everything becomes meaningless.
Why not gladden my ordinary mind, and drink always to stupor? (no. 143)

Upon first glance, this piece seems to be a nihilistic lament. It is not simply mortality that concerns the speaker, but rather the realization that nothing will leave a trace. His melancholy is such that even a religious promise of afterlife cannot alleviate it. He then offers his solution: *carpe diem*. There are various poems in Wang's corpus that convey similar sentiments, namely, gratifying oneself with food and drink in the sojourn of this life. Nonetheless, the one cited above underscores the speaker's "ordinary mind" 俗心. The "common / ordinary" is what Tao tries to escape and distinguish himself from. Here, the speaker impresses not by lofty aspirations but by a forthright identification with the most ordinary. It is a self-referential comment on the common. Such ordinariness involves not merely bodily satisfaction but also a mentality of the abject and the uncouth, which will be explained later.

The image of a merry farmer in Wang's poems does not entirely disguise the austerities the speaker finds himself in. A significant portion of Wang's corpus is dedicated to narrating lives of the destitute lower class. Unlike the literati poets who might also sympathize with the indigent but who do not originally belong to this social stratum, Wang's voices observe and sing out the deprivation and distress as part of the group and are thus more vivid and concrete.²⁵ The speaker places himself within the circle of the impoverished and comments on their behaviors in a sarcastic way:

²⁴ WFZ, 3:339.

²⁵ WFZ, Preface, 22.

吾富有錢時，婦兒看我好。吾若脫衣裳，與吾疊袍襖。
吾出經求去，送吾即上道。將錢入捨來，見吾滿面笑。
繞吾白鴿旋，恰似鸚鵡鳥。邂逅暫時貧，看吾即貌哨。
人有七貧時，七富還相報。圖財不顧人，且看來時道。²⁶

When I was rich, my wife and children thought of me as pleasant-looking. When I took
my clothes off, they folded them up for me.

When I went out to make a living, they saw me off on my way. When I came back with
earnings, they grinned at me cheerfully.

They lingered around me like doves, and like parrots. When it chanced that I slipped
into poverty, they then thought of me as unsightly.

There are times of poverty, followed by times of wealth. If you seek only fortune without
caring about others, just wait for retribution along the way. (no. 002)

The speaker reveals the most dramatic pictures of his petty folk in the most trivial quotidian style. The drastic change in people's attitude toward him after he falls into poverty is both hilarious and thought-provoking: material pursuit becomes the only concern for them. The satirical tone permeates the whole poem, exemplified by the comic fifth couplet that compares the ingratiating people to doves and parrots. It is the picturesque illustration of the most ordinary trifles that is the most powerful and representative of the lower class. Ironic is the fact that the people the speaker criticizes are his wife and children, his most intimate ones and equals, yet who act in a snobbish way as if devoid of any familial devotion.

Especially intriguing is the outward manifestation of inner mentality in both the first and the sixth couplets. The word 貌哨 in the sixth couplet is a conundrum. Chinese scholars have proposed various explanations and associations.²⁷ One major suggestion interprets the word as an idiomatic

²⁶ WFZ, 1:12–14.

²⁷ A summary of major scholars' interpretations is conveniently collected in Huang Jiaojun 黄交军, Ren Lianming 任连明, and Ding Hongjie 丁红杰, "Dunhuang wenxian ciyu 'maoqiao' guquan" 敦煌文献词语'貌哨'诂论 [Explanation and Interpretation of the Word "maoqiao" in Dunhuang Manuscripts], *Liaodong xueyuan xuebao* 10, no. 4 (2008): 57, CNKI.

expression in the Tang dynasty that means an unpleasant facial expression. Another popular view relates the word 𪗇 to 魑, a ghost believed to appear in mountains. The word then acquires an extended meaning of ugly-looking, which stands in contrast to “good-looking” 好 in the second couplet.²⁸ In the first interpretation, 貌𪗇 refers to the insolent manner of the speaker’s wife and children when he becomes poor. The second interpretation understands 貌𪗇 as describing the speaker’s appearance from the perspective of his family: when he becomes poor they see him as a hideous man. These two interpretations are predicated on different theories, yet they both point to the natural manifestation of a miserly mentality that unfolds vividly in the poem.

