Speaking and Writing:

Studies in Vernacular Aspects

of Middle Period Chinese Culture

Edited by
Victor H. Mair

SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS is an occasional series dedicated to making available to specialists and the interested public the results of research that, because of its unconventional or controversial nature, might otherwise go unpublished. The editor-in-chief actively encourages younger, not yet well established scholars and independent authors to submit manuscripts for consideration.

Contributions in any of the major scholarly languages of the world, including romanized modern standard Mandarin and Japanese, are acceptable. In special circumstances, papers written in one of the Sinitic topolects (*fangyan*) may be considered for publication.

Although the chief focus of *Sino-Platonic Papers* is on the intercultural relations of China with other peoples, challenging and creative studies on a wide variety of philological subjects will be entertained. This series is *not* the place for safe, sober, and stodgy presentations. *Sino-Platonic Papers* prefers lively work that, while taking reasonable risks to advance the field, capitalizes on brilliant new insights into the development of civilization.

Submissions are regularly sent out for peer review, and extensive editorial suggestions for revision may be offered.

Sino-Platonic Papers emphasizes substance over form. We do, however, strongly recommend that prospective authors consult our style guidelines at www.sino-platonic.org/stylesheet.doc.

Manuscripts should be submitted as electronic files in Microsoft Word format. You may wish to use our sample document template, available here: www.sino-platonic.org/spp.dot.

All issues of *Sino-Platonic Papers* are free in PDF form. Issues 1–170, however, will continue to be available in paper copies until our stock runs out.

Please note: When the editor goes on an expedition or research trip, all operations may cease for up to three months at a time.

Speaking and Writing:

Studies in Vernacular Aspects of Middle Period Chinese Culture

Edited by Victor H. Mair

University of Pennsylvania

Foreword

Victor H. Mair

University of Pennsylvania

The three papers in this collection were written for my seminar on Middle Vernacular Sinitic (MVS). They cover a wide variety of topics, from epistolary style to social mores, to philosophy and religion. They reveal how a vernacular ethos informs the thought and life of men and women from different social classes and distinguishes them from those who adhere to a more strictly classical outlook. Although they are on quite dissimilar subjects, this trio of papers harmonize in their delineation of the implications of vernacularity for belief and perception. Taken together, they compel one to consider seriously what causes some people to tilt more to the vernacular side and others to cling to classicism. While the authors of these papers do not aim to arrive at a common conclusion on the meaning of the vernacular-classical divide, the readers who probe beneath the surface of all three papers will undoubtedly find facets that refract and reflect themes that bind them into a unified body of inquiry.

In the first paper, Jack Lu examines an enigma that has long puzzled historians of art, since the individual who is generally considered to be the greatest calligrapher in Chinese history, Wang Xizhi (fourth c.), is also famous for having written countless notes and letters in vernacular language. Not only are the notes and letters in vernacular, they are also often about the most mundane of subjects, such as the minor ailments of himself, his family members, and friends. Lu plumbs Wang's motives for this seemingly bizarre behavior and explains how it makes a certain kind of sense.

Xinyan Chen delves into the elusive notion of *yuàn* 媛, which started out more than two thousand years ago with the meaning of "beautiful woman," developed during the early middle ages into the idea of a woman who is both beautiful and admirable, but somehow during the modern period has taken on the rather negative nuance of a privileged, pampered woman. Chen focuses particularly on *yuàn* 媛 as portrayed in *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語), a remarkable

work of social anecdotes and commentary of the second-fourth centuries that was compiled and edited during the first half of the fifth century and is conspicuous for the large proportion of vernacular usages it has for that period.

The third paper, by Ming Sun, is about the core Chan / Zen concept of the negation of language, particularly written language. Of course, this presents a contradiction in terms, since the Chan masters who promoted this doctrine could not but talk and write about it. Sun investigates ineffability from a range of standpoints: philosophical, religious, literary, and so forth. Early on in the paper, the author introduces us to some of the means Chan masters adopted for dealing with the problem language in a system of thought that was skeptical of the efficacy of language in arriving at truth: Chan poetry (*chanshi* 禪詩), public cases (*gong'an* 公案), recorded sayings (*yulu* 語錄), incisive dialogue (*jifeng* 機鋒), beating and shouting (*bangh*e 棒喝), and even silence.

Coming to grips with exquisite mundanity, virtuous beauty, and ultimate truth— all within the realm of linguistic vernacularity—ensures that readers of this collection will come away from it with the gray matter between their ears buzzing.

Analyzing the Reasons behind Wang Xizhi's Use of Vernacular Chinese in Letters

Jack Lu

University of Pennsylvania

"Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (321–379) is responsible for a great many middle vernacular Chinese dictionary entries."[1] Wang Xizhi is widely recognized as the paramount figure of the history of Chinese calligraphy, but his role in the study of middle vernacular Chinese attracts far less attention compared to his artistic achievements. The precursor of the written vernacular Chinese, medieval period Buddhist texts contained more vernacularizations than any other texts of the same period.[2] It is commonly understood that classical Chinese was the designated written linguistic form in early medieval China and that incorporating vernacular language into writing rarely occurred in non-Buddhist texts.

The surviving works of Wang Xizhi, especially his personal letters and notes, however, are vernacularized to an unusual extent. As a result, many middle vernacular phrases survived owing to his use of them in his writings. This essay will attempt to tackle the question why he chose to write in such a manner. Or to phrase it more precisely, how did it come about that most of the surviving texts of Wang Xizhi are vernacular and informal?

This essay examines the nature of Wang Xizhi's letters, considering them in four sections. While explaining the probable reasons behind Wang's choice of a vernacular, informal, and expressive writing style, the first two sections will also discuss whether his epistolary writing style was unique in his time. Is it possible that the extant sampling of Wang Xizhi's writing is biased toward such letters? Is it possible that many people contemporaneous to Wang Xizhi were also writing in vernacular Chinese, but that

---

1 Victor H. Mair, in class discussion in February 2023.

2 Victor H. Mair, "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 3 (1994): 709–712. https://doi.org/10.2307/2059728.

only Wang Xizhi's letters survived, because of the calligraphic values of his writings? The third section will examine the possible bias of the sampling of Wang Xizhi's extant works. The last section will center on the relationship between the originality of the calligraphy and the authenticity of the text. Through close study of the context of his works, hopefully this paper will be able to explain why the history of Chinese calligraphy is poignantly yet beautifully held together by slips of papers about trivial matters.

A major challenge of this research is the absence of a sample of the authentic handwriting of Wang Xizhi. At one time, during and shortly after his lifetime, there were probably tens of thousands of his works in circulation. However, the contents of only about seven hundred texts, mostly addressed to his family and friends, survive today.[3] Tragically, none of the original copies of these texts survived. All we have today of his works are engravings and traced copies. Furthermore, the evidence of the provenance of the works of Wang Xizhi is scarce. Often there is no clue to the context of the letter and who the intended recipients were.[4] Wang's letters contain a large variety of themes, and the precise dates of the letters are now impossible to investigate.[5]

These issues pose a concern not only for this paper but also for any study of Wang. Not being able to see a single character written by Wang Xizhi almost completely prevents us from making any firm claims about the calligraphic quality of his original works, while it also invites a wide range of hypotheses regarding his vernacular writing style.

INFORMALITY IN WANG XIZHI'S LETTERS

The exquisiteness of the works Wang Xizhi, known as the Saint of Calligraphy, can never be stressed enough. Beside the use of vernacular language in his letter, there are a couple of aspects outside the linguistic quality that are unique and that must be taken into account. Compared to those of his contemporaries who passed down to us only a few examples, the contents of an immense number of Wang's letters have survived until today. What is more remarkable is that almost all of Wang's writing

---

3 Antje Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy: Reading Wang Xizhi's Letters," *T'OUNG PAO*, no. 96 (2011): 372. www.brill.nl/tpao.

4 Ibid.

5 Danping Sun 孙丹萍, "The Study of the Epistolary Essays in Jin Dynasties 两晋尺牍文学研究," *CNKI* (dissertation, 2006), 44. https://kns.cnki.net.

was passed down as calligraphic works, while other people's correspondences are incorporated into other literary works.[6] While these notes written by Wang Xizhi are precious sources for the studies for his biography, broader historical events, and Chinese calligraphy, scholars largely have ignored the significance of the literary form of these short letters.[7]

Wang's most expressive and artistically creative calligraphic works were written in a literary form called *chidu* 尺牍. *Chidu*, literally translated, is a wooden slip one foot long. Before the invention of paper, people wrote on bamboo and wooden slips as a method of communication.[8] One precursor of *chidu* is the Junshi 君奭 chapter of *Book of Documents* 尚书.[9] In the Warring States period, *chidu* was mainly intended for official affairs and only rarely functioned as personal correspondence.[10] Most of the surviving *chidu* from this era mainly featured diplomatic and political debates and persuasions.[11] Starting from the Qin dynasty, *chidu* concerning personal affairs gradually gained popularity.[12] Then people living in early medieval China experienced an important change in the medium of writing when the use of paper became prevalent. Although it was a long process that stretched for dynasties, paper gradually replaced bamboo, wood, and silk for writing.[13]

While multiple media coexisted, bamboo slips were used for more formal and official documents and books, and wooden tablets were used for personal correspondence. Silk is lighter in weight and can be employed to create calligraphy with much more aesthetically pleasing effects, but it is also more expensive and requires better writing skills.[14] Until the Eastern Han dynasty, paper gradually

---

6 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 374.

7 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 375.

8 Tao Yang 杨涛, "A Research on the Evolvement of the New Style Calligraphy in the Eastern-Jin Dynasty 东晋新体'书法成因研究," *CNKI* (dissertation, 2010), https://kns.cnki.net pp. 56.

9 Sun, "The Study of the Epistolary Essays in Jin Dynasties," 7.

10 Tao Yang, "A Research on the Evolvement of the New Style Calligraphy in the Eastern-Jin Dynasty," 56.

11 Sun, "The Study of the Epistolary Essays in Jin Dynasties," 7.

12 Yang, "A Research on the Evolvement of the New Style Calligraphy," 56.

13 Antje Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 20.

14 Ibid.

replaced bamboo and wood as the writing medium for both private and public settings.[15] In comparison to silk, paper is lighter, easier to transport, and significantly more affordable. Epistolary culture flourished, and people produced *chidu* more frequently than ever. It was the spread of paper that enabled Wang Xizhi to send a large quantity of letters. Paper provided people like Wang Xizhi a way that was free of financial concerns of sending letters that are calligraphically valuable.

The extant personal correspondence of Wang Xizhi can best be characterized as unconventional, informal, and sincere. This section will analyze the factors that contributed to the heavily informal character of Wang's letters. While his own personal preference is without a doubt the primary cause of Wang Xizhi's writing style, there are also other aspects almost equally influential, such as his political position and the possible bias shown in the surviving sample of his writings.

While Wang's letters have the conventional opening and ending sections, his letters also contain unconventional aspects, such as frequently having an incomplete framework, in that they lack a main body, notably any concrete information. The opening section of his letters at times smoothly transitions to the closing,[16] and the letter is hollow in meaning, almost without the function of transmitting a message. This note from volume twenty-four of *Quan Jin Wen* 全晋文 exemplifies such letters' lack of substance:

On the 15th day of the 7th month [Wang] Xizhi lets [you] know:

In these autumn days, I am deeply moved by my longing for you. Having received your note of the 5th I feel greatly comforted. Recently the heat has been extreme. Have you been fairly well lately? I am waiting for further communications, and am in fairly good health. Despite all my efforts, I cannot be more detailed.

[This is what] Wang Xizhi lets [you] know.[17]

---

15 Yang, "A Research on the Evolvement of the New Style Calligraphy," 56.

16 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy." 380–81.

17 Ibid.

秋日感怀深，得五日告，甚慰，晚热盛，君比可不？迟复后问，仆平平，力
及不一一。王羲之白。[18]

The phrase *li bu yi yi* 力及不一一 is a vernacular usage meaning "my vitality is not enough for me to go into detail." Similar phrasess used by Wang are *li bu yi y*i 力不一一 and *li bu ci* 力不次.[19] In this letter, the intention of the writer is quite unclear. The entire letter feels like "small talk." It contains all elements of modern quotidian "small talk." Wang discusses the weather, inquires about the well-being of the recipient in a general sense, and casually mentions that he himself was in good health. Neither demanding or purposeful, it seems purely demonstrative of Wang Xizhi's desire to maintain contact with his friends and family. Such informal letters may achieve the goal of cultivating good and close relationships more effectively than polite and formal letters, which might provide a more distant effect.

This writing style was deliberately chosen by Wang Xizhi as a way to express sincerity, but the choice might also have been influenced by the contemporary trend of treating pieces of personal correspondence as art objects. It is possible that Wang wrote these letters as a courtesy, to provide his friends with valuable art objects. Famous calligraphers have the expectation that their writings will be admired. Wang Xizhi's son Wang Xianzhi 王献之 (344–386) once wrote a letter to Xie An 谢安 (320–385), expecting him to keep it, but Xie An simply wrote his reply on the back of Wang Xianzhi's letter and sent it back. Wang Xianzhi was upset about the dismissive treatment he received.[20] The fact that Wang Xizhi's personal correspondence was passed down to us confirms the fashion for considering these letters as art objects worth saving. There are other examples of letters' being appreciated as artistically pleasing objects in early medieval China. Liang dynasty poet Xu Ling 徐陵 (507–583) once described how visually and aesthetically pleasing he found his addressee's handwriting to be:

---

18 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 381.

19 Xiaoshen Wang 王小莘 and Xiaochun Guo 郭小春, "Wang Xizhi fuzi shutie zhong de Wei Jin xisu yuci 王羲之父子书帖中的魏晋习俗语词," *Journal of Guangxi University* (*Philosophy and Social Science*) 22, no. 2 (2000), 82. https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1001-8182.2000.02.016.

20 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 396–97

... The two Attendants-in-ordinary Liu and Fu have returned and again brought me a letter [*shuzha*] from you. The silver hooks [of your handwriting] are utterly beautiful, and your jade script is still the same as it used to be. As soon as I had opened the envelope and unfolded the paper, my worries were shattered and turned into smiles. White autumn has just arrived, and the sweltering heat has abated a little. How is your health? Take good care of your excellent fortune! ...[21]

... 劉、傅(三)〔二〕常侍還，又承書札。銀鉤甚麗，玉疏依然。開封伸紙，破愁為笑。素秋方屆，溽暑稍闌。體中何如。善保元吉。[22]

One aspect of this letter offers an uncanny resemblance to the writing of Wang Xizhi. Xu Ling in this reply did not even mention the content of the other's letter he received that he deemed aesthetically pleasing. That implies that the content of the letter he received did not demand a proper response and that the letter was probably as empty in meaning as some of the letters of Wang Xizhi. Another example is a letter written by Xiao Ziliang 蕭子良 (460–494) to Wang Sengqian 王僧虔. Wang Sengqian was a descendant of Wang Xizhi, so this example is especially relevant to the cultural context of the letters of Wang Xizhi. Like Xu Ling, Xiao Ziliang also elaborately described the wonderfulness of the other's handwriting:

I was honored to receive your letter [*gao*, note] along with five sheets of paper. The whole layout shows a rich essence and a profound numinosity. Again and again I held [your writings] to cherish them; I would not let them out of my hands....[23]

---

21 Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture*, 24.

22 Ibid.

23 Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture*, 24–25.

辱告，并五紙。舉體精雋靈奧，執玩反覆，不能釋手。[24]

In this example, the content of the five papers that Xiao Ziliang received from Wang Sengqian also was not revealed, and this reply from Xiao Ziliang might be just as empty of meaning as the five papers that he received. Xiao Ziliang provides no information in this letter other than how much he appreciated the letters he received. These examples from Xu Ling and Xiao Ziliang may provide us some insights about why certain letters of Wang Xizhi are lacking concrete information. While being sincere, Wang Xizhi's letters are defective in terms of communicative efficacy.[25] Why did he make these letters empty and incomplete to such a great extent? Why could he not achieve communicative efficacy at the same time he was creating artistic objects for his friends and family? Would not including specific information in the letter create an even more genuine atmosphere?

The letters of Wang Xizhi, Xu Ling, and Xiao Ziliang together can provide a possible answer to these questions. In the case of Xu Ling and Xiao Ziliang, both claimed that viewing the calligraphy of the letters brought them great joy. Xiao Ziliang repeatedly held the letters from Wang Sengqian to appreciate the calligraphy written on them. Judging by their degree of obsession with and appreciation of the letters, it is highly likely that they would desire to share this pleasure with others. It is not difficult to imagine scenarios in which the owners of the letters would casually show the letters to their close friends, inviting them to appreciate the calligraphy and discuss it together, or even just to flaunt the collection of handwritten samples from famous calligraphers that they possessed. Such letters presumably could be shown at gatherings. In these situations, presenting a letter that contains information about private affairs might be embarrassing.

