

Revisiting the Scene of the Party: A Study of the Lanting Collection

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The Lanting (sometimes rendered as “Orchid Pavilion”) gathering in 353 is one of the most famous literati parties in Chinese history.¹ This gathering inspired the celebrated preface written by the great calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), another preface by the poet Sun Chuo 孫綽 (314–371), and forty-one poems composed by some of the most intellectually active men of the day.² The poems are not often studied since they have long been overshadowed by Wang’s preface as a work of calligraphic art and have been treated as examples of *xuanyan* (“discourse on the mysterious [Dao]”) poetry,³ whose fate in literary history suffered after influential Six Dynasties