It is not until the final couplet that the speaker directly comments on all his family’s shameful behavior, drawing on the belief in reincarnation to warn them there will be retribution in the afterlife. Nonetheless, he does not present himself as morally superior, but places himself within the group of the very despicable that he at the same time ridicules:

吾家昔富有，你身窮欲死。你今初有錢，與我昔相似。
吾今乍無初，還同昔日你。可惜好靴牙，翻作破皮底。²⁹

When I was wealthy, you were deadly penniless. Now you have just got rich, you are like me in former days.

Now I have become broke, I am also like you in former days. What a fine piece of leather for boots, what a pity it is trampled as a shabby sole. (no. 293)

The theme of recurrent fortune is articulated in this poem in a more acerbic key. Though the speaker shows clear contempt for the lower class, he is also identified with it, a circumstance reflected not from the meager material wealth he possesses but from the cynical mentality he exhibits. Recollections of former affluence offer mental comfort and counteract the frustration of the present deprivation. However, it does not suffice for the speaker to recall only his own prior situations. A foil whose past is

²⁸ *WFZ*, 1:13.

²⁹ *WFZ*, 5:569–570.

as lowly as his present is required to keep his inner tranquility. One quickly realizes that the speaker's intention is not to philosophize on the rotating nature of fortune in people's lives, but to sneer at those who "have just got rich." The whole poem alternates between "I" 吾 and "you" 你 with no descriptions of actual interpersonal interactions, instead employing rich internal monologues of the speaker alone. On the one hand, one naturally wonders what others have done wrong to deserve such an attack and mentally sketches the image of smug upstarts who behave in a corrupted way that offends the speaker. On the other hand, one might also ask whether the antagonism between "I" and "you" is only a figment of the speaker's imagination. The poem does not offer answers but discloses a sensitive interiority, where the irritation at the sudden destitution of oneself is intertwined with jealousy of wealthy others. It is this mentality that betrays the speaker's belonging to the lowly class that he condemns.

The exposition on recurrent fortune is reminiscent of several poems of Hanshan's. One of them, "Old Lady from the Eastern House," ponders the same question but ends with a philosophical rumination. The poem scoffs at a snobbish old lady who has gained wealth for several years and who mocks the impoverished narrator. The old lady and the narrator deride each other but for different reasons: the former sees life as a race to be rich and laughs at the latter for lagging behind, whereas the latter scorns participation in such a race and laughs at the former for being in the lead. The narrator then concludes: "and if this laughter doesn't stop:/ An east side will again turn into a west side."³⁰ This final couplet is an epiphany that the vicious cycle of discrimination will never end until both sides dismiss the impulse to claim superiority. Paul Rouzer points out that "[Hanshan's] poetic voice has the ability to wryly undermine its own superiority, thus questioning its own seeming role as a model worthy of emulation."³¹ While recognizing such self-parody, one might also acknowledge the narrator's eventual enlightenment, which still marks him as morally superior and distinguishable from the old lady. Such a tacit statement of the self's morality is prevalent in Hanshan's poems, along with contempt and cynicism toward the corrupted rich.³²

³⁰ Modified from Rouzer's original translation "an east side and a west side too" 相笑儻不止, 東邊復西邊. Paul Rouzer, *On Cold Mountain: A Buddhist Reading of the Hanshan Poems* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 79.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

³² *Ibid.*, 158. Here Rouzer also argues that "While Wang Fanzhi posits a stable world of karmic justice (in deciding status and

Although similar in the juxtaposition of both the self and the other, the rich and the poor, Hanshan's self-parody and Wang's stricture are not a perfect pair, as the latter does not entertain the philosophical resolution of the former. The final couplet in Wang's poem seems to be the speaker's self-lament: the change from a prosperous past to the humble present is just like a fine piece of leather wasted as the sole of shoes. The previous reflection on the alternating statuses between the self and the other does not culminate, as it does for Hanshan's narrator, in the realization that life keeps reshuffling and that neither prosperity nor adversity need be a cause for concern.