Given the unparalleled fame he enjoyed during his lifetime, Wang Xizhi was undoubtedly aware of the culture of the preservation of personal correspondence. According to an anecdote from *Lunshu Biao* 论书表, Yu Yi 庾翼 (305–345), a calligrapher contemporary with Wang Xizhi, once saved

---

24 Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture*, 25.

25 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 396.

handwritten notes by Zhang Zhi 张芝, a calligrapher from the Eastern Han dynasty, for reasons of artistic appreciation:[26]

> In the beginning [Wang] Xizhi did not excel in calligraphy; he was no match for Yu Yi or Xi Yin. Toward the end of his life, however, he reached the highest peak of this art. Once he wrote a letter to Yu Liang in "draft cursive" script which Liang showed to Yu Yi. Admiring it, Yu sent a letter to Xizhi and said, "I once owned ten sheets of 'draft cursive' writing by Boying which were lost when I fled north China across the Yangzi River. I deeply regret that such excellent works are gone forever. When I happened to see your letter to my brother, however, as brilliant as if written by a god, my former pleasure and appreciation were revived.[27]

> 羲之書始未有奇，殊不勝庾翼、郗愔。迨其末年乃造其極。嘗以章草答庾亮。亮以示翼。翼歎服。因與羲之書云："吾昔有伯英章草書十紙，過江亡失,常痛妙迹永絕。忽見足下答家兄書，煥若神明，頓還舊觀。"[28]

Yu Yi saw the letter Wang Xizhi wrote to Yu Yi's brother Yu Liang 庾亮 (289–340) and was impressed by his calligraphy. Yu Yi wrote to Wang Xizhi to express his admiration of the calligraphy in Wang's letter to Yu Liang, free of the concern of Wang Xizhi's construing it as an act of intrusion of privacy. This anecdote reflects people's openness toward divulging the content of personal correspondences during Wang Xizhi's lifetime. Yu Yi and Yu Liang considered sharing personal letters with one another proper behavior, and, on receiving Yu Yi's reply, Wang Xizhi was surely aware of the

---

26 Xiaochun Qi 祁小春, "'Sangluan tie' yexu shi yi jian digao buzheng 《丧乱帖》也许是一件底稿补证," *Art Work* 艺术工作, no. 01 (February 15, 2023): 56–58, https://kns.cnki.net.

27 Mengfu Zhao, "Zhao Mengfu: Four Anecdotes from the Life of Wang Xizhi: China: Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed January 19, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/40509.

28 Ibid.

fact that his letters were not viewed solely by the recipient nor were they only appreciated in private settings.

Wang Xizhi himself participated in the practice of collecting personal correspondences. According to the *Book of Jin* 晋书, he saved the letter he received from his uncle Wang Dao 王导.[29] Famous calligraphers like Wang Xizhi, being fully aware of the artistic value of their letters and anticipating the future scenarios of their letters' being presented to others, might deliberately create letters that lack actual information to free the recipients from the dilemma of wanting to flaunt their collection of letters but at the same time worrying that their privacy may be compromised. For instance, a letter that contained detailed symptoms of one's disease would be far less presentable than a letter that is empty, that is, without the body of the letter. But the possibility that Wang Xizhi simply wanted to maintain friendship and family relations through these concise letters should not be ruled out. Wang Xizhi's awareness of the letter appreciation culture and his intention of sending letters simply to maintain contact with friends and family both are contributing factors to the absence of concrete information in his letters.

The last factor that contributed to the informality of Wang Xizhi's letters that we will consider is his political position. His political power and social status might have enabled him to address his friends in just such an unconventional and intimate manner. Wang Xizhi was born into a prominent clan, and he and other members of his clan held important posts in the government. Wang Xizhi's relationship with Xie An best demonstrates his mode of interaction with social elites at the time. Wang Xizhi taught Xie An calligraphy, and he frequently traveled in natural scenes with him. Xie An was also a figure with a prominent background, and the Xie clan and the Wang clan were united by marriage.[30] If Wang Xizhi had had a humbler background, he would not have been able to interact with people like Xie An. Enjoying such high social and political status might have exempted him at times from the need to use a formal tone in his writing.

Wang Xizhi slightly modified his writing style, however, when he addressed a recipient in a

---

29 Xiaochun Qi, "'Sangluan tie,'" 57.

30 Chongyue Ren 任崇岳 and Rongji Li 李荣基, "Xie An and Wang Xizhi 谢安与王羲之," *The Central Plains Culture Research* 中原文化研究, 2019, 7, no. 04 (August 6, 2019): 111–15, https://doi.org/10.16600/j.cnki.41-1426/c.2019.04.015.

superior position. For instance, while addressing a superior, he refers to himself as *chen* 臣 (a humble form of I) or *zhoumin* 州民 (commoner of the prefecture).[31] While addressing an inferior, Wang Xizhi used actual names or the pronoun *ru* 汝 (you).[32] Zeng Weijun 曾卫军 has pointed out that, judging by the extant texts, Wang Xizhi only used *wu* 吾 as first person pronoun in his letters, while his contemporaries were mostly using *wo* 我 in their writings.[33] Zeng then explained that the reasons behind Wang Xizhi's use of *wu* 吾 was probably the vernacular nature of the epistolary language. While the more serious texts of the Jin dynasty mostly used *wo* 我, *wu* 吾 frequently appeared in more informal writings. When writing to an inferior, Wang Xizhi used *bai* 白 for the verb to speak, in contrast to *yan* 言, used when addressing a superior.[34] Furthermore, he also used the common set phrases *dunshou dunshou* 顿首顿首 (to knock one's head on the ground) and *huangkong huangkong* 皇恐皇恐 (terrified) when addressing a superior. In addition, when writing formal subject matter such as recommendation letters, letters of gratitude, and letters offering condolences, Wang Xizhi's letters tend to be more formulaic and conventional. The reason his letters are dominated by two different tones is also probably attributable to his social status. It enabled him to address most of his recipients as inferiors, and only on some occasions did he feel it was necessary to render his letters in a more formal manner. In one letter Wang thanked a friend for the presents he received—but he also asked for more.[35] This letter demonstrates that Wang Xizhi was comfortable with the environment in which he was situated. As a government official and a member of a prominent clan, he must have enjoyed great respect and kindness from people surrounding him, and he presumably felt that a little frankness would not offend the recipients of his letters.

---

31 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 382–85.

32 Ibid.

33 Weijun Zeng 曾卫军, "Personal Pronouns in Er Wang Zatie 王《杂帖》中的人称代词," *Journal of Mianyang Teacher's College* 绵阳师范学院学报, November 30, 2005, 106, https://doi.org/10.16276/j.cnki.cn51-1670/g.2005.06.024.

34 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 388.

35 Ibid.

THE EXPRESSIVENESS OF WANG XIZHI

While the informality and concision mentioned above are two significant traits of the content of letters of Wang Xizhi, considerable expressiveness also characterizes his writing. His informality also manifests in the elaborate emotions he expresses. He used phrases that refer to the genre of letters and how the limitations of letters are inadequate to express his overwhelming emotions. For instance, Wang used the phrase *naihe* 奈何 to express the idea that there was nothing he could effectively say or do because he is communicating merely through a sheet of paper. A more emotional example would be Wang Xizhi's use of the phrase *linzhigengye* 临纸哽咽, meaning "leaning over the paper, I am choking with grief."[36] Two examples of Wang Xizhi's explicitly complaining about the inadequacy of letter writing are his use of the phrases *zhishou* 执手 and *cuxi* 促膝. *Zhishou* literally translates to "clasp hands," and in the context of the Jin dynasty, *zhishou* refers to a particular courtesy of farewell. By saying "*bu de zhishou, ci shen he shen* 不得执手, 此恨何深" in one letter, Wang Xizhi was expressing his deep grief in not being able to send off the recipient personally.[37] *Cu xi* literally translates to "sitting side by side with knees pressed closely," referring to meeting in person. In one letter he states, "*cuxi wei jin, dongwang kairan* 促膝未近, 东望慨然," meaning "it is still unclear when we will meet in person; I gaze toward the east with deep feelings." By depicting his interaction and struggle with the medium of letter writing, Wang showed he was not afraid of or shy about sharing the sensitive and soft side of his nature. He also expressed his lamenting of separation. He frequently used the word *xuan* 悬, meaning "to worry."[38] Wang combined *xuan* 悬 with characters having similar meanings to form compound words such as *xuannian* 悬念, meaning to worry and to have concern.[39] He acknowledges the letter's inability to relieve the reader's longing. His letters concerning separation demonstrate the paradoxical situation of people constantly hoping for replies while knowing that the replies are inadequate to fulfill one's

---

36 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 390–96.

37 Junzhi Zhang 张俊之, "Er Wang zatie cihui yanjiu 二王雜帖詞彙研究," *CNKI* (dissertation, 2013), 63–64. https://kns.cnki.net.

38 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 399–402.

39 Xiaoshen Wang and Xiaochun Guo, "Wang Xizhi fuzi shutie zhong de Wei Jin xisu yuci," 82.

emotional needs.[40] It is precisely the uncontrollable need to express his emotions that drove Wang to adopt a vernacular writing style. The use of vernacular phrases in letters can be interpreted as his attempt to simulate meetings in person, perhaps his method of coping with the unattainability of such meetings in the near future.

Wang Xizhi was extremely elaborate when sharing his health conditions. He frequently discussed the health of his addressees, speaking less often about his own health. In some cases, however, he discusses his own poor health in his letters. By divulging such information, such letters demonstrate the intimate relationship between Wang Xizhi and the addressees. The condition of his health was complex: he suffered from restlessness, insomnia, loss of appetite, diarrhea, digestive disorders, and other acute diseases and aches. While some of Wang Xizhi's notes have the motive of sharing symptoms in order to obtain a correct diagnosis and adequate treatment of a disease, most of the notes simply express his misery to a sympathetic addressee, as a way of coping with it.[41] What Wang's discussion of his health reflects is his willingness to share private information with his friends. He was not embarrassed by such medical conditions as diarrhea. In these letters, he seems to enjoy the freedom of letting out his true feelings. This expressiveness, combined with his unconventional writing style, enabled him to discuss subjects that would be difficult to discuss with a more formal tone. This expressiveness in terms of sharing private information and emotion do not contradict the previous hypotheses of Wang Xizhi's deliberately making letters "empty" to avoid divulging personal information and embarrassing the recipient. It is only when the letter contains the intention of communicating specific information that he writes expressively. When there is no compelling need of communication, Wang Xizhi probably would be more inclined to write empty letters for the convenience of such of the recipients as would like to save the letters as art objects. In sum, Wang Xizhi's letters can be divided into two subcategories according to whether they were intended to function as a medium of communication or a matter of art.

Eugene Wang observed the conflict between different personas of Wang Xizhi demonstrated by

---

40 Ibid.

41 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 402–407.

lantingji xu 兰亭集序 and *sangluan tie* 丧乱帖.[42] He describes *lantingji xu* as being "smooth and refined," and he states that the *sangluan tie* demonstrates "raw energy or archaic plainness." He claims this is an aspect that has fueled a modern debate about the authenticity of *lantingji xu*. While people's general impression of Wang Xizhi as constructed by anecdotes is refined and artistic, historical records suggest otherwise. Eugene Wang recognizes Wang Xizhi as a strong and upright person, which is the personality that matches the sturdy and masculine propensity of his characters, "like dragons leaping through Heaven's door and tigers crouching across the phoenix's gateway," as described by Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (464–549). Wang Xizhi's personality and calligraphic style demonstrated by *lantingji xu* and the sangluan tie contain significant discrepancies. While the calligraphic style of *lantingji xu* corresponds to the sensitivity and expressiveness shown by the personal correspondence of Wang Xizhi, the calligraphy of *sangluan tie* contributes to his image as an upright person who detested injustice and corruption, in accordance with *Book of Jin* 晋书. Taking all these examples into consideration, Wang Xizhi appears to be an extremely complicated person with a double personality. But does that not hold true for every human being in existence? Is anyone's personality that simple and formulaic, like characters in soap operas? The inconsistency of Wang Xizhi's calligraphic and writing styles is indeed a rather ordinary phenomenon. The real issue is people's oversimplifying historical figures, assigning a label or two to them. Who is to say that the elegant and upright Wang Xizhi was not a humorous and vulgar person in private? Ignoring the complexity of human personality and emotions can narrow our understanding of the literature of people like Wang Xizhi. One has to take all manifestations of Wang Xizhi's personality into consideration when evaluating his writings.

The dual character of Wang Xizhi can be analyzed through the time dimension. He spent a significant portion of his life as a state official. He never cowered from having to criticize his colleagues. After realizing the restrictions of serving in the government and experiencing the turmoil of society, Wang Xizhi decided to resign from his post and spend his time traveling and embracing nature.[43] It is

---

42 Rebecca M. Brown, Deborah S. Hutton, and Eugene Y. Wang, "Taming of the Shrew: Wang Xizhi and Calligraphic Gentrification in the Seventh Century," in *Asian Art* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 252–53.

43 Yuechuan Wang 王岳川, "Wang Xizhi's Vigorous Style and Calligraphic Realm 王羲之的魏晋风骨与书法境界," *Journal of Peking University* (*Philosophy and Social Sciences*) 48, no. 6 (November 2011), 130–31. https://kns.cnki.net.

crucial to remind oneself always of these two distinctive stages of Wang Xizhi's life while analyzing his writing style. Even though information about the provenance of his letters is scarce, the context of his letters should be taken into consideration as far as his personality is concerned.

THE BIAS OF THE SAMPLE OF WANG XIZHI'S OEUVRE

Besides all the hypotheses mentioned above about the reasons Wang Xizhi's letters are dominated by vernacular language, an alternative interpretation of the vernacular nature of the extant oeuvre of Wang Xizhi is the bias of the sample that we possess. Richter points out that Wang Xizhi's calligraphic works mostly consisted of short personal letters, so his works are representative of the merge of calligraphic and epistolary culture. He also quotes Robert Harrist: "This connection is not coincidental but necessary, since many of the most coveted features of Wang Xizhi's handwriting, and that of the elite calligraphers who were his contemporaries, such as "sudden changes of speed and brush direction that vividly recorded the impulses of the writer's hand ... would have been unacceptable in more formal types of writing or in the work of professional scribes."[44] Harrist shrewdly observed the distinct calligraphic style that was associated only with the informal type of writing. Most commentaries throughout history do not specify which genre they are referring to when they comment on Wang Xizhi's calligraphy. When characterizing Wang's calligraphy the words expressive, spontaneous, and creative naturally come to mind. However, his works were not limited to expressive writings. In his surviving works there are also regular script calligraphy pieces such as *The Yellow Court Classic* 黄庭经. There is also a noticeable difference between the calligraphic style of *lantingji xu* and the personal letters of Wang Xizhi. While the personal letters use a more unrestrained style of calligraphy, *lantingji xu* is more refined. It is most likely that Wang Xizhi was famous for the expressive and creative handwriting in his letters and people's desire for his works then extended to his pieces in other genres. The existing oeuvre of Wang Xizhi is dominated by his expressive personal correspondence written in vernacular Chinese. However, the currently surviving oeuvre of Wang Xizhi may not be representative of the nature of the original and more complete oeuvre of Wang Xizhi back in the Jin dynasty.

The sample of Wang's works that we have access to today is almost certainly a biased one. The

---

44 Richter, *"Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China,"* 24.

rulers from the fourth to the sixth centuries demonstrated great passion in collecting writings of the great calligraphers. The most exemplary cases are Emperor Xiaowu of Song 宋孝武帝 (430–464), Huan Xuan 桓玄 (369–404), and Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (464–549).[45] Given the political power these individuals possessed, the formations of their collections of calligraphic works may have been collective efforts at the regional or even national elite level. If these collections concentrated the exquisite calligraphy works of the time into a few sites, it would have made the oeuvre of the renowned calligraphers prone to the threat of being wiped out entirely. It takes only one fire or one war to destroy the imperial collections of fragile calligraphy works. Unfortunately, warfare in China often concludes with the ignition of the imperial palace or the residence of the ruler. Therefore, compared to being scattered around the nation, the rulers' decision to concentrate the works calligraphy in one place is to a large extent responsible for the extinction of the original works of Wang Xizhi.