The Tang poet-monk Jiaoran 皎然 (730–799), in his magnum opus *Models of Poetry* 詩式, placed Wang under the category of “Appalling the common” 駭俗 with the comment that his poetry “exhibits outward an appearance that amazes the common and embraces inward a mind that enlightens others” 外示驚俗之貌，內藏達人之度.³³ The second half of this appraisal hardly applies to the poem discussed above, and the first half will be discussed later. The poem scarcely enlightens others, as the speaker himself is not yet enlightened but trapped in the trail of misery and degradation. What makes Wang's poem uniquely poignant is indeed this uncovered and unabashed monologue of an ignoble voice, which does not seek to claim a moral high ground or a spiritual enlightenment, neither does it present itself purely as a detached observer of mundanity. Wang's persona is situated within the lowly class that it harshly derides, a stance that separates him from Hanshan's moral self-appraisal.

On the theme of lower class deprivation, the name of Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) inevitably emerges along with the image of his thatched roof blown by the autumn wind. As probably the most celebrated and imitated classical Chinese poet, Du Fu's “vision of large significance in the everyday” lends his poetry to multifaceted depiction of the mundane.³⁴ One of Du's poems dealing with the speaker's own impoverishment, “Empty Purse” 空囊, serves as a counterpoint to Wang's poem:

allotting wealth), Hanshan emphasizes a world in flux, where Impermanence makes things wildly unpredictable.” This does not hold true for Wang's poem “When I was wealthy” cited earlier, as well as several others. Much like Hanshan's, Wang's world is also one where people's lots are constantly rearranged.

33 Jiaoran, “Shishi” 詩式, *Lidai shihua* 歷代詩話 [Remarks on Poetry of Past Dynasties], ed., He Wenhuan 何文煥 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 32.

34 Stephen Owen, ed. and trans., *The Poetry of Du Fu* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), Introduction, lvi.

The azure cypress is bitter, but still is eaten,
bright wisps at dawn can make a meal.
Men of this age have all let things run wild,
and my way finds itself in hardship.
No wood for the fire, the well frozen at dawn,
without robes, bed cold by night.
Fearing shamefaced awkwardness if my purse were empty,
I hold on to one copper cash.³⁵

The opening couplet describes a typical immortal regimen, yet the speaker does not belong to the otherworld but is just one of the "men of this age." Without envisioning a symbolic transcendence of the phenomenal world to circumvent the immediate concerns of poverty, Du's persona faces all the realistic hardships in the human world. Nonetheless, the end of the poem reveals that shame is worse than destitution, which is why the speaker has to create a false facade and put one coin into his empty purse to show to others. As Owen observes, "Tu Fu is the sage-autobiographer, penetrating all the deceptive surface roles that belong to his unsagely, merely human self."³⁶ Rather than simply constructing an image of a content noble who dines on "azure cypress" and "bright wisps," Du exposes the contention between an idealized surface role and a struggling true self and brings them into a unity, which confers sagehood upon him.

It is with the construction of the poetic voice that Wang's poem becomes distinctive compared to Du's. The complexity of Du Fu's persona reveals a much-contradicted mentality, fearing embarrassment by holding on to a deceptive coin and at the same time not fearing it by telling the truth to his readers,³⁷ which contributes to its everlasting charm and reputation. One might ask, in an era when most commoners likely suffered from substandard living conditions and financial distress, what

³⁵ Ibid., 183.

³⁶ Stephen Owen, "The Self's Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography," in *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice: Shih Poetry from the Late Han to the T'ang*, ed. Shuen-fu Lin and Stephen Owen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014 rpt.), 90.

³⁷ Ibid., 89.

makes one feel ashamed of having an empty purse. It is clear that Du Fu never belongs to the class of utter deprivation despite his constant complaint about poverty, hence the need to distinguish himself from those penniless through a disguise. In Wang's poem, such contradiction silently dissolves, or does not exist from the very beginning, as the speaker does not strive to differentiate himself from the lowly others. There is no need to conceal destitution, nor is it something to be ashamed of. Xiang Chu associates the bitter tone of Wang's poem, dwelling as it does on past wealth, with the morbid mentality of Ah Q 阿 Q,³⁸ a hilariously pathetic character crafted by the pen of Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936). The sensitive inner world of Wang's speaker recalls Ah Q's exclamation: "We used to be much better off than you! Who do you think you are?"³⁹ Crying out from both works is an unadorned voice, both poignant and pitiable, that ventures to expose its abjection.

To say that Wang's persona pursues no moral superiority does not mean that it rejects any form of superiority.

他家笑吾貧，吾貧極快樂。無牛亦無馬，不愁賊抄掠。
 你富戶役高，差科並用卻。吾無呼喚處，飽吃常展腳。
 你富披錦袍，尋常被纏縛。窮苦無煩惱，草衣隨體著。⁴⁰

Others laugh at my poverty; I am poor yet cheerful. No ox or horse, I do not worry about
 the depredation of thieves.

You are rich but have more burdens, both corvee labor and tax. Nowhere can I be of
 service, I eat my fill and stretch my legs all the time.

You are rich and cloaked with brocade garments, always stumbling on them. I am poor
 yet not troubled, robes of straw wrap around my body. (no. 006)

³⁸ WFZ, 5:570.

³⁹ Lu Xun, "Ah Q zhengzhuàn" 阿 Q 正傳 [The True History of Ah Q], in *The Complete Stories of Lu Xun*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 70.

⁴⁰ WFZ, 1:24–26.

Here is a clear juxtaposition between the poor and the rich as well as the speaker's self-professed optimal delight in poverty. In this cursory peek, the state of poverty seems to be more desirable: the speaker seems insouciant and unburdened by state-imposed labor, whereas those of great fortune bear unavoidable responsibilities. Nonetheless, this is not a pure monologue of self-contentment but rather the speaker's rebuttal to those who deride him for his poverty, as shown in the first line. Once again, the prominent opposition between "I" and "you" highlights the argumentative tenor. While the speaker's concerns for corvee labor and tax imposed on the rich might reflect social realities,⁴¹ his "observation" that the rich often stumble over their brocade garments seems to be his own fantasy. It is sheer self-consolation, hapless and helpless. The superiority of poverty is merely a deception. Much like the last poem, this poem reveals the speaker's interiority, brimming with distorted dramatization.

Two poems often cited together as a contrast offer a glimpse into how the actual lives of the rich and the poor are represented, which also ruthlessly belies the claim of the superiority of poverty. In "Rich Hicks" 富饒田舍兒 (no. 269), the speaker states at the beginning that being rich should be desirable. However, the speaker does not refrain from criticizing the rich landlords: despite their affluence, they greedily hoard grain in hopes of gaining colossal profit once its price increases. When village clerks come to solicit their service, they bribe them with feasts and luxuries so as to be exempted from corvee labor: "County clerks show favor, ministries form alignment./ Despite the demanding corvee labor and heavy taxes, with money none is there to fear" 縣官與恩澤, 曹司一家事./ 縱有重差科, 有錢不怕你.⁴² On the contrary, "Poor Hicks" 貧窮田舍漢 (no. 270) depicts a straitened couple who are never cheerful. The couple are occupied with menial labor and have neither rice nor firewood. Far from eating their full, they constantly starve as if they were fasting. Rather than taking pride in having robes of straw that cover their whole bodies, they have not even a complete set of garments. In spite of their poverty, they can hardly escape corvee labor. While portraying their life with these miserable details, the speaker does not sympathize with them either. He exposes further how suffering