There were two major catastrophic events that altered the nature of the oeuvre of Wang Xizhi. In the Eastern Jin dynasty, the usurper Huan Xuan, while escaping from pursuers, dumped hundreds of volumes of works of Wang Xizhi into the Yangtze River. The second event is the burning by Emperor Wu of Liang's collection of Wang Xizhi. When Jiangling 江陵 was about to be seized, Emperor Yuan of Liang 梁元帝, the son of Emperor Wu of Liang, decided to set the imperial library on fire, destroying more than a dozen thousand volumes of texts along with Liang Wudi's entire collection of Wang Xizhi. Both Huan Xuan's and Liang Wudi's collections had taken decades to form. While emperors from the Tang dynasty were too desperate to search for any authentic texts written by Wang Xizhi, collectors who lived in earlier time periods, such as Huan Xuan and Emperor Wu of Liang, probably had the luxury of being selective when they were constructing their collections. It is reasonable to think that collectors such as Huan Xuan and Emperor Wu of Liang would be attracted by the more complete, refined, and time-consuming works of Wang Xizhi, and that personal letters concerning Wang Xizhi's diarrhea were more likely to be overlooked. In these two catastrophic events, therefore, Wang's more lengthy and formal writings probably suffered the most. So the question arises, is it possible that Wang Xizhi's vernacular writing actually did not form the majority of his oeuvre, but rather the vernacular writings were more likely to survive because of their informal and incomplete nature.

---

45 Yang, "A Research on the Evolvement of the New Style Calligraphy," 55.

It is also possible that the descendants of the recipients of his informal letters deemed the correspondence between their ancestors and Wang Xizhi to be precious to the family, so the letters in this case would circumvent the collecting activity of the rulers, avoiding being destroyed along with other works of Wang Xizhi.

Furthermore, the recipients of Wang Xizhi's letters also played a crucial role in shaping his surviving oeuvre. As previously discussed, the fame of Wang Xizhi decided that his letters were almost certainly saved by the recipients for artistic reasons. Apparently, the recipients would also preserve Wang Xizhi's letters for monetary reasons. One example that demonstrates the monetary value of calligraphy works is Xiao Ziyun 萧子云 (487–549)'s encounter with envoys from Baekje (modern-day southwestern Korea).[46] Xiao Ziyun's fame had spread overseas so Baekje sent envoys specifically to seek writings from him. Xiao Ziyun stopped his boat for three days to produce writings, and he exchanged his works for money and goods. The monetary value of Wang Xizhi's writings increases the chances of his personal correspondence being traded and exposed to a larger audience. In other words, Wang Xizhi might not be the only person who incorporated vernacular Chinese into his writing, but the monetary value attached to his correspondence motivated his contemporaries to archive them.

THE ORIGINALITY OF THE CALLIGRAPHY AND THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE TEXT

In her essay "Beyond Calligraphy: Reading Wang Xizhi's Letters," Richter claims that the fact that none of the transmitted pieces of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy are originals does not as such have any consequence for the authenticity of their texts.[47] Calligraphy is certainly a field that requires talents from many disciplines. The authenticity of a calligraphy work can be refuted based on calligraphic quality, seals of the collectors throughout history, and the content of the text. While it is true that the text cannot be deemed inauthentic solely based on the originality of the calligraphy, Richter's use of the word "any" is too extreme.

---

46 Yang, "A Research on the Evolvement of the New Style Calligraphy," 57.

47 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 372.

Emperor Wu of Liang, constructing his collection in the sixth century, already had problems authenticating the works of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, and he frequently had to consult Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536) about the matter of authentication.[48] Emperor Wu of Liang's subordinates Xu Sengquan 徐僧权 and Tang Huaichong 唐怀充 were in charge of the imperial collections, and both of their signatures are found on the traced copies of Wang Xizhi's works.[49] Xu Sengquan developed a method to cope with theft and forgery. He would attach an extra sheet of paper to the original copy and sign his name right where the edges of the two sheets meet. The extra sheet of paper containing only half of the signature would then be removed and kept as a tool to verify whether the original copy had been replaced by a counterfeit. In the Tang dynasty, Emperor Taizong 太宗 trusted Chu Suiliang 褚遂良 (596–658) to authenticate Wang Xizhi's works. Emperor Taizong was accepting submissions of works of Wang Xizhi from all over the state, and Chu Suiliang was the connoisseur who determined whether these submitted pieces were actually written by Wang Xizhi. Chu Suiliang certified two hundred and sixty-six of Wang Xizhi's pieces.[50] Most of the works we are looking at today were the ones that were filtered by Chu Suiliang. Emperor Taizong of Tang commissioned exact copies of the works of Wang Xizhi functioned as templates for the officials to imitate the style of the master.[51] Scholars nowadays are inevitably at the mercy of the connoisseurship of Chu Suiliang. Since a significant portion of the works of Wang Xizhi that are available to us today are the ones that were authenticated by Chu Suiliang and codified by the Tang court, and again by the Song court (Chunhua ge tie 淳化阁帖, Xuanhe shupu 宣和书谱), there is almost no way to think outside of the logic of connoisseurs like Chu Suiliang. If the texts of Wang Xizhi that we are looking at today have undergone two devastating disasters, gone through the multiple screening processes of connoisseurs from different dynasties, and were copied by generations of transcribers, how can we still claim that the originality of calligraphy gradually wiped away by this thousand-year-long process does not have any consequence for the authenticity of the text?

---

48 Yang, "A Research on the Evolvement of the New Style Calligraphy," 55.

49 Lothar Ledderose, "Characters as Art and Characters as Evaluation: Three Letters from China in the 4th Century: The Spread of Fengju Tie," trans. Yi Qu, *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute* (*Fine Arts & Design*) 01, no. 2019 (2019), 2–3.

50 Ledderose, "Characters as Art and Characters as Evaluation," 3.

51 Ibid.

It takes only one mistaken authentication or one transcription error to alter the content of the received text, and the probability that such mistakes took place more than once since the Jin dynasty is not to be neglected.

Contemporary scholars have already noted possible corruptions that occurred in the process of transcribing letters written by Wang Xizhi. Many such discussions centered around *shiqi tie* 十七帖, a collection of twenty-nine of Wang Xizhi's letters.[52] The received version of *zhanjin tie* 瞻近帖, one of the twenty-nine letters included in *shiqi tie*, contains the phrase "*xi chi bu ke yan* 喜迟不可言." It was once considered that this phrase means "the joy cannot be expressed by words."[53] Songchang Chen 陈松长 claims that the first two characters in this phrase, *xi* 喜 and *chi* 迟 are synonymous compound words both meaning "joy." However, Zhou Duwen 周笃文 observed that the character *chi* 迟 in the excavated copy of *zhanjin tie* from Dunhuang has two dots written on its right, indicating that the character is meant to be deleted by Wang Xizhi.[54] Zhou Duwen believes the two dots are absent in the received copies due to the one-thousand-year-old process of copying and engraving. He also states that eliminating the character *chi* 迟 would make the phrase more smooth and coherent. Zhou Duwen's argument was then refuted by Cai Yuandi 蔡渊迪,[55] who noted that Zhou Duwen's opinion was influential and many had agreed with him. Cai quoted Nishikawa Yasushi 西川寧 and Liu Tao 刘涛 to establish that the character *chi* 迟 from the Dunhuang copy is incorrect in terms of the form of the cursive script. Cai proposed that the most plausible explanation is that the character *chi* 迟 was not deleted in Wang's original text, and the two dots next to the character were purely the work of the transcriber; the transcriber of the Dunhuang copy made a mistake while writing *chi* 迟, and after putting

---

52 "The Dragon of Calligraphy: Select Examples of '*Shiqi* Modelbook' Through the Ages 書中龍也-歷代十七帖法書名品展," National Palace Museum, 2016, https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh105/dragon_calligraphy/ch/index.html.

53 Songchang Chen 陈松长, "Er Wang zatie ciyu sanshi 二王杂帖词语散释," *Research in Ancient Chinese Language* 古汉语研究 1 (April 2, 1991): 52, https://kns.cnki.net

54 Duwen Zhou 周笃文, "Dunhuang juanzi zhong faxian de Wang Xizhi er tie gulinben 敦煌卷子中发现的王羲之二帖古临本," *Cultural Relics* 文物 03 (March 31, 1980): 50, https://kns.cnki.net.

55 Yuandi Cai 蔡渊迪, "Guanyu Dunhuang ben 'shiqi tie' linben de ji ge wenti 关于敦煌本《十七帖》临本的几个问题," *Bainian Dunhuang wenxian zhengli yanjiu guoji xueshu taolunhui lunwenji (xiace)* 百年敦煌文献整理研究国际学术讨论会论文集（下册） 2 (April 9, 2010): 827–31, https://kns.cnki.net.

two dots next to the incorrect *chi* 迟, the transcriber rewrote the character right after the incorrect version. The rewritten *chi* 迟, however, Cai suggests, is lost because the upper half of the Dunhuang copy was damaged. *Chi* 迟 is the last character of the third line of the Dunhuang copy, and, if Zhou Duwen is right, the fourth line should start with *bu ke yan* 不可言. However, only the bottom half of the character *yan* 言 is still visible, and Cai claims that the blank left by the damage is too big for the missing two and a half characters. Therefore, Cai believes the rewritten *chi* 迟 was the first character of the fourth line. Cai also provided the example of the usage of the compound word *xi chi* 喜迟 in other letters of Wang Xizhi. Cai also referred to *Sanxitang fatie* 三希堂法帖 and *Fashu yaolu* 法书要录 to prove the nonexistence of the deletion mark. Furthermore, Cai criticized Zhou Duwen for using modern habit and sense of language to judge whether the phrase "*xi chi bu ke yan* 喜迟不可言" is coherent or not. Cai states that it cannot be assumed that Wang Xizhi, who lived one thousand five hundred years ago, had the same linguistic habits as modern people.

Another letter from *shiqi tie* called *qingyan tie* 清晏帖 also offers controversy over a possible deletion mark. While Qi Xiaochun 祁小春 agreed with Akirou Fukuhara 福原啓郎 on the following normalization of *qingyan tie*:

I know your place is clear and peaceful with plenteous harvest. Things produced here are not deficient. This place is renowned, and so are the mountains, rivers, and other scenery. How can one resist traveling to such a place?

知彼清晏岁丰,又所出(有)无乏,故是名处。且山川形势乃尔，何可以不遊目?[56]

Qi Xiaochun and Akirou Fukuhara put the character *you* 有, meaning to have or to exist, from the phrase "*you suo chu* (*you*) *wu fa* 又所出(有)无乏," in parentheses, implying that it was meant to be deleted by Wang Xizhi. However, Qing dynasty scholar Wang Hongzhuan 王弘撰 and Wang Shu 王树 considered

---

56 Dongqin Liu 刘东芹, "Wang Xizhi 'shiqi tie' shiwen kaoyi 王羲之《十七帖》释文考异," *Chinese Painting & Calligraphy* 中国书画, October 5, 2014, 70–71, https://kns.cnki.net.

the character *you* 有 to be part of the text.[57] After analyzing other examples of Wang Xizhi's cursive script writing of the character *wu* 无, Liu Dongqin decided that between the character *wu* 无 and *fa* 乏 there is a character *yi* 一. Liu also agreed that the character *you* 有 should be included. Liu confirmed that Wang Shu's normalization *"you suo chu you wu yi fa* 又所出有，无一乏" is accurate and coherent.

There is a similar issue in *fushi tie* 服食帖, also a letter from *shiqi tie* 十七帖:

I have been consuming this medicine for a while, it is quite ineffective. My general condition, compared to past years,' is considerably more acceptable. Take care and treasure yourself. I write this letter with an air of melancholy.

吾服食久，犹为劣劣。大都比之年时，为复可可。足下保爱为上，临书，但有惆怅。[58]

Examining the way the character *dang* 当 was written in cursive script, Chen Kunyi 陈坤一 believes the phrase *lielie* 劣劣 should indeed be normalized to *dangdang* 当当.[59] Chen also states that the first half of the traditional normalization of this letter is contradictory to the second half. Chen proposes that if *lielie* 劣劣 is substituted by *dangdang* 当当, meaning "suitable," this letter would read more coherently.

A modern debate about the authentication of the most prestigious piece *lantingji xu* took place in the 1960s (兰亭论辩). This debate was triggered by Guo Moruo's doubts about the authenticity of *lantingji xu*. He argued that the second half of *lantingji xu* had a much more sorrowful tone as compared

---

57 Ibid.

58 Zhengcheng Liu 刘正成 and Tao Liu 刘涛, 中国书法全集.王羲之王献之二(附王氏一门) *Zhongguo shufa quanji. Wang Xizhi Wang Xianzhi er* (*fu wangshi yimen*), vol. 19 (Beijing: Rong Bao Zhai, 1991), 373.

59 Kunyi Chen 陈坤一, "Wang Xizhi 'shiqi tie' zhong 'fushi tie' shiwen yu yiyi xintan 王羲之《十七帖》中《服食帖》释文与译意新探," *Chinese Calligraphy* 中国书法, no. 304 (March 4, 2017): 121–25, https://kns.cnki.net.

to the rather pleasant and positive poems composed by people who attended the gathering at Lanting.[60] Guo Moruo referred to the Qing dynasty scholar Li Wentian 李文田's doubts about the origin of the text of *lantingji xu*. Li Wentian argued that the received version of *lantingji xu* was originally named *linhe xu* 临河序, and it was included in *A New Account of the Tales of the World* 世说新语. *A New Account*'s version of *linhe xu* shares a textual parallel with the received version of *lantingji xu*. More importantly, the titles "*linhe xu*" and "*lantingji xu*" both appear in *A New Account*, confirming that the author of *A New Account* considered them to be two different texts. In *A New Account*, *lantingji xu* was being compared with *jingu xu* 金谷序, and Li Wentian assumed this comparison must consist of two texts of similar length, arguing that the received *lantingji xu* is significantly longer than the received version of *jingu xu*; therefore, he believed the text of *lantingji xu* was edited or expanded by later generations.[61] What Li Wentian was suggesting is that the received *lantingji xu* is not the same as the *lantingji xu* in *A New Account*, and people from later generations might have expanded *linhe xu* to produce the received *lantingji xu* that we see today. Judging by Li Wentian's argument, the term *lantingji xu* had certainly undergone a change of meaning through time. Song Zhanli 宋战利 claims that Guo Moruo ignored the fact that the title *lantingji xu* appeared in *A New Account* and it was imprudent to conclude that the title *linhe xu* and lantingji xu are interchangeable.[62] However, as mentioned previously, Guo Moruo's article included the complete commentary of Li Wentian, which includes Li Wentian's mentioning the appearance of both "*linhe xu*" and "*lantingji xu*" in *A New Account*. As a supporter of Li Wentian's argument, it is unlikely that Guo Moruo missed such a critical detail from a text that he quoted. Instead, Guo Moruo and Li Wentian's argument may just be supported by the occurrence of the title *lantingji xu* in A New Account. While Song Zhanli states Guo Moruo and Li Wentian overlooked that *lantingji xu* and *linhe xu* refer to two different texts in *A New Account*, Li Wentian explicitly acknowledged that those two titles represented two different texts in the Jin dynasty, and he used this

---

60 Moruo Guo, "You Wang Xie muzhi de chutu lundao lanting xu de zhenwei 由王谢墓志的出土论到兰亭序的真伪," in *Lan Ting Lun Bian* 兰亭论辩 (Beijing: Cultural Relics Press 文物出版社, 1977), 11–14.

61 Ibid.

62 Zhanli Song, "Song Zhanli lanting xu yu linhe xu guanxi kaobian 宋战利：《兰亭序》与《临河叙》关系考辨," accessed January 29, 2024, https://gyy.henu.edu.cn/info/1024/1192.htm.

situation as evidence to argue that the term *lantingji xu* had undergone a change of meaning throughout time. It is possible that Song Zhanli did comprehend Li Wentian's argument that the *lantingji xu* mentioned by *A New Account* and the received *lantingji xu* are two different texts with different contents. There are other scholars that deny the authenticity of the received *lantingji xu*. Qi Gong 启功 pointed out that Bada Shanren 八大山人 (1626–1705)'s imitation of *linhe xu* contains only a few minor differences from the *A New Account*'s version of *linhe xu*, so he considered this text to be the original from Wang Xizhi.[63] Li Changlu 李长路 firmly denied the authenticity of the received *lantingji xu*, and he asserted that *linhe xu* is without a doubt a work of Wang Xizhi.[64] On the other hand, scholars who deem *lantingji xu* an original Wang believe *A New Account* trimmed *lantingji xu*. For Instance, Gao Ershi 高二适 and Shang Chengzuo 商承祚 believed *linhe xu* from *A New Account* to be an excerpt of the received *lantingji xu*.[65]

If we examine the controversy encompassing *lantingji xu* alongside the debates on the normalization of the letters of Wang Xizhi, a narrative of how the originality of the calligraphy and the authenticity of the text can have joint influence on a calligraphy piece manifests itself. The discussion about the originality of Wang Xizhi's work is the largest obstacle to studying Wang Xizhi. Wang Xizhi's era was simply too long ago. Any claims we are making are based on distant and possibly corrupted sources. More importantly, how can we make any certain statements about Wang Xizhi while nobody in this world has ever laid eyes on a single character written by Wang Xizhi? We are just chewing the leftover food from the people that made these traced copies and connoisseurs like Chu Suiliang. Our understanding of Wang Xizhi is limited by the calligraphic competency of these transcribers and Chu Suiliang's connoisseurship. Even though it is up for debate whether the originality of Wang Xizhi's works really does not have any consequence of the authenticity of his text, Richter's argument, the fact that

---

63 Yafei Chen 陈雅飞, "A Review of the Authenticity Debate over the Calligraphy Model of Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection in China's Mainland 中国大陆《兰亭序》真伪论辨回顾," *Journal of Zhejiang University* (*Humanities and Social Sciences*) 34, no. 3 (May 2004), 105. https://kns.cnki.net.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

we are dealing with copies does not mean that these notes are false[66], is surely a valid one. There can hardly be any absolute proof of the authenticity of any transmitted texts. Even if there is an archaeological excavation, its results would prove only the authenticity of the document but not the reliability of the content nor its authorship.[67] Richter's attitude toward the texts of Wang Xizhi is to encourage considering the notes as sources, unless we have clear indication that their authenticity is questionable.[68] Richter is not choosing a stance in this issue, rather, she is choosing the only possible stance there is. All we have are copies of copies of writings that were attributed to Wang Xizhi. We have no choice but to utilize the evidence that is available to us. However, just because contemporary people have lost the capability to firmly authenticate the works of Wang Xizhi, it doesn't mean the topic is irrelevant to the study of Wang Xizhi. All we can do as scholars is acknowledge the issue and the possible influence of this obstacle on our studies. There is no need to downplay the importance of the originality of Wang Xizhi's works, and at the same time there is no need to feel hampered by this obstacle, since there is no way to circumvent it.

REFERENCES

Brown, Rebecca M., Deborah S. Hutton, and Eugene Y. Wang. "Taming of the Shrew: Wang Xizhi and Calligraphic Gentrification in the Seventh Century." In *Asian Art*, 247–60. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Cai, Yuandi 蔡渊迪. "Guanyu Dunhuang ben 'shiqi tie' linben de ji ge wenti 关于敦煌本《十七帖》临本的几个问题." *Bainian Dunhuang wenxian zhengli yanjiu guoji xueshu taolunhui lunwenji (xiace)* 百年敦煌文献整理研究国际学术讨论会论文集（下册） 2 (April 9, 2010): 827–37.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3IEynGI71r_BHcxQUcA9vodbm7jIzmGcbuVZO PQGs-

66 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 373.

67 Ibid.

68 Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 373–74.

07w6I0RFnRgQucsatlTTG8LnnqDyvOz7Ot6QsQUIlxtBI61LnmurtugH79rDr_cflgI9HpcsoHeUr
uwoRK10_V8ncvKNEnqZ8=&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS.

Chen, Kunyi 陈坤一. "Wang Xizhi 'shiqi tie' zhong 'fushi tie' shiwen yu yiyi xintan 王羲之《十七帖》中《服食帖》释文与译意新探." *Chinese Calligraphy* 中国书法, no. 304 (March 4, 2017): 121–25.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=WVDzDAe5jxaaDrklHhr3D6AX0zx-
AsheCFWbvRxpPbn0OHrhjJ5jELQxGfkdMvU2m-pPnK50qFs4FqgAS-I9ZG-
4TKIeu9Wv692B_lZqANGzJH-KG2moR-
OkJ3tulBS8w7XwVXrnAlY=&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS.

Chen, Songchang 陈松长. "Er Wang zatie ciyu sanshi 二王杂帖词语散释." *Research in Ancient Chinese Language* 古 汉 语 研 究 1 (April 2, 1991): 52–55.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3IEynGI71r_OsiYzU-
TU6zhjrBBDEvMMvnnrmwlasxOSZDK2kEtrIkinAMUD0wueAD0PRU05XpjhLkrdfHuxWCJzgs
N7M_oDMLNMVt-nZ9qhpoguIYyiJbH3y4sZIBZm&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS.

Chen, Yafei 陈雅飞. "A Review of the Authenticity Debate over the Calligraphy Model of Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection in China's Mainland 中国大陆《兰亭序》真伪论辨回顾." *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)* 34, no. 3 (May 2004).
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=WVDzDAe5jxZ05DjNKqWWSnm40yL_amq6pN
8LdkRN6REwqPMT31UvlrS8bfr3dhgSmCqzUBHANFxjgKgAnPVTITLv8VdtinV8_PmKbHYbur9
PNQRjTfhG7GageB112NmQ&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS. 103–111.

"The Dragon of Calligraphy: Select Examples of '*Shiqi* Modelbook' Through the Ages 書中龍也-歷代十七帖法書名品展." National Palace Museum, 2016.
https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh105/dragon_calligraphy/ch/index.html.

Guo Moruo, "You Wang Xie muzhi de chutu lundao lanting xu de zhenwei 由王谢墓志的出土论到兰亭序的真伪." In *Lan Ting Lun Bian* 兰亭论辩 (Beijing, China: Cultural Relics Press 文物出版社, 1977).

Ledderose, Lothar. "Characters as Art and Characters as Evaluation: Three Letters from China in the 4th Century: The Spread of *Fengju Tie*." Translated by Yi Qu. *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute (Fine Arts & Design)* 01, no. 2019 (2019).

Liu, Dongqin 刘东芹. "Wang Xizhi 'shiqi tie' shiwen kaoyi 王羲之《十七帖》释文考异." *Chinese Painting & Calligraphy* 中 国 书 画, October 5, 2014, 70–71. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=oslmGXurZ-rtmDaUsJzQB7IaCbpiLMyIOMfdFKj7kM4oYLi5nqyaEP84RpWmQqv1pWtpu7eghoWdwnQIw oZkwk3ntm9SvS39Rcl9JYfaU47w7iCRsyFaHoCRk92YvGqW&uniplatform=NZKPT&language= CHS.

Liu, Zhengcheng 刘正成, and Tao Liu 刘涛. 中国书法全集.王羲之王献之二(附王氏一门) *Zhongguo shufa quanji. Wang Xizhi Wang Xianzhi er (fu wangshi yimen)*, vol. 19. Beijing: Rong Bao Zhai, 1991.

Mair, Victor H. "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 3 (1994): 707–51. https://doi.org/10.2307/2059728.

Qi, Xiaochun 祁小春. "'Sangluan tie' yexu shi yi jian digao buzheng 《丧乱帖》也许是一件底稿补证." *Art Work* 艺 术 工 作, no. 01 (February 15, 2023): 56–58. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3IEynGI71r8lXPZBP9f75dm2o8P31SPXKvcv86-U1wawq4K6i-goo7t4p9uQzAh4I9B-cHa6PsphFefQbaN2MChEv_qexhCOoa2zSkMDLmNzGidA1RG5uQdcoKOTVcqtY-pp-UnETZc=&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS.

Ren, Chongyue 任崇岳, and Rongji Li 李荣基. "Xie An and Wang Xizhi 谢安与王羲之." *The Central Plains Culture Research* 中 原 文 化 研 究, 2019, 7, no. 04 (August 6, 2019): 111–15. https://doi.org/10.16600/j.cnki.41-1426/c.2019.04.015.

Richter, Antje. "Beyond Calligraphy: Reading Wang Xizhi's Letters." *T'OUNG PAO*, no. 96 (2011): 370–407. www.brill.nl/tpao.

Richter, Antje. *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013.

Song, Zhanli. "Song Zhanli 'lanting xu' yu 'linhe xu' guanxi kaobian 宋战利：《兰亭序》与《临河叙》关系考辨." Accessed January 29, 2024. https://gyy.henu.edu.cn/info/1024/1192.htm.

Sun, Danping 孙丹萍. "The Study of the Epistolary Essays in Jin Dynasties 两晋尺牍文学研究." *CNKI*, 2006. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=oslmGXurZ-pqLRngtaVSWj6pCxvDtDBCIAXlSrcgZOqedDnTLdmalJ1lbtF6M7k1WVxiXxQQ65OhKddhfIrj3

EFvv8DQZA7v6RKlrTJqP6hpglwJwHHDWsbOcBWP4VVj&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=C
HS.

Wang, Xiaoshen 王小莘, and Xiaochun Guo 郭小春. "Wang Xizhi fuzi shutie zhong de Wei Jin xisu yuci
王羲之父子书帖中的魏晋习俗语词." *Journal of Guangxi University* (*Philosophy and Social
Science*) 22, no. 2 (April 2000): 80–86. https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1001-8182.2000.02.016.

Wang, Yuechuan 王岳川. "Wang Xizhi's Vigorous Style and Calligraphic Realm 王羲之的魏晋风骨与
书法境界." *Journal of Peking University* (*Philosophy and Social Sciences*) 48, no. 6 (November
2011).

https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=A4c134OkBY8sTnJyAkKS9dFRaW5Sv8TBUbHqc

YnEE6PPsRBcgDxwJDIfoj_0wJkslIY4WJPOS_uLkk6V5m1-

SKsCM8zswbkosKYxbwU69_A5bbBnlSfb8WeeU3ov1-

6S&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS.

Xiao, Daping 肖大平. "Research on Wang Xizhi's Life, Thoughts and Letter Works 王羲之生平、思想
及   其   尺   牍   文   研   究."   *CNKI*,   2011.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=A4c134OkBY9qDpktoaJ_HN_-

Wti7pQUaYZ9UkT6AaIuueKMnrGJ-dm6wRBkAnO5rUIzncmEscInVDac5Wp5adLX3gv-

A2L5CATQuNkszlj3jIPYGR7yOAX06fdi26yvx&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS.

Yang, Tao 杨涛. "A Research on the Evolvement of the New Style Calligraphy in the Eastern-Jin Dynasty
东   晋'新   体'书   法   成   因   研   究."   *CNKI*,   2010.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=TmrGBFWiZl0oWXNTREuxnJMuOclzHKtvaW6

b93qKEGtgaJxcGN8GeBX_5JJKN0qujq2pW78n0VhTjIzj5gvRLX5hxJdYNbvUt0Omy4VUtmKF-

yr43A0IOQdM0kJxyE4VNJqX5D0xxjX80wl8a5gchw==&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS.

Zeng, Weijun 曾卫军. "Personal Pronouns in Er Wang Zatie 王《杂帖》中的人称代词." *Journal of
Mianyang   Teacher's   College*   绵   阳   师   范   学   院   学   报,   November   30,   2005,   102–7.
https://doi.org/10.16276/j.cnki.cn51-1670/g.2005.06.024.

Zhang, Junzhi 张俊之. "Er Wang zatie cihui yanjiu 二 王 雜 帖 詞 彙 研 究." *CNKI*, 2013.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=-

0THPtffOh2fNRsYdek3mhnQocPMzj8TVXK2wrvSoLJwqc_x9LfVAMhGn0cy_VfgfhpI6O0GhJQ

VwlbUVwhQJvS3LB3QWr3MbmeBxKRfFH4ndBl2GgI8qsjuMXe1diaQFibBzxwSrGg=&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS.

Zhao Mengfu. "Zhao Mengfu: Four Anecdotes from the Life of Wang Xizhi: China: Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)." The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed January 19, 2024. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/40509.

Zhou, Duwen 周笃文. "Dunhuang juanzi zhong faxian de Wang Xizhi er tie gulinben 敦煌卷子中发现的王羲之二帖古临本." *Cultural Relics* 文物 03 (March 31, 1980): 47–50. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3IEynGI71r93JCUWrEnNy0F930AXd1Di5QB4OLmHpRfKhd089rI797VQQIKj3AytLwBXE9FIs-P9yVV8daRM0A62OuGbv5UObAbKpefzxUs7y4adp_aBlTZQlplcZhE1&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS.

An Exploration of the Semantic Shift and Cultural Significance of "媛"

in the *Shishuo Xinyu* and Contemporary Chinese Context:

A Comparative Analysis

Xinyan Chen

University of Pennsylvania

A B S T R A C T

This paper explores the semantic evolution of the Chinese character "媛." Through comparative analysis of its use in *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語) and contemporary contexts, the paper addresses several key research questions, elucidating this character's transformation from a symbol of beauty to a modern polysemy. The research also examines the traces of social media's guidance in shaping public discourse about "媛" and the role of collective body symbolism in this semantic shift. The character "媛" serves as a lens for viewing the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity, offering insights into the cultural significance of language and its transformative power.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The character "媛" has a longstanding significance in Chinese cultural history. The earliest Chinese dictionary, *Discussing Writing and Explaining Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字), denotes "媛" as a beautiful and esteemed woman, composed of the elements "女" (woman) and "爰" (support). This character also appears in the classical text *The Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經):

展如之人兮，邦之媛也。

With a woman such as this, how few can vie! The beauty of the land, she charms the gazing eye. (Legge, p. 95)

The radical of "媛," depicting "女" (female), originally signified the grooming of virtuous women in early and medieval Chinese history, a meaning that remained relatively stable over time. However, in modern China, the semantic landscape of "媛" holds heightened complexity, with connotations of stigmatizing women. This transition in polysemy is associated with societal attitudes toward female groups.

Thus, this essay is dedicated to uncovering the semantic transformation of the character "媛." It employs a comparative analysis of "媛"'s usage in historical textual records, such as *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語), with its modern usage.

This research was guided by three key research aspects: the cultural significance and usage of "媛" in the *Shishuo*, the multifaceted connotations of "媛" in the contemporary context, and the similarities and differences of "媛"'s definitions between the two contexts, alongside the influencing factors. By meticulously examining the semantic evolution of "媛," this study deepens understanding of Chinese gender dynamics, enriches knowledge of Chinese linguistic and cultural evolution, and establishes a solid foundation for future analyses.

Semantic Analysis of "媛" Before Modern China

Premodern China saw the semantic usage of "媛" bifurcated into two categories. When functioning as a noun, it primarily denoted a beautiful woman, exemplified in the *Erya* 爾雅 dictionary: "A beautiful woman is "媛" (*meinü wei yuan* 美女為媛)" (Kaiyun Wang, p. 135).

When the word "媛" refers to a beautiful woman, it primarily appears in combination with the Chinese words "*ming* 名" and "*xian* 賢." The phrase "*mingyuan* 名媛" (the socialites) is perpetuated today. It refers to an upper-class woman with good qualities. The term "名媛" first appeared in the Ming dynasty novel *The Secret History of the Two Jin Dynasties* (*Liangjin Mishi* 兩晉秘史)*:*

皇後必擇世德名媛，幽嫻淑善。

The empress must select from the virtuous and renowned beauties in the world, choosing those who possess virtues such as tranquility, elegance, and kindness. (Yang, p. 3082)

In the late Qing dynasty, Shen Shanbao 沈善寶, a female writer, compiled *Remarks on Poetry by Notable Women* (*Mingyuan shihua* 名媛詩話). It captures the lives and literary achievements of the era's gifted women. Shen redefined the criteria for "the socialites" (*mingyuan* 名媛), prioritizing talent and virtue over considerations of appearance and lineage.

The phrase "*Xian Yuan* 賢媛" means a virtuous beauty, exemplified in the *New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語). Its nineteenth chapter is titled "賢媛" (Worthy Beauties). Additionally, the Ming dynasty's legendary play *The Garden of An Irrigation* (*Guanyuan ji* 灌園記) includes the following entry:

忠臣良將並賢媛，開國承家在簡編，隻落千載名傳。

Loyal ministers, good generals, and worthy beauties built their states and inherited fiefdoms in the more abbreviated writings, leaving their names a thousand years of fame alone. (Zhang, p. 65)

Furthermore, "媛" connotes "beautiful postures" and frequently manifests in women's names. Notably, the *Book of the Later Han* (*Houhan shu* 後漢書) documents the name Zhao Yuanjiang 趙媛姜 in the Western Han dynasty:

犍為盛道妻者，同郡趙氏之女也，字媛姜。

The wife of Shengdao from Qianwei was a daughter of the Zhao family from the same county, with the courtesy name Yuanjiang. (Fan, p. 1065)

As "媛" became an adjective, its positive connotations for women are evident in the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan* 列女傳), in the *Book of the Later Han* (*Houhan shu* 後漢書). This text provides instances of employing "媛" to laud women:

若淑媛謙順之人，則能依義以篤好。

If a woman came from a privileged background and was beautiful, humble, and obedient, then she could follow righteousness to get along with her husband's family in harmony. (Fan, p. 1061)

The character "媛" signifies "beautiful" in this context. Throughout pre-modern China, its usage exhibited a discernible consistency, conveying a positive assessment of certain women. This semantic stability underscores its role as a linguistic artifact, reflecting societal perceptions of female attributes.