⁴¹ According to the Tang Code, households that are more affluent and have more members bear more responsibility in corvee labor and paying taxes. See Liu Junwen 劉俊文, "Chaike fuyi weifa" 差科賦役違法 [Violation of Codes of Corvee Labor and Taxes], *Tanglü shuyi jianjie* 唐律疏議箋解 [Annotation and Explanation of the Tang Dynasty Code] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 13:1001.

⁴² *WFZ*, 5:512–517.

from deprivation elicits violence and vileness in human beings: “The ugly wife curses with fury, muddled, she grasps the clerk’s cap. / The clerk is kicked, the village head is punched” 醜婦來惡罵，啾唧搦頭灰。/ 里正被腳蹴，村頭被拳搓。⁴³

Note that in these two poems, though the speaker reveals candidly and poignantly the contrast between two extremes of life, he does not favor or take pity on any of his protagonists. The previously claimed superiority of idle poverty is subverted, and the disadvantages become attached to poverty, while the wealthy are complicit with officials and spared from any obligations. One might recall the timeless depiction of the wealth gap by Du Fu: “Crimson gates reek with meat and ale, while on the streets are bones of the frozen dead.”⁴⁴ Both Du and Wang write about the same theme yet with different attitudes. Du articulates profound sympathy toward the deprived and condemns the corrupted. His aspiration is so ambitious as to “get a great mansion of ten thousand rooms,⁴⁵ / broadly covering the poor scholars of all the world, all with joyous expressions, / unshaken by storms, as stable as a mountain.”⁴⁶ For Wang, however, both the rich landlords and the poor couple are mere hicks,⁴⁷ the former rapacious and ingratiating, and the latter beleaguered but vicious. None is heroic or piteous, all are petty and obnoxious.

Throughout the poems analyzed so far, Wang’s speaker conveys an explicit impulse to comment on lowly people in a self-referential manner, and an implicit one to address his readers. Although the poetic themes are hardly novel, the sarcastic tone toward both the lower class and the abject self distinguishes him from not only classical poets but also his contemporary, Hanshan. The urge to connect to his readers is not manifest but latent, and it can take the form of an exclamation or question at the end, as in the two pastoral poems. At other times and more frequently, it is embedded in gruesome diction, fulfilling the first part of Jiaoran’s comment that Wang’s poetry “exhibits outward an appearance that shocks the common.”

43 *WFZ*, 5:517–521.

44 Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, 1:215.

45 Modified from Owen’s original translation: “a million rooms” for 千萬間.

46 *Ibid.*, 3:43.

47 The terms used in the titles, 田舍兒/漢, literally mean “farmhouse men” but are usually derogatory.

Relentless depictions of the grotesque human body fill Wang's corpus, fraught with analogies such as "sacks of pus and blood" 膿血袋 and "sacks of excreta" 屎尿袋.⁴⁸ They allude to the Buddhist concept of the "Contemplation on the Impure" 不淨觀 (Skt. *aśubhabhāvanā*), a meditative practice to overcome the affliction of carnal lust by observing foul objects.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the terms are used beyond sheer metaphors but as literal and anatomical descriptions:

身是五陰城，周回無里數。上下九穴門，膿流皆鼻瘻。
湛然膿血間，安置八萬戶。餘有四千家，出沒同居住。
壤壤相啖食，貼貼無言語。惣在糞尿中，不解相蛆妒。
身行城即移，身臥城穩住。身死城破壞，百姓無安處。⁵⁰

The body is a town of five aggregates, spanning endless *li*. Nine orifices from top to bottom, dripping pus congeals into foul blobs.