Tone Differences of the "媛"

A dictionary in Eastern Han dynasty, *Discussing Writing and Explaining Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字), presents the word "媛" with dual pronunciations. Subsequently documented in the *Kangxi Dictionary* (*Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典) and the *Sea of Words* (*Ci hai* 辭海), namely the second tone (*yang ping* 陽平) and the fourth tone (*qu sheng* 去聲). The second tone denotes a graceful posture, primarily observed in the phrase "嬋媛(*chan yuan*)" as an aesthetically pleasing pose.

The character "媛" in the fourth tone refers to a "beautiful woman." The Ming dynasty novel, *The Secret History of the Two Jin Dynasties* (*Liangjin mishi* 兩晉秘史), introduced the term "the socialites" (*ming yuan* 名媛) to describe an upper-class beauty. Although the historical usage favors the fourth-tone pronunciation, contemporary Mandarin Chinese speakers commonly utilize the second tone to pronounce "*mingyuan* 名媛" in the twenty-first century. This prevalent deviation from the traditional phonetic standard remains unrecognized in formal lexicons.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE USAGE OF THE CHINESE CHARACTER "媛" IN *A NEW ACCOUNT OF TALES OF THE WORLD*

Exploring the semantic nuances of "媛" in early Chinese historical texts necessitates an examination of *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語). This literary work is a hallmark of the Six Dynasties. It meticulously documents eminent scholars' words, deeds, and anecdotes, spanning the late Eastern Han dynasty to the Wei and Jin periods. Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 led a scholarly group to compile it, and Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝標 annotated the extant version. Additionally, as a beacon in Western scholarship, Richard Mather's English translation has guided researchers to the intricacies of the Six Dynasties period. It provides a broader academic perspective on the cultural milieu of the Six Dynasties, shaped by the evolution of politics, education, wars, and the economy.

Unique for its period, *Shishuo Xinyu*'s vernacular nature primarily manifests in its use of appellations, regional colloquialisms, and extensive quotations and dialogues (Ai, p. 21). Firstly, the *Shishuo* employs appellations rarely seen in historical texts but extensively in daily communication. The following entry is a classical example:

公徐云："诸君少住，老子於此处兴复不浅！"

Yu said affably, "Gentlemen, stay awhile. The old chap's pleasure in this spot is by no means slight." (Liu, Liu and Mather, p. 336)

Yu refers to "the old chap" (*Lao zi* 老子) as himself. In vernacular speech, "*Laozi* 老子" is common among elders for self-reference. For instance, the poet Xin Qiji 辛棄疾 of the Song dynasty follows this usage: "As an old chap, today I am going to inspect my skeleton and body one by one" (Tang, p. 783).[1] Furthermore, "*Laozi* 老子" persists in contemporary regional dialects as a self-referential term.

Secondly, The *Shishuo* contains dialectal vulgarities rarely seen in traditional textual records. Many of these terms are coarse insults such as "blankety-blank idiot" (*hui wa diao* 咷瓦吊):

---

1 "老子今朝，點檢形骸" comes from Song lyrics "Spring in the Garden of Qin" (Qin Yuan Chun 沁園春), written by Xin Qiji 辛棄疾. It was included in the "Complete Song Lyrics" (Quan Song Ci 全宋詞) compiled by Tang Guizhang 唐圭璋.

王右军闻，大嗔曰："三祖寿乐器，冚瓦吊孙家儿打折！"

On hearing of it, Wang Youjun cried out in great indignation, "A priceless musical instrument which has been a family heirloom for three generations, that blankety-blank idiot son of the Sun family has smashed and broken!" (Liu, Liu and Mather, p. 471)

The term is seldom found in historical texts. Mather explained it as a colloquial swear word for which no standard characters existed. Additionally, the *Shishuo*'s vernacular traits are epitomized in numerous conversations and quotations. As in the two previous cases, it excels in character portrayal by presenting people's words. This faithful document includes great amounts of vernacular speech, fostering its vernacular nature and adding to its vivid portrayal of the era.

Furthermore, the *Shishuo* dedicates a chapter titled "Worthy Beauties" ("Xian yuan" 賢媛) to portraying women in the Six Dynasties. This chapter examines the images of women with four criteria: wisdom, virtue, ability, and temperament.

In the intellectual realm, the story within the "Worthy Beauties" chapter narrates wisdom:

孫秀初欲立威權，咸雲："減李重者又不足殺。"遂逼重自裁。初，重在家，有人走從門入，出髻中疏示重；重看之色動，入內示其女，女直叫"絕"，了其意，出則自裁。此女甚高明，重每諮焉。

When Sun Hsiu first wanted to establish prestige and power, everyone said, "Someone less important than Li Chung isn't worth killing." So he compelled Chung to take his own life. Earlier, while Chung was at home, someone ran in through the gate and showed it to Chung, taking a memorandum from inside his topknot. As Chung read it, his face paled. Entering the inner quarters, he showed it to his daughter, who immediately cried, "It's all over!" Understanding her meaning, Chung went out and took his own life. This daughter was extremely high-minded and intelligent, and Chung always consulted her about every situation. (Liu, Liu and Mather, p. 374)

The case unveils the sagacity of Li Chong's 李重 daughter within the context of courtly intrigues. When a ruler seeks to consolidate authority through executions, Li Chong becomes a target due to his esteemed standing. His daughter relies on her astute handling of a perilous letter to showcase her intelligence. Li Chong's trust in his daughter corroborates her foresight. Thus, the *Shishuo* extolls the girl's wisdom.

Moreover, Tao Kan's 陶侃 mother also presents her wisdom in the chapter:

陶公少有大誌，家酷貧，與母湛氏同居。同郡範逵素知名，舉孝廉，投侃宿。於時冰雪積日，侃室如懸磬，而逵馬僕甚多。侃母湛氏語侃曰：”汝但出外留客，吾自爲計。”湛頭髮委地，下爲二髮，賣得數斛米。斫諸屋柱，悉割半爲薪，剉諸薦以爲馬草。日夕，遂設精食，從者皆無所乏。

When Tao Kan was young he had great ambitions, but his family was desperately poor, and he lived with his mother, Lady Chan. A native of the same commandery, Fan Kui by name, had always been well known, and when he was recommended for the degree Filial and Incorrupt, he stopped at Kan's house for the night (on his way to the capital). At the time sleet and snow had been falling for days, and Kan's house was "bare as hanging stone chimes," yet Kui's horses and servants were extremely numerous. Kan's mother, Lady Chan, said to Kan, "You just go and see to it that the guests stay. I'll think of something." Since Lady Chan's hair reached all the way to the floor, she cut it off and made it into two switches, which she sold for several *hu* of rice. She then chopped the pillars of the room, removing half of each for firewood, and ripped up the straw bed mats to make fodder for the horses. As the day drew toward evening, she served an exquisite meal, and no one in the company had any lack. (Liu, Liu and Mather, p. 375)

Lady Zhan recognizes the potential advantages with which the guests can reward her son and offers dedicated hospitality. Amid material dearth, her wisdom is evident in the generous reception she provides. Consequently, the guests help spread Tao Kan's (陶侃) reputation, aiding his ascent from humble beginnings to becoming a distinguished minister.

Furthermore, as elucidated in the "Worthy Beauties" chapter, virtue emerges as a second criterion for evaluating women. Noteworthy exemplars include the narratives of Lady Zhong and Lady Hao:

王司徒婦，鐘氏女，太傅曾孫，亦有俊才女德。鐘、郝爲娣姒，雅相親重。鐘不以貴陵郝，郝亦不以賤下鐘。東海家內，則郝夫人之法；京陵家內，範鐘夫人之禮。

Wang Hun's wife, Chung Yen, was the great-granddaughter of the grand tutor, Chung Yu, and in her own right possessed outstanding ability and womanly virtue. Lady Chung and Lady Hao, as the wives respectively of the elder and younger Wang brothers, Wang Hun and Wang Chan, always treated each other with affectionate respect. Lady Chung did not, because of her noble origin, act condescendingly toward Lady Hao, nor did Lady Hao, because of her lowly origin, act obsequiously toward Lady Chung. Within the household of Wang Chan's son, Wang Cheng, they followed the rules of Lady Hao, and within the household of Wang Hun they took as their model the etiquette of Lady Chung. (Liu, Liu and Mather, p. 373)

Lady Hao's alliance with a noble family was founded on her virtuous reputation. After her marriage across class lines, her dignity was recognized despite her humble origins. Simultaneously, Lady Zhong, of aristocratic lineage, transcended class biases, demonstrating her virtue by respecting Lady Hao. This reciprocal dynamic underscores the virtues of both women.

The third criterion is ability. The *Shishuo* highlights the valuation of female prowess, particularly in politics. One example is when Wei Emperor Ming (魏明帝) apprehends Board of Civil Office clerk Xie Yun (謝允). Lady Ruan, his wife, instructs Xie Yun on how to handle the emperor, exemplifying composure amid unforeseen political upheaval:

初，允被收，舉家號哭。阮新婦自若，雲："勿憂，尋還。"作粟粥待。頃之，允至。

When Yun was first apprehended, his entire household was weeping and wailing, but his bride, Lady Ruan, said with complete self-composure, "Don't worry. After a while, he'll return." Whereupon she cooked some millet gruel and waited for him. In a short time Yun arrived. (Liu, Liu and Mather, p. 367)

Lady Ruan's insight into the emperor's disposition is manifested in her poised and calculated conduct. She proved her competence in political affairs and navigating challenging circumstances, which ensured Xie's official standing and familial safety.

Temperament, as a fourth criterion, prompted the inclusion of women like Xie Daoyun 谢道韫 in the *Shishuo*:

有濟尼者，遊於二家，或問之， 濟尼答曰：王夫人神情散朗，故有林下風氣。

A certain Chi Ni went to visit both the Chang and the Hsieh families. When people asked him which was superior and which inferior, he replied, "Lady Wang's (i.e., Xie Daoyun's) spirit and feelings are relaxed and sunny; she certainly has the manner and style of (the Seven Worthies) beneath the (Bamboo) Grove." (Liu, Liu and Mather, p. 380)

The essence of "Linxia Zhifeng" 林下之風 emanates from the distinguished temperament of the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Forest" 竹林七賢. Revered by contemporaries, this clique's ethos became a benchmark. Consequently, Xie Daoxuan's (谢道韫) exceptional acclaim, transcending societal gender norms, garnered praise beyond traditional expectations.

In exploring the cultural and historical significance of "媛" in the *Shishuo*, the chapter titles featuring the character "媛" are particularly revealing. The term is combined with "賢" (*xian*) to denote virtuous beauties. This chapter sets criteria that include wisdom, virtue, talent, and temperament while minimizing the emphasis on physical appearance. Including "媛" in this context underscores its positive connotation and public recognition. The *Shishuo*'s depiction of women named "媛" reflects societal esteem in that era.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEMPORARY USAGE OF THE CHINESE CHARACTER "媛"

Premodern China saw the meaning of "媛" as a positive and uniform association with femininity. However, it has multi-dimensional connotations in contemporary China. Firstly, modern authoritative dictionaries, such as the twelfth edition of the *Xinhua Dictionary* published in 2020, have retained the traditional positive interpretation of "媛." Its explanation aligns with what the *Sea of Words* (*Ci hai* 辭 海) analysis previously discussed.

Additionally, the character "媛" still appears in an individual's name with a positive connotation in contemporary China. The prominent instance is the name of Peng Liyuan 彭丽媛, the wife of the present General Secretary of the PRC. "媛" conveys the essence of beauty in her name. The conjunction of "Li 麗" and "Yuan 媛" contains a parental expectation of her aesthetic qualities.

However, the character "媛"'s derivation occurred in October 2020. An article about "female socialites in Shanghai" appeared on the WeChat platform, suggesting that the word carries pejorative overtones in digital media. The article discussed women's articulating methods for displaying affluence and upper-class status, including cost-sharing and rotating the use of luxury items, such as designer stockings. The article's spread significantly caused public resentment against such women. Subsequently, Chinese social media saw a series of movements using "媛" to stigmatize women by creating new phrases. This usage starkly contrasts with the character's historically positive connotations (Deng, p. 1).

BUDDHIST SOCIALITES

"Buddhist socialites" (*fo yuan* 佛媛) classicly exemplifies a new phrase formed on the word "媛." It initially described a group of women posting photos of themselves with Buddha statues or worshipping in temples. They, however, dressed provocatively and in seductive poses. After gaining public attention, some initiated deceptive marketing, offering "enlightened" products at prices ten to one hundred times higher than those of comparable items.

Buddhism, now recognized by China, has faced commercialization issues, leading to a 2017 ban on profiting from religious activities. Consequently, influential Chinese media have united to denounce

women exploiting Buddhism for profit, with China Central Television labeling such actions as "undermining the sanctity of religious sites" (Luo, p. 1). The *Workers' Daily* also weighed in on the "Buddhist socialites" controversy. The article begins by referencing the "Shanghai socialite" case, drawing parallels between it and the "Buddhist socialites" (*fo yuan* 佛媛), characterizing them as the same female group. This article, titled "The Tail of the Fox Can't Be Hidden by Wearing a Robe," draws a comparison between the so-called "Buddhist socialites" and the fox demons in *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記). It condemns their moral failings, particularly their pursuit of economic gain through deceit. This media narrative has primarily shaped the public perception of the issue.

Chinese official media employ the term "Buddhist socialites" to refer to a specific group of women, tacitly allowing this term to permeate public discourse. Subsequently, the "Buddhist socialites" indiscriminately labeled any woman captured alongside a Buddha statue. A notable case involved a cultural ambassador for Shanxi province, a female blogger specializing in Han-style fashion. Her participation in a government-sponsored photo shoot with a Buddha statue led to criticism. Although having no connection to Buddhism for personal profit, she was labeled a "Buddhist Socialite" for standing next to a Buddha statue.

SICK SOCIALITES

Following the *Workers' Daily*'s 2021 commentary on "Buddhist socialites," the *Health Times*, part of the *People's Daily*, published an article titled "After the 'Buddhist Socialites,' there are 'Sick Socialites.'" The article criticized a woman with delicate makeup who took photos in the hospital to sell products. She falsely claimed to have thyroid cancer and to have made a quick recovery to sell illegal drugs. Thus, official media labeled her as a "sick socialite (*bing yuan* 病媛)."

After the media revelations, several women refuted the allegations, verifying their illnesses and denying any product sales. While their clarification ended the attacks on them of being "sick socialites," no apology was forthcoming from the media outlet.

Beyond "sick socialites 病媛" and "Buddhist socialites 佛媛," modern Chinese society has coined many derogatory terms for women, such as "frisbee socialites (*feipanyuan* 飛盤媛)," which describes young women posting photos of themselves playing frisbee. Also, "Covid-testing socialites (*hesuanyuan* 核酸媛)" refers to women volunteering for nucleic acid stations while wearing makeup. With the

situation that all women can be "媛," the "*yuanyuanbuduan* 媛媛不斷" (unending stream of socialites) has also emerged. It is a play on the Chinese idiom "*yuányuán bùduàn* 源源不斷" (a steady flow). [2]

Despite its semantic shifts, "*ming yuan* 名媛" maintains its traditionally affirmative connotation in modern China. A case in point is the translation of "Le Bal des Débutantes" to "*Bali mingyuan wu hui* 巴黎名媛舞會" (Paris Socialite Ball), where "*ming yuan* 名媛" portrays an upper-class woman with distinguished attributes. This contemporary usage of "媛" mirrors that in the *Shishuo*, signifying elegance and nobility, informing its current relevance.

Overall, the character "媛" is considered polysemous in contemporary Chinese vernacular contexts, a usage not yet included in official dictionaries. While it retains its traditional positive meaning, it involves a skepticism towards women who feign wealth for financial gain, with its derivative form "x 媛."

CONTRASTING THE USE OF "媛" IN TWO CONTEXTS

Upon examining the character "媛" in the *Shishuo* and its modern Chinese usage, the third research question surfaces: How does the application of "媛" in the *Shishuo* compare with its current connotations in China?

The character "媛" consistently conveys a positive image of women, symbolizing beauty in both contexts. The *Shishuo* includes "媛" in the chapter title "*Xian Yuan* 贤媛" to praise women. Although no female name with "媛" appears in the *Shishuo*, historical and contemporary examples, such as Zhao Yuanjiang (趙媛姜) and Peng Liyuan (彭麗媛), demonstrate its use to designate a female with the meaning "beautiful."

However, in modern vernacular contexts, the character "媛" has acquired a more pejorative meaning than in the *Shishuo*. In addition, the term "*ming yuan* 名媛" currently signifies socialites with exceptional qualities, but it's also employed derogatorily in terms like "x 媛," which tarnishes women's reputations. This additional layer of meaning is absent in the *Shishuo*.

---

2 Xinyu Deng 鄧鑫宇, "Socialite," China Media Project, December 7, 2022.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SEMANTIC SHIFT OF "媛"

The semantic evolution of "媛" is related to multiple factors. First, the rise of social media reshaped the semantic contours of "媛." WeChat and Little Red Book, for instance, are involved in this semantic deconstruction. The 2020 "Shanghai socialites" case led to labeling women's groups with "媛." Subsequently, these media have broadened its definition, adding negative implications for women.

Groups profiting from such "pretend socialites" have increased the complexity of "媛." They borrow "媛"'s traditional image to drive consumer behavior. This group's emergence coincides with a shift from conventional perspectives on the symbolism of women's bodies. For instance, on social media, provocative poses clash with the solemnity of Buddhist, challenging conventional Chinese moral values. This conflict's negative association has permeated a broader group of women, stigmatizing them with the term "x 媛."

Furthermore, official Chinese media, such as the *People's Daily*, have further employed "x 媛" to denounce this group as deceptive, expanding the character's semantic range.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the semantic shift and cultural significance of "媛" in *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語) and modern China, answering several research questions and providing insights through comparative analysis.

The first research question examines the historical significance of "媛" in the *Shishuo*. The term denotes a beautiful woman and is combined with "*xian* 賢," describing commendable women of the Six Dynasties, in the chapter "*Xian Yuan* 賢媛." However, "媛" does not appear in the chapter's content. The *Shishuo*'s definition of "媛" embodies women's evaluation criteria in wisdom, virtue, ability, and grace.

The second question concerns the contemporary usage of "媛." In modern Chinese, the character "媛" retains its traditional significance, referring to beauty, feminine grace, and female names. But within sinological discourse, the expression "x 媛" satirizes a specific cohort of women.

A commonality in applying "媛" across the *Shishuo* and modern Chinese contexts, as examined by the third research inquiry, is its association with the concept of feminine beauty. However, contemporary usage introduces semantic layers that diverge from this traditional connotation,

encompassing positive and negative nuances.

The fourth question delves into the factors contributing to the semantic evolution of "媛." The rise of social platforms, the guidance of Chinese media, groups profiting from the traditional image of "媛," and the transgressive use of body symbols have all significantly altered "媛"'s meaning from its conventional sense in the *Shishuo* to its modern Chinese multiple interpretations.

In conclusion, exploring the character "媛" is a journey of cultural reflection. It shows how social media and values shape human understanding and exploitation of language. The semantic shift of "媛" mirrors broader cultural transformation, as epitomized in the interplay between tradition and modernity. This exploration also illuminates the continuous renegotiation of gender roles and societal expectations. The semantic evolution of "媛" manifests language's power in shaping a civilization.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ai, Yuan 艾媛. *Shishuo Xinyu de baihua xingzhi chutan*《世說新語》的白話性質初探. Hubei University, 2010.

Chen, Jack Wei. *Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance: Essays on the Shishuo Xinyu*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021.

Deng, Xinyu 鄧鑫宇. "Socialite." China Media Project, December 7, 2022. https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/socialite/.

Fan, Ye 范曄. *Hou Han Shu* 後漢書. Di 1 ban. Shanghai: Han yu da ci dian chu ban she, 2004.

Legge, James. *The She King: Or, The Book of Ancient Poetry*.詩經. London: Trübner, 1876.

Li, Dan 李丹. *Shishuo xinyu zhong nüxing xingxiang yanjiu*《世說新語》中女性形象研究. Shibboleth authentication request. Accessed April 21, 2023. https://oversea-cnki-net.proxy.library.upenn.edu/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?

Liu, Yiqing 劉義慶, Liu Chün 劉峻, and Richard B. Mather. *Shih-Shuo Hsin-Yu: A New Account of Tales of the World*, Second edition. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.19860.

Luo, Meihan 羅美涵. "Chinese Social Sites Ban Online Influencers Capitalizing on Buddhism." #SixthTone, September 24, 2021. https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1008581.

Mair, Victor H. "All-purpose word for 'glamorous woman,'" Language Log (10/16/21).

Mair, Victor H. "The 'socialite' phenomenon in China," Language Log (4/13/23).

Qian, Nanxiu 錢南秀. *Dongya han wenhuaquan de "xianyuan" shuxie* 東亞漢文化圈的"賢媛"書寫. Shibboleth authentication request. Accessed April 21, 2023.https://oversea-cnki-net.proxy.library.upenn.edu/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?

Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋. *Quan Song Ci* 全宋詞. 1st edition. Beijing: Zhong hua shu ju, 1965.

Wang, Kaiyun 王闓运. *Er Ya Ji Jie* 爾雅集解. Di 1 ban. Changsha Shi: Yuelu shu she, 2010.

Wang, Yun 王韻. *Shehui biaozheng shiyuxia meijie wuming de shengchan yu dikang-- yi wangluo liuxingyu 'x yuan'wei li* 社會表徵視域下媒介污名的生產與抵抗–以網絡流行語"X 媛"爲例. CNKI. Accessed April 21, 2023. https://www.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?

Xiao Xueyan 肖雪妍. *Yueguizhe pipanzhe yu shehuihua: "yuan" de wuminghua tanxi* 越軌者、批判者與社會化：'媛'的污名化探析. CNKI. Accessed April 21, 2023. https://www.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?

Xu, Shen 許慎. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*. Dian xiao ben. Di 1 ban. Beijing: Zhong hua shu ju, 2020.

Speaking What Cannot Be Spoken:
Poetry as a Solution to the Ineffability in Chan Rhetoric

Ming Sun

University of Pennsylvania

INTRODUCTION

Chan Buddhism is known for maintaining a negative stance toward human language, as it is rooted in the Mādhyamika ontology that the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) transcends linguistic expression. Its doctrine on the negation of (particularly written) language, namely "no establishment upon written words" (*buli wenzi* 不立文字), is well conceptualized in the *Platform Sūtra*, the scripture of the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng's 惠能 hagiography and teachings:

> The master said, "When it comes to the writings, I cannot read them. But when it comes to the meaning, please feel free to ask." The nun asked, "If you cannot even recognize the writings, how can you understand the meaning?" The master replied, "The wondrous truth of the Buddhas is not concerned with writings."

> 師曰：「字即不識，義即請問。」尼曰：「字尚不識，焉能會義？」師曰：「諸佛妙理，非關文字。」[3]

---

[3] *Liuzu dashi fabao tanjing* 六祖大師法寶壇經, in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, vol. 48, no. 2008, p. 345. T2008_.48.0355a16.

Paradoxically, many consider Chan to be the Buddhist sect most prolific in literary production and inventive use of language. Despite Chan's emphasis on the ineffability of the ultimate in its metaphysical construction, its adherents believe that the understanding of the truth could be triggered by certain strategic applications of language in praxis. Christoph Anderl keenly grasped this tension between speaking and non-speaking, writing that Chan "adepts navigate between a feeling of deep distrust toward the capabilities of language concerning its capacity to express the ultimate truth on the one hand, and a huge literary output and great creativity concerning the invention of genres and the use of language on the other hand."[4] Admittedly, to address the challenge of speaking what cannot be spoken, Chan masters adopted a variety of approaches, encompassing practices such as Chan poetry (*chanshi* 禪詩), public cases (*gong'an* 公案), recorded sayings (*yulu* 語錄), incisive dialogue (*jifeng* 機鋒), beating and shouting (*banghe* 棒喝), and even silence.

Poetry has long been recognized by Chan Buddhism as a particularly potent medium for transferring the transcendental and private into the accessible and public sphere. Scholars trace the significant merging of Buddhism and poetry back to the mid-Tang period with the emergence of the "poet-monk" (*shiseng* 詩僧) group.[5] Further integration of Chan and poetry during the Northern Song dynasty marked the maturation of the "literary Chan" (*wenzi Chan* 文字禪) tradition, signifying Chan's transformation from "no establishment upon written words" to "no separating from written words" (*buli wenzi* 不離文字).[6] Yuan Haowen 元好問 (1190–1257), a celebrated Jin dynasty poet, offered a colorful

---

4 Christoph Anderl, *Zen Buddhist Rhetoric in China, Korea, and Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 3.

5 For the historical accounts offering details about the poet-monks, see Thomas J. Mazanec, *Poet-Monks: The Invention of Buddhist Poetry in Late Medieval China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024). See also Sun Changwu 孫昌武, *Tangdai wenxue yu fojiao* 唐代文學與佛教 (Shaanxi People's Publishing House, 1985), 126–171; Cheung Wai-kwan 張為群, "The Monk-Poets of the Mid-Tang Period 中唐詩僧研究" (master's thesis, University of Hong Kong, 1999); Lucas Rambo Bender, "Why the Mid-Tang Poet-Monks (*Shi-seng* 詩僧) Chose *Shi* 詩-Poetry" (presentation, University of Colorado, Boulder, Asian Studies Graduate Association Online Conference, Boulder, CO, February 19, 2022).

6 Zhou Yukai 周裕鍇, *Wenzi Chan yu Songdai shixue* 文字禪與宋代詩學, di 1 ban 第 1 版, ed. Gaoxiao wenke boshi wenku (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998).

On the problem of Chan's overuse of poetry in the Song dynasty, see Jason Protass, *The Poetry Demon: Song-Dynasty Monks on Verse and the Way* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021).

description of the interplay between Chan and poetry as two complementary entities, thus: "Poetry is the flower-embellished brocade for Chan practitioners; Chan is the jade-cutting knife for poets" (詩為禪客添花錦，禪是詩家切玉刀).[7] It is thus evident that Chan monks employ poetry as a linguistic and soteriological solution for the ineffability in Chan rhetoric.

Rather than recounting the historical convergence of Chan and poetry, the goal of this paper is to investigate the internal compatibility between this religious body and literary style. It examines the ideological and philosophical rationales underlying their close relationship, offering three explanations for their synergy. The first section analyzes the genre features of poetry, suggesting that, viewed as *gāthā* (*ji* 偈, "verses"), the Chan poetry tradition has roots in its Indian origins, which legitimized Chinese monks' self-expression through poems. The second section interrogates how the fuzziness of poetic language acts as an effective *upāya* (*fangbian* 方便, "expedient means") that satisfies the philosophical premise for readers and listeners to enter the state of enlightenment. Finally, the third section argues for poetry's literary plasticity through its openness to other linguistic strategies endorsed by Chan, showing how these seemingly disparate linguistic practices mutually inform and interact with each other within Chan rhetoric.

THE PERFORMATIVE FEATURES OF POETIC GENRE: POETRY AS *GĀTHĀ*

Rhythmic, metrical verses are commonly associated with religious activities due to their performative, memorializable, and transmittable nature. In Bronze Age China, for instance, the performance of hymns classified as *ya* 雅 in the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經) was an integral part of ancestral sacrificial ceremonies. Similarly, in India the Buddhist penchant for oral chanting of verses manifested in the tradition of *gāthā*. The Sanskrit term *gāthā* initially signified a "song" intended for singing. In Buddhism, it specifically refers to the verse sections of a sūtra, distinguishing it as one of the two fundamental compositional styles of a sūtra, the other being prose. *Gāthā* and prose typically alternate in a sūtra, with *gāthā* regarded as the core. Tradition holds that *gāthā* is enriched with the wisdom of the enlightened, thus being attributed greater soteriological value. Chanting these verses is believed to

---

7 Yuan Haowen 元好問, *Zeng Songshan juanshizhe xueshi* 贈嵩山雋侍者學詩.

facilitate the practitioners' acquisition of merit in a direct and mystical manner. Consequently, it is widely accepted by modern historians that, in early Buddhist scriptures, *gāthā*s were composed first for oral transmission, with the prose sections subsequently developed to elaborate on the contextual details derived from the *gāthās*.

The concept of *gāthā* was introduced into China with the successive translations of Buddhist scriptures. An Shigao 安世高, the earliest translator, from Parthia, opted to translate *gāthā* as *jue* 絶 in the second century CE. Later, the Indo-Scythian native Lokakṣema 支婁迦讖 first rendered *gāthā* as *ji* 偈 in *Banzhou sanmei jing* 般舟三昧經 (*Pratyutpanna-samādhi sūtra*), while some of his contemporaries chose *song* 頌 as an alternative. Until the fourth century, the vast influence of Kumārajīva's 鳩摩羅什 work solidified *ji* as the preferred translation.[8] However, it is crucial to note that Indian *gāthā* and Chinese poetry were never identical concepts in their respective cultural contexts. The changing of Chinese understanding of *gāthā* or *ji* as strictly from the sacred verses in Buddhist sūtra to a broader definition of Buddhist poetry was a gradual process, involving both the poeticization of *gāthā* and the gāthāization of poetry. Thomas J. Mazanec pointed out that there was an attempt to poeticize *gāthā* in the early medieval translations. He noticed that when Kang Mengxiang 康孟詳 by the end of the second century domesticated *gāthā* verses into the form of Chinese poetry, he intentionally incorporated additional rhymes at the end of each line, reflecting the greater emphasis on rhyme in Chinese poetry.[9] Concurrently, *gāthā* also reshaped the Chinese conception of poetry. Victor H. Mair and Tsu-Lin Mei have demonstrated that Sanskrit tonal prosody like *gāthā*, inspired Shen Yue 沈約 and his followers in the fifth century to establish the theory of Chinese poetic tonality known as the "four tones and eight defects" (*sisheng babing* 四聲八病). Shen's theory has provided the theoretical foundation for regulated verse (*lüshi* 律詩), or recent style poetry (*jintishi* 近體詩), a new poetic form favored by the literati in the Tang dynasty.[10]

---

8 For an account of the earliest translators and their dealings with *gāthā*, see Jan Nattier, *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations: Texts from the Eastern Han and Three Kingdoms Periods* (Tokyo: International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2008). See also E. Zürcher and Jonathan A. Silk, "A New Look at the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Texts," in *Buddhism in China: Collected Papers of Erik Zürcher* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 427–430.

9 Thomas J. Mazanec, "The Medieval Chinese *Gāthā* and Its Relationship to Poetry," *T'oung Pao* 103, no. 1–3 (2017): 105–115.

10 Victor H. Mair and Tsu-Lin Mei, "The Sanskrit Origins of Recent Style Prosody," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51, no. 2

Whether it was the poeticization of *gāthā* or the gāthāization of poetry, deliberately or unconsciously, *ji* and poetry became indistinguishable. A vernacular poem attributed to the legendary Chan poet Shide 拾得 ("Picking up") illustrates that people had completely blurred the distinction between *ji* and poetry by the Tang dynasty:

我詩也是詩	My poetry is indeed poetry,
有人喚作偈	Some call them *ji.*
詩偈總一般	Poetry and *ji* are always the same,
讀時須子細	You need to read them with great care.[11]

Shide's case encapsulates how *ji* evolved into a form synonymous with Buddhist poetry, and effectively, a subset within the category of poetry. Furthermore, as Chan Buddhism rose to prominence, the terms "Buddhist poetry" and "Chan poetry" came to be used interchangeably in practice. Notably, early representative "poet-monks" like Hanshan 寒山 ("Cold Mountain"), Shide, and Pang Jushi 龐居士 ("Layman Pang") were all recognized as Chan monks. Henceforth, it became a common practice to write poetry on Buddhist or Chan themes and call it *ji*, or vice versa, to compose Buddhist or Chan *ji* in the style of Tang poetry.

The verses in the *Platform Sūtra* well exemplify this trend. When the author(s) who were deeply immersed in the Sinicized Chan tradition crafted their sacred text in alignment with the *gāthā* tradition of Indian Buddhism, they composed *ji* in the same way as Tang poetry. The sūtra comprises ten chapters, filled with twenty-nine verses categorized as either *ji* or *song*. While three are labeled as *song*, the remaining twenty-six are introduced explicitly as *ji* or begin with phrases such as *jiyue* 偈曰 ("the *ji* says"). The majority of these verses maintain the pentasyllabic structure typical of recent style poetry, organized in four or eight stanzas. The first two cases narrate the well-known competition between Shen Xiu 神秀 and Hui Neng. When the Fifth Patriarch, Hong Ren 弘忍, proclaimed that the disciple

---

(1991): 375–470.