In the brimming pus and blood, settled eighty thousand households.⁵¹ With four thousand more, they lodge together.

Messily they devour each other, mutely they utter no words. They are all in ordure, how come they envy each other?

When the body walks its town also moves, when the body lies down its town also settles.

When the body expires its town collapses, leaving all its dwellers no habitat. (no.

251)

48 "Everyone Cherishes the Sack of Pus and Blood" 各各保愛膿血袋 (no. 20), *WFZ*, 1:65 and "Mere Sacks of Excreta" 本是屎尿袋 (no. 304), *WFZ*, 6:586.

49 Robert E. Buswell, Jr., and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., "aśubhabhāvanā," *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 75.

50 *WFZ*, 5:473.

51 In the Buddhist allusion here, the "eighty thousand households" 八萬戶 as well as the "four thousand households" 四千家 in the next line refers to the numerous "worms" 蟲 thought to reside in the human body. See notes 6 and 7 in *WFZ*, 5:475.

The specifics of the putrefaction involved in the “Contemplation on the Impure” are compacted in this poem, drawing on the Buddhist analogy of the human body as “a town of five aggregates.”⁵² The gruesome and picturesque description of bodily discharges is not unique to Wang’s poems either.⁵³ What is notable is how the poet utilizes the existing allusions and analogies and transforms them into his own satire on humanity.

The third and the fourth couplets rework the Buddhist allusion that numerous worms exist in the human body by personifying these creatures as residents in the body’s “town.” This personification becomes more apparent in the sixth couplet, “They are all in ordure, how come they envy each other?” which is a direct comment on the previous line, concerning how they encroach on each other. The implied sarcasm, that all is filthy and vying is senseless, is consistent with the mockery seen in the previous poems on wealth and poverty. The speaker does not emphasize the original efficacious Buddhist practice of observing foul substances to counteract one’s carnal desire. Instead, he draws an analogy between the numerous worms and humans and points out sharply that they are all mired in sordidness.

A final question thus arises: what is the need to compose such unpleasant poems? Although the whole corpus, being a medley, rejects any essentialist extraction of its meaning, there remains one quatrain key to this question:

⁵² *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. “Wuyun” 五蘊, accessed April 28, 2021, <http://www.buddhism-dict.net>.

⁵³ Besides its source in certain Buddhist concepts, these details of filthy bodily discharges also appear in another Dunhuang manuscript, “The Tale of Master Yuan of Mount Lu” 廬山遠公話, in which an eminent monk explains Buddhist teachings. See Tansen Sen and Victor H. Mair, “The Tale of Master Yuan of Mount Lu,” in the *Hawai‘i Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture*, ed. Victor H. Mair, Nancy S. Steinhardt and Paul R. Goldin (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 318–319, doi:10.2307/603705.

梵志翻著襪，人皆道是錯。乍可刺你眼，不可隱我腳。⁵⁴

Fanzhi flips over his socks to wear, people all say that he is wrong. I would rather offend
your eyes, but not upset my feet. (no. 319)

Different from most of Wang's poems, that had only been unearthed from Dunhuang at the beginning of the twentieth century, this terse poem is found in multiple literary records from the Song dynasty,⁵⁵ which bespeaks its popularity and wide recognition across circles of both the commoner and the elite. The consciousness of a purposefully unorthodox self is remarkable as well. The speaker is keenly aware of his eccentricity and people's displeasure with him, yet he is adamant that he will not conform to the mainstream for the plain reason of not upsetting his feet. Essentially what "seems" (conventional way of wearing the socks) is less important than what "is" (actual comfort of one's feet). It resonates with the prior statement of gladdening the "ordinary mind": conforming to the mainstream is valued less than staying true to the self even if it appears outlandish. The famous Northern Song literatus Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) commented that "all sentient beings turned upside down are just like this. Thus we learned that Fanzhi is devoted to self-cultivation" 一切眾生顛倒，類皆如此，乃知梵志是大修行人也。⁵⁶ The idea of "flipping over the socks to wear," namely, behaving in an unorthodox way, referring to the extended meaning of writing against conventional values, was deemed the most representative feature of Wang's poetry. It also became a much-favored literary device among Tang vernacular poets, anticipating the Song usage of "Reversing the Verdict" 翻案法。⁵⁷