[11] This anonymous poem is considered to be the Shide Poetry no. 9, compiled in the *Cold Mountain Poetry* 寒山詩. See *Hanshan shizhu fu Shide shizhu* 寒山詩注附拾得詩注, ed. and annot. Xiang Chu 項楚 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), 844–845.

who composed the best *ji* would receive the "heart seal" (*xinyin* 心印), indicating his appointment as the Sixth Patriarch, Shen Xiu, the most promising disciple, made the first attempt:

(Shen Xiu) wrote his *ji* on the wall of the south corridor, presenting what was seen in his mind. The *ji* says:

身是菩提樹	The body is a bodhi tree,
心如明鏡臺	The mind is like a bright mirror stand.
時時勤拂拭	Constantly brush it clean,
勿使惹塵埃	Lest dust should alight upon it.[12]

Shen Xiu's work was conveyed to Hui Neng, then a new convert, through a child's recitation:

Two days later, a child passed by the threshing room, reciting Shen Xiu's *ji*... The child said, "...The great master has instructed everyone to chant this. By cultivating according to this *ji*, one may avoid falling into the evil path; By cultivating according to this *ji*, one may gain considerable merit."

復兩日，有一童子於碓坊過，唱誦其偈。...童子曰，「...，大師令人皆誦。依此偈修免墮惡道，依此偈修有大利益。」[13]

Upon hearing Shen Xiu's *ji*, Hui Neng, though illiterate, orally made his reply:

菩提本無樹	Bodhi originally has no tree,
明鏡亦非臺	The bright mirror also has no stand.

---

12 T2008_.48.0348b22.

13 T2008_.48.0348c18.

本來無一物　Fundamentally there is not a single thing,

何處惹塵埃　Where could dust alight?[14]

Hui Neng's verse is among the most celebrated in the history of Chan literature due to its successful conveyance of the true understanding of *śūnyatā* (*kong* 空, "emptiness"). It is often cited to elucidate the core principles of sudden enlightenment (*dunwu* 頓悟), countering Shen Xiu's advocacy for gradual cultivation (*jianxiu* 漸修). Beyond the sudden/gradual paradigm, this narrative enhances our understanding of the function of *ji* in Chan practice. Like Indian *gāthā*, chanting *ji* authored by eminent monks is believed to gain spiritual benefits for practitioners. Yet, the poetic nature of these *ji* is showcased by their typical features of Tang recent style poetry. Both Shen Xiu's reflection and Hui Neng's response, though formally recognized as *ji*, are embodied in the language of poetry, and have been widely circulated in the long tradition of Chan poetry over time. This brought up an intriguing tension—Chan monks ideologically participated in the Buddhist tradition of *ji* on the one hand, while practically engaging in the art of Tang poetry on the other hand.

Chan *ji*, or Chan poetry, is the result of the sinicization of Indian *gāthā*. It is a Chinese endeavor of poetic creation that is bolstered by the underpinnings of Buddhist doctrine on the theoretical level. Composing poetry in the name of *ji* is not only advantageous for monks within the Buddhist framework, but it also enables them to venture into artistic expression like their literati contemporaries do. Poetry, thus featured in both religious devotion and literary artistry, has found its place in Buddhist tradition, enhancing the richness of monastic life.

THE FUZZINESS OF POETIC LANGUAGE: POETRY AS *UPĀYA*

Fuzziness is the opposite of precision. Bertrand Russel initiated the modern discourse on fuzziness with his 1923 speech, "On Vagueness," drawing attention to the absence of clearly defined criteria in the real physical world.[15] In 1965, Lotfi A. Zadeh introduced fuzzy set theory in mathematics, highlighting the

---

14 T2008_.48.0349a06.

15 Bertrand Russell, "On Vagueness," *The Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* 1 (1923): 84.

nuanced and non-binary decision-making processes in human cognition.[16] Short thereafter, the substantial impact of this fuzzy logic reached beyond logic, philosophy, and cognitive science, shedding new light on various linguistic-related fields with the emergence of fuzzy linguistics. When fuzzy linguistics was introduced to Chinese academia in the 1980s, it sparked intense discussion in literary theory, translation studies, and rhetoric. Some overly generalized the discussions on this concept, asserting that Sinitic languages exhibit greater fuzziness than Romance languages to account for cultural phenomena such as euphemisms in Chinese pragmatics or to address the Needham Grand Question. However, these expansive reflections on "fuzzy linguistics" exceed the scope of this chapter. My argument here is rather straightforward: the language of ancient Chinese poetry is distinguished by its fuzziness, which enables Chan devotees to employ it as a tool for exploring the limit of language and preaching the ineffable doctrine.

Fuzziness in linguistics refers to the indefinite and imprecise nature of human language.[17] It is a common feature in literary works, crossing cultural and language boundaries. Chinese poetry is particularly noted for its favor toward fuzzy language, which forms a significant aesthetic proclivity towards the implicit, indirect, and subtle expressions that invite open interpretation. This prominent characteristic of Chinese poetry has received consistent affirmation from modern translators and comparative literary scholars. For example, the lay Buddhist Wang Wei 王維 (600–759 CE) is renowned for his masterly incorporation of Chan themes into his poetry.[18] His poem "Deer Enclosure" ("Luzhai" 鹿柴) is both admired and notorious for the challenges its fuzzy syntax and semantics pose to translators:

空山不見人　On the empty mountain, seeing no one
但聞人語響　only hearing the echo of human voices
返景入深林　returning light enters the deep forest

---

16 L. A. Zadeh, "Fuzzy Sets," *Information and Control*, 8 (1965): 338–353.

17 L. A. Zadeh, "A Fuzzy-Set-Theoretic Interpretation of Linguistic Hedges," *Journal of Cybernetics* 2, no. 3 (1972): 4–34; Wu Tieping 吳鐵平, *Mohu yuyan xue* 模糊語言學 [Fuzzy Language] (Shanghai waiyu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999).

18 See Regina Wai Kwok Chui, "Wang Wei: Road to Emptiness. The Buddha Poet's Chan Belief and Vimalakīrti" (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2003); MQ84254.

復照青苔上[19] again shining upon the green moss

Wang Wei uses simplistic language to craft a spacious and profound scene. Each stanza here resists a rigid subject-verb-object (SVO) structure, with most morphemes able to function as more than one part of speech. Eliot Weinberger, in 1987, published a collection comprising nineteen different translations of this poem, each offering a new reading.[20] The variety of translations, while free from factual errors, convert an otherwise vague and open text into a relatively definitive writing, thus constraining the boundless interpretive potential dwelling inside the original work. Many of them attempt to impose grammatical structure in order to figure out the concrete situation that the poem depicts, such as inserting the subject 'I' to complete a sentence, or attempting to determine the singular and plural of nouns and the active or passive mood of verbs. Unfortunately, such translations fail to preserve the absence of self, the purity of natural imagery, and the sense of emptiness. Even though there is no direct evidence that Wang Wei had himself identified his works as Chan poetry, his restrained expression of the state of emptiness serves as a model for those from the Tang to the Ming dynasty who aspired to infuse Chan into poetry.[21] During his lifetime, Fan Xian lauded him as "a contemporary master of poetry who was also proficient in Chan teachings" (當代詩匠，又精禪理).[22] The Northern Song Chan master Juefan Huihong 覺範惠洪 praised the aesthetic virtue of "purity" (*qing* 清) in Wang Wei's writings and integrated it into his own construction of "literary Chan," which elevated the unity of Chan and poetry

19 Wang Wei 王維, "Lu Chai" 鹿柴 [Deer Enclosure]..

20 Eliot Weinberger, *Nineteen Ways of Looking At Wang Wei: How a Chinese Poem Is Translated* (Mount Kisco, N.Y.: Moyer Bell, 1987).

21 Note that while Wang Wei himself was obsessed with Chan and Buddhism in general, it is not clear whether he held the same conception of Chan poetry that we do. The direct association between Wang Wei's poetry and Chan Buddhism is probably a later construction; see Yang Jingqing, *The Chan Interpretations of Wang Wei's Poetry: A Critical Review* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2007). I take Wang Wei as an example here not based on his self-identification but on the significant historical influence he had on the theory of Chan poetry.

22 Fan Xian 范咸, *Chou Wangwei xu* 酬王維序 [Response to Wang Wei's Preface]. 全唐詩 卷一二九

to a new level.[23] These endorsements ultimately contributed to Wang Wei's posthumously earning the title of "Buddha of Poetry" (*shifo* 詩佛) during the Ming dynasty.

Yan Yu 嚴羽 in the Southern Song dynasty was acutely aware that the polysemy and ambiguity inherent in the works of the best poets allow them to generate infinite meanings from very subdued poetic lines. In his poetic criticism work, *Canglang Poetry Talks* (*Canglang shihua* 滄浪詩話), he said:

> Therefore, their subtle realm is clear and exquisite, which cannot be forced together. It is like the sound in the air, the form (*rūpa*) in the portrait, the moon in the water, and the image in the mirror. Words have their limits, but meaning is infinite.

> 故其妙處，透徹玲瓏，不可湊泊。如空中之音，相中之色，水中之月，鏡中之象，言有盡而意無窮。[24]

Although he would not have used the term "fuzziness," Yan Yu reached a similar conclusion that the essence of Poetry and that of Chan lie in the audience's comprehension. His assertion that "Words have their limits, but meaning is infinite" (*yanyoujin er yiwuqiong* 言有盡而意無窮) became an important literary theory in the discussion of the "Relationship between Word and Meaning" (*yanyi zhibian* 言意之辨). When comparing poetry with Chan, he further said:

> Generally speaking, the Chan path lies only in the subtle comprehension, and the poetry path also lies in the subtle comprehension.

---

23 There are multiple poems in the collection titled *Shimen wenzi chan* 石門文字禪 that reference the purity of Wang Wei's poems. Juefan Huihong 覺範惠洪, *Shimen wenzi chan* 石門文字禪 [Literary Chan of the Stone Gate]. Sibu congkan chubian 四部叢刊初編

24 Yan Yu 嚴羽, *Canglang shihua jiaoshi* 滄浪詩話校釋, ed. Guo Shaoyu 郭紹虞 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1961), 23–24.

大抵禪道惟在妙悟，詩道亦在妙悟。[25]

According to Yan Yu, the evocative language of poetry resonates with the Chan emphasis on intuitive understanding and sudden enlightenment. The instrumental use of words by a Chan master or poet can facilitate a listener or reader's transition from a worldly realm to an enlightened state via such tacit inspiration. This notion aligns with the Mahāyāna teaching of *upāya.*

Upāya is typically translated into English as "expedient means," "skillful means," or "mediating devices." It is an adaptive pedagogical approach aimed at translating the ineffable "ultimate truth" (*paramārtha-satya*) into the expressible "conventional truth" (s*aṁvṛti-satya*). *Upāya* adopts a listener- or reader-oriented mode of thinking, requiring that the speaker adjust his preaching pedagogy based on the specific circumstances to enlighten specific audience. Instances of such skillful modes of speech can be found in the dialectical treaties written by Nāgārjuna, the use of parables in the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*), and the silent teachings of non-duality in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (*Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa-Sūtra*). Looking back to the high-Tang period, Bo Juyi 白居易 was one of the earliest writers to recognize the *upāya* quality in Chan poetry. When he commented on the poet-monk Daozong 道宗's works, he made this very clear:

> (He) first used poetic lines to draw you in, then led you to Buddhist wisdom.

> 先以詩句牽，後令入佛智。[26]

This is to say, for the truly venerable monks like Daozong, poetry is not merely an artistic end, but a means for directing attention toward Buddhist realization. It is the same analogy as the mirror reflecting the image, as described by Yan Yu, and aligns with the Chan metaphor of a finger pointing to the moon. It is the direction the finger indicates, not the finger itself, that one should look toward. In this vein, Bo

---

25 Yan Yu, *Canglang shihua jiaoshi,* 10.

26 Bo Juyi 白居易, *Ti Daozong Shangren shiyun* 題道宗上人十韻 [Ten Rhymes to the Venerable Daozong].

Juyi believed that the master Daozong wrote poetry not for the sake of poetry, rather, for people's self-realization and discovery of their Buddhist nature:

I began to know that the Venerable Daozong's writings were composed for righteousness, for the Dharma, for the wisdom of *upāya*, and for the nature of liberation. He did not write it for poetry.

予始知上人之文，為義作、為法作、為方便智作、為解脫性作，不為詩而作也。[27]

Around the same period, Yu Di 于頔 also pointed out that the famous poet-monk Jiao Ran 皎然 served his poetry as an embodiment of *upāya*. For Yu Di, the *miao* 妙 (subtle, exquisite) nature of Jiao Ran's poetry make this literary medium an effective *upāya* for conveying an internal understanding of emptiness in a way that is externally accessible and appreciated by a broad audience:

(He) internally holds the secret of emptiness and stillness and externally opens for expedient means (*upāya*). The subtle words are spoken through writing...

中秘空寂，外開方便，妙言説於文字...[28]

Yan Yu, Bo Juyi, and Yu Di acknowledged that exemplary poetry not only reflects the natural world but also conveys a state of mind. This seems to suggest that explicit, direct, and referential language is inadequate for Chan learners, who attempt to pursue a transcendental realm that fundamentally rejects any conceptual and linguistic definition. Thus, the rationale behind poetry as *upāya* is that the core of Chan teaching is incompatible with classical logic or conventional use of language, so that one needs to appeal to the implicit, indirect, and figurative language—what I refer to

---

27 Bo Juyi, *Ti Daozong Shangren shiyun.*

28 Yu Di 于頔, *Shi Jiaoran shushanji xu* 釋皎然杼山集序 [Preface to the Literary Collection of Jiaoran].

here as fuzzy language. In *Fuzzy Thinking: The New Science of Fuzzy Logic*, Bart Kosko writes that if Aristotle's binary logic speaks of "A OR not-A," then the fuzzy logic of Buddhism "breaks through the black-and-white world of words," offering the possibility of "A AND no-A."[29] Burton Watson also notes Chan masters' preference for "brief, highly compact poetic expressions that are suggestive rather than expository in nature."[30] In this regard, Yan Yu's assessment is right on the point, namely:

Poetry has its unique interests, not related to *li* [principle/reason].

詩有別趣，非關理也。[31]

The meaning of *li* 理 in Yan Yu's time was expanded by the Neo-Confucianists from its etymon of "pattern" or "texture" into "principle" and "reason," orientating it towards a rational investigating of the objective order of the universe. In Yan Yu's theory, however, poetry in Chan Buddhism went toward the opposite of this. Chinese poetry, with its linguistic characteristic of fuzziness, aligns with Chan's requirement for *upāya* in an alogical manner and has thus become an aid to the path of Chan, fostering a strong tradition of Chan poetry.

THE PLASTICITY OF POETIC RHETORIC: POETRY AS AN EMPTY VESSEL

Following our foregoing exploration of the *gāthā* origins of Chan poetry and its *upāya* quality of fuzziness, this section focuses on the plastic nature of poetry and how it promotes a reflection on Chan language in a broader context. Rather than proposing any new hypothesis, this section aims to invoke a perspective on the relationships between the various linguistic solutions that Chan accesses to the problem of ineffability. By plasticity, I refer to the amazingly malleable potential that poetry exhibits in

29 Bart Kosko, *Fuzzy Thinking: The New Science of Fuzzy Logic* (Flamingo, 1994), 6.

30 Burton Watson, "Zen Poetry," in *Zen: Tradition and Transition,* ed. Kenneth Kraft (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 106.

31 Yan Yu, *Canglang shihua jiaoshi*, 23.

the Chan context. In the horizontal dimension, poetry often crosses the scholarly classifications of Chan literature, expanding its usage in Chan communications on different occasions typically deemed separate linguistic practices. Vertically, this plasticity is further evident in its literary compatibility with diverse rhetorical devices favored by Chan pragmatics within the poetic compositions.

Previous scholarship on Chan language has studied various linguistic strategies that Chan monks adopt when they endeavor to speak the ineffable doctrine. The connotation of these so-called linguistic strategies ranges from poetry and recorded sayings in textual traditions to broader semiotic performances, such as drawing the symbolic *ensō* circle (*yuanxiang* 圓相) and engaging in acts of beating and shouting. Poetry, under such methodology, is categorized and discussed as one or several independent forms of linguistic practice based on different criteria. Yugu 於轂 divided the transmitted Chan writings into five main classes according to literary genre: records of the lamp (*denglu* 燈錄), memoirs (*zhuanji* 傳記), recorded sayings, instruction on public-cases verses (*niansong* 拈頌), and poetry.[32] Zhou Yukai 周裕鍇 organized his book *Chan Language* (*Chanzong yuyan* 禪宗語言) chronologically, tracking the evolution of different Chan sects and associating each with some signature use of language.[33] *Ji*, for example, is discussed in the late-Tang division of the five Chan schools in the third chapter; *niansong* 拈頌, or instruction on public-cases verses, is addressed in the fourth chapter, under the discussion on the various forms of public cases; and poetry is re-examined in the fifth chapter under the framework of "literary Chan," focusing on its growing significance in the monastic life starting from the Song dynasty.

Yugu and Zhou Yukai's categorization undoubtedly provides insight in locating poetry among the rich applications of Chan language. However, as one might imagine, the boundaries between these allegedly different practices are not clear cut. *Ji*, as discussed in the previous section, is entangled with poetry both ideologically and practically throughout Chan history. Poetry and public cases are similarly intertwined rather than parallel categories. A public case, in short, might manifest as a tacit guidance from a master, a meaningful dialogue between any two speakers, a poem or *ji* designed to be unpuzzled, or an instructive conversation on a specific poem—the latter being what the term *niansong* 拈頌

---

32 Yugu 於轂, *Chanzong yuyan he wenxian* 禪宗語言和文獻 [Chan Language and Texts] (Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1995).

33 Zhou Yukai 周裕鍇, *Chanzong yuyan* 禪宗語言 [Chan Language] (Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1999).

essentially refers to. Therefore, public cases, poetry, *ji*, and *niansong* may be less helpful when understood as exclusive performances. Instead, they are interconnected notions that showcase the diversity and complexity of Chan's unconventional use of poetry. The making and studying of poetic verse have been generalized and applied across many aspects of Chan's daily cultivation, such that the holistic power of poetry cannot be fully appreciated if we break it down into more segmentary discourses or discuss it in isolation from other linguistic solutions.

If the applicational integration between different forms of speech demonstrates the external plasticity of Chan poetry, then a closer look at the language of poetry itself reveals an even greater literary plasticity regarding rhetoric and pragmatics. In his study of Chan's indirect communication, Wang Youru delves into the Chan pragmatics for deconstructing the Buddha nature. [34] From his analytical investigation, paradoxical language, tautological language, and poetic language are three types of indirect strategies that exemplify the Chan's use of "living words" (*huoyu* 活語) and the idea of "never tell too plainly" (*bushuopo* 不說破).[35] Though Wang Youru didn't extract poetry as a literary body, he defines poetic language further as figurative, imaginative, and suggestive.[36] The terminologies that Wang employs are seriously justifiable, and all justifiable interpretations are equally valued in understanding the Chan philosophy of language. Nevertheless, like the ineffable teaching that Chan language intends to signify, "poetic" itself may be too abstract a term, one that allows various ways of expounding. It would be necessary to further such analysis by noting that the rhetorical strategies that Chan poetry draws upon tend to be more expansive and open-ended. The second section of this paper highlights the fuzziness of Chan poetry, yet the language of Chan poetry can never be summarized in just one way. My point here is that poetry is like an "empty vessel," capable of incorporating a wide range of specific linguistic strategies, thereby broadening the definition of "poetic language." This section

---

34 Youru Wang, *Linguistic Strategies in Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism: The Other Way of Speaking* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

35 The Linji 臨濟 Chan master Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海 in the Tang dynasty made the first distinction between "living words" (*shengyu* 生語) and "dead words" (*siyu* 死語). For the use of living words and the compilation of recorded sayings in the Linji Chan tradition, see Albert Welter, *The Linji Lu and the Creation of Chan Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

36 Youru Wang, 183.

carefully frames Chan poetry in terms of its inclusiveness and malleability without involving more detailed definitions because it rejects generalization by any single model and resists any rigid rules of language usage.

Due to space limitations, I will concentrate on a single poem and discuss its use of vernacular language and paradoxical language, two rhetorical strategies that are favored by and widely applied in Chan pedagogy. A compilation of Chan poetry from the Tang dynasty known as the "Mind Ocean Collection" (*Xinhai ji* 心海集) is circulated in the Dunhuang 敦煌 area. An excerpt from the "Chapter of Arriving to the Way" (*zhidao pian* 至道篇) reads as follows:

菩提無相貌　Bodhi has no appearance

緋白黑青黃　Crimson, white, black, blue, and yellow

無形善問答　Formless, yet skilled in questioning and reply

解語沒家鄉[37] Comprehensible, yet has no homeland

Philosophically, the poem challenges traditional views on the wisdom of the Buddha and resonates with Chan's advocacy of emptiness. The most striking linguistic feature of this poem is its vernacularity and the resulting accessibility, in contrast to the works written in the Classical or Literary Chinese (*wenyan* 文言). For instance, the second line is a pale listing of the "five colors" (*wuse* 五色), which describe the myriad appearances/forms in the world. Another noticeable vernacular element is the negation *méi* 沒 in the fourth line. It is pronounced with the second tone in modern Mandarin and probably as *muət* in Middle Chinese, meaning "not have" or "there is not."[38] This is a typical middle vernacular word that is distinct from the verb *mò* 沒, the classical usage of the same character, pronounced with the fourth tone in modern Mandarin and probably *mˤə-s* in Old Chinese, meaning "submerge" or "dive."[39] Unlike the refined verses of Wang Wei, these colloquial and earthy expressions

---

[37] Wang Fanzhou 汪泛舟, *Dunhuang shiku sengshi jiaoshi* 敦煌石窟僧詩校釋 (Hong Kong: Peace Book Co. Ltd., 2002), 164.

[38] For this Middle Chinese reconstruction, see Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'I Press, 2007), 376–377.

[39] For Old Chinese reconstruction, I use Baxter–Sagart Old Chinese Reconstruction, version 1.1 (20 September 2014), 77. The

are more readily accepted by a broader group of non-literates, allowing everyone to get a taste of otherwise esoteric Dharma. In history, Buddhism has always played a key role in facilitating the vernacularization of written Chinese.[40] Substantial vernacular elements were found in the earliest Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures from as early as the end of the second century CE.[41] Later, a systematic use of written vernacular was exemplified in the transformation texts (*bianwen* 變文) excavated in Dunhuang.[42] Within the Chan corpus, recorded encounter dialogues are particularly noted for their vernacular style, yet it's often overlooked that poetry, too, participated in this linguistic transformation. One of the earliest instances of writing poetry in vernacular dates to Wang Fanzhi 王梵志 ("Brahmacārin Wang"), a legendary monk believed to have lived during the early Tang dynasty. This tradition continued with Hanshan, Shide, and Pang Jushi. Each of these names enjoys both the attribution of a collection of vernacular poetry and orthodox recognition as a prominent Chan master.[43] These underscore poetry's remarkable capacity to embrace vernacular expression, so that poets skilled in this strategy are honored and studied through the ages.

In addition to its vernacularity, the use of paradoxical language in this Dunhuang poem well demonstrates another salient feature of Chan communication. The stanza consists of four paradoxical

---

table is a later-released index to the book *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction* by William H. Baxter and Laurent Sagart (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

40 Victor H. Mair, "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 3 (1994): 707–751.

41 E. Zürcher, "Late Han Vernacular Elements in the Earliest Buddhist Translations," *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association* 13.3 (1977): 177–203.

E. Zürcher, "Vernacular Elements in Early Buddhist Texts: An Attempt to Define the Optimal Source Materials," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 71 (1996): 1–31.

42 Victor H. Mair, *Tang Transformation Texts: A Study of the Buddhist Contribution to the Rise of Vernacular Fiction and Drama in China*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 28 (Harvard University Press, 1989).

43 Regarding their attributions of collections of poetry, it should be noted that these collections were likely written by multiple authors from the seventh to ninth centuries. As to their recognition as Chan masters, taking Han Shan as an example, his biography is chronicled in the thirty-seventh volume of the *Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* (*Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄), and tales of his interactions with other Chan monks are included in the *Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall* (*Zutang ji* 祖堂集) and the *Recorded Sayings of Ancient Venerables* (*Gu zunshu yulu* 古尊宿語錄).

propositions. The first proposition is that the wisdom of Buddha lacks existential entity, alluding to Hui Neng's verses about the non-existence of both the Bodhi tree and the mirror. The second line, however, negates the nihilistic position in the first line, suggesting that even if there is essentially nothing, the manifestation of the five primary colors of the external world persist. Moving deeper, the third line posits that truth, though formless and nameless, can still be pursued through the *wenda* 問答 (question and answer) dialogue. Yet again, this premise is challenged in the fourth line, which reminds the audience that although comprehensible language can be a valid instrument for querying the ineffable, ultimately there is nothing to be articulated. The first two paradoxes deal with ontological questions, grasping the non-dualist reality of the universe as being both existent and non-existent. The final two are of epistemological concern, affirming both the *upāya* approach of language and the ineffability of the ultimate. Ingeniously, both the second and fourth lines build on the previous paradoxes and offer them additional skepticism, rejecting any attachment to either stance. Through its consistent negation, the poem breaks in the logic of the conventional mind flow, indicating the paradoxical nature of the middle path being both "A AND B" and "no-A AND no-B." This sort of bold and experimental use of paradox is one of the representative pieces of rhetoric in Chan's making of "living words," and it has been favorably popularized by the "Observing-dialogue Chan" (*kanhua Chan* 看話禪) school.[44] Such expressions are more frequently found in colloquial encounter dialogues, but if one pays attention, they are also skillfully employed in Chan poetry, revealing the internal plasticity of poetic language.

CONCLUSIONAL REMARKS

The inherent inadequacy of language in expressing the ineffable has long been a soteriological and pedagogical challenge for religious and philosophical traditions. Chan Buddhism, being both philosophically sophisticated and religiously profound, persistently sought solutions to speak the unspeakable. Scholarship delving into these solutions to the ineffable often falls into the similar

---

44 Wang Youru and Robert H. Sharf have offered comprehensive discussions on the paradoxical and negational phrases in Chan language, particularly in public cases. See Youru Wang, 176–180. Also see Robert H. Sharf, "Chan Cases," in Yasuo Deguchi, Jay L. Garfield, Graham Priest, and Robert H. Sharf, *What Can't Be Said: Paradox and Contradiction in East Asian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 80–104.

predicament. This article is based on the historical fact that Chan and poetry are already well integrated into the strong tradition of Chan poetry, offering possible rationales and mechanisms that may have driven their historical integration. As developed across the three focal points previously outlined, this discourse evolves from tangible genre features to more abstract analysis on fuzziness, ultimately leading to complex considerations through the lens of poetic plasticity. In short, at first poetry inherits the role of *gāthā* as a practicing theory within the Buddhist system, which makes the genre of Chan poetry formally possible and promoted. Secondly, from the linguistic characteristics of Chinese poetry itself, its fuzzy expression is deeply appealing to Buddhism, especially Chan, as it closely coincides with the pedagogical philosophy of *upāya*. Last but not least, we have examined here the twofold dimension of plasticity. On the one hand, poetry functions in different contexts, showing that Chan practitioners are less concerned with differentiating linguistic practices than we tend to realize in our conceptualization today. On the other hand, the striking rhetorical diversity displays in its poetic language remind us that poetry adapts to various linguistic strategies as needed, without strict prohibitions. Perhaps studies examining the relationship between Chan and poetry should likewise adopt an open-minded approach, mirroring Chan's rejection of fixed linguistic rules and poetry's openness to the innovative use of Chan language.

REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES

Bo Juyi 白居易. *Ti Daozong Shangren shiyun* 題道宗上人十韻 [Ten Rhymes to the Venerable Daozong].

Dunhuang shiku sengshi jiaoshi 敦煌石窟僧詩校釋. Ed. Wang Fanzhou 汪泛舟. Hong Kong: Peace Book Co. Ltd., 2002.

Fan Xian 范咸. *Chou Wangwei xu* 酬王維序 [Response to Wang Wei's Preface].

Hanshan shizhu fu Shide shizhu 寒山詩注附拾得詩注. Ed. and annot. Xiang Chu 項楚. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000.

Juefan Huihong 覺範惠洪, Shimen wenzi chan 石門文字禪 [Literary Chan of the Stone Gate]. Sibu congkan chubian 四部叢刊初編.

Liuzu dashi fabao tanjing 六祖大師法寶壇經. In *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 vol. 48, no. 2008, 345. T2008_.48.0355a16; T2008_.48.0348b22; T2008_.48.0348c18; T2008_.48.0349a06

Wang Wei 王維. "Lu Chai" 鹿柴 [Deer Enclosure].

Yan Yu 嚴羽. *Canglang shihua jiaoshi* 滄浪詩話校釋. Ed. Guo Shaoyu 郭紹虞. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1961.

Yu Di 于頔. *Shi Jiaoran shushanji xu* 釋皎然杼山集序 [Preface to the Literary Collection of Jiaoran].

Yuan Haowen 元好問. *Zeng Songshan Juanshizhe xueshi* 贈嵩山儁侍者學詩.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Anderl, Christoph. *Zen Buddhist Rhetoric in China, Korea, and Japan*. Leiden: Brill, 2012.

Baxter, William H., and Laurent Sagart. *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Bender, Lucas Rambo. "Why the Mid-Tang Poet-Monks (*Shi-seng* 詩僧) Chose *Shi* 詩-Poetry." Presentation, University of Colorado, Boulder, Asian Studies Graduate Association Online Conference, Boulder, CO, February 19, 2022.

Cheung Wai-kwan 張為群. "The Monk-Poets of the Mid-Tang Period 中唐詩僧研究." Master's thesis, University of Hong Kong, 1999.

Chui, Regina Wai Kwok. "Wang Wei: Road to Emptiness. The Buddha Poet's Chan Belief and Vimalakīrti." PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2003.

Deguchi, Yasuo, Jay L. Garfield, Graham Priest, and Robert H. Sharf. *What Can't Be Said: Paradox and Contradiction in East Asian Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Kosko, Bart. *Fuzzy Thinking: The New Science of Fuzzy Logic*. Flamingo, 1994.

Mair, Victor H. "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 3 (1994): 707–751.

Mair, Victor H. *Tang Transformation Texts: A Study of the Buddhist Contribution to the Rise of Vernacular Fiction and Drama in China.* Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 28. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Mair, Victor H., and Tsu-Lin Mei. "The Sanskrit Origins of Recent Style Prosody." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51, no. 2 (1991): 375–470.

Mazanec, Thomas J. *Poet-Monks: The Invention of Buddhist Poetry in Late Medieval China.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024.

Mazanec, Thomas J. "The Medieval Chinese *Gāthā* and Its Relationship to Poetry." *T'oung Pao* 103, no. 1–3 (2017): 105–115.

Nattier, Jan. *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations: Texts from the Eastern Han and Three Kingdoms Periods.* Tokyo: International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2008.

Protass, Jason. *The Poetry Demon: Song-Dynasty Monks on Verse and the Way*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021.

Russell, Bertrand. "On Vagueness." *The Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (1923): 84–92.

Schuessler, Axel. *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'I Press, 2007.

Sun Changwu 孫昌武, *Tangdai wenxue yu fojiao* 唐代文學與佛教. Shaanxi People's Publishing House, 1985.

Wang, Youru. *Linguistic Strategies in Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism: The Other Way of Speaking.* London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

Watson, Burton. "Zen Poetry." In *Zen: Tradition and Transition*, ed. Kenneth Kraft, 106. New York: Grove Press, 1988.

Welter, Albert. *The Linji Lu and the Creation of Chan Orthodoxy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Wu Tieping 吳鐵平. *Mohu yuyan xue* 模糊語言學 [Fuzzy Language]. Shanghai waiyu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999.

Yang, Jingqing. *The Chan Interpretations of Wang Wei's Poetry: A Critical Review.* Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2007.

Yugu 於轂. *Chanzong yuyan he wenxian* 禪宗語言和文獻 [Chan Language and Texts]. Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1995.

Zadeh, L. A. "Fuzzy Sets." *Information and Control* 8 (1965): 338–353.

Zadeh, L. A. "A Fuzzy-Set-Theoretic Interpretation of Linguistic Hedges." *Journal of Cybernetics*, 2, no. 3 (1972): 4–34.

Zhou Yukai 周裕鍇. *Chanzong yuyan* 禪宗語言 [Chan Language]. Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1999.

Zhou Yukai 周裕鍇. *Wenzi Chan yu Songdai shixue* 文字禪與宋代詩學 [Literati Chan and the Poetry Studies in the Song Dynasty]. Di 1 Ban. ed. Gaoxiao wenke boshi wenku. Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998.

Zürcher, E. "Late Han Vernacular Elements in the Earliest Buddhist Translations." *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association* 13.3 (1977): 177–203.

Zürcher, E. "Vernacular Elements in Early Buddhist Texts: An Attempt to Define the Optimal Source Materials." *Sino-Platonic Papers* 71 (1996): 1–31.

Zürcher, E., and Jonathan A. Silk. "A New Look at the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Texts." In *Buddhism in China: Collected Papers of Erik Zürcher,* 427–430. Leiden: Brill, 2013.