Hanshan also left several meta-poems elucidating his attitudes toward his own poetry, among which the most often cited is the following:

⁵⁴ *WFZ*, 6:602.

⁵⁵ See a list of the Song records that reference this poem in *WFZ*, 6:604.

⁵⁶ Huang Tingjian, *Yuzhang Huang xiansheng wenji* 豫章黃先生文集 [Anthology of Master Huang's (Huang Tingjian) Literary Works] (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1979), 30:344.

⁵⁷ Zha Minghao 查明昊, "Fan zhuo wa fa yu Hanshan ti" 翻著襪法與寒山體 [(Literary) Device of "Reversing the Socks" and Hanshan's (Literary) Form], *Dunhuang yanjiu*, no. 3 (2003): 100–104.

There are people who laugh at my poems;
 Though they're in keeping with classical standards!
 But I won't bother people with Sir Zheng's notes,
 Have no need of glosses from the Masters Mao.
 I don't hate the lack of comprehenders;
 That's just because my intimates are few.
 I dispense with forcing tones on my lines,
 Since I can't cure myself of my errors.
 But should they meet up with clear-sighted ones,
 Then they'll circulate throughout the world!⁵⁸

It is instantly clear that Hanshan does not consider his works humble and even implies that they are superior to the *Book of Odes* 詩經, as they are free of commentarial burden and are more accessible.⁵⁹ In fact, Hanshan harbors pride in his own intrinsic distinction and literary talent, which he believes are also reflected in the lack of comprehenders.⁶⁰ Like Wang, Hanshan also realizes that his poetry is unappreciated, yet he attributes it to the lack of his “intimates” 知音 (literally, “one who knows the tone”), who are also the “clear-sighted ones” 明眼人. All the others who do not understand his poetry and laugh at him thus become mindless. There is a fundamental difference between Hanshan's and Wang's self-perception: Hanshan never considers his poetry vulgar or himself unworthy, but Wang constantly places himself within the vulgar and even delights in being so.

What ultimately renders Wang's poetry peculiar is the self-reflexive vulgarity embedded in his poetic ideas. Wang's poems are diagonally different from belle-lettres not merely because of the

⁵⁸ Rouzer, *On Cold Mountain*, 54.

⁵⁹ Mair brings forward the possibility that the number of around three hundred poems attributed to Hanshan is modeled on that of the *Book of Odes*. He also expresses a suspicion about Hanshan's alleged literacy: “On the face of things, it does not seem likely that someone of his status would have been able to write even these less-than-polished pieces.” See Mair, “Script and Word,” 272.

⁶⁰ Rouzer notes that “the rarity of complete understanding is a mark of profundity and wisdom.” See Rouzer, *On Cold Mountain*, 55.

colloquial and unadorned diction, but more inherently because of the speaker's apathy towards moral superiority or spiritual enlightenment in painting a self-portrait. In a similar fashion, Wang's poems also diverge from Hanshan's with regard to their satiric targets: the latter against the wealthy, especially those who exploit the powerless,⁶¹ in contrast to the former against virtually everyone, including his abject self. In Wang's polyvocal corpus, there are pungent voices that are infuriated with the snobbish, jealous voices that assail the new rich, miserable voices that feign a self-contentment, defiant voices that delight in disturbing the orthodox. It is less a matter of expression but more one of revelation and reflection on the self, the collective personality voiced through the vernacular and the vulgar.

⁶¹ Ibid., 170.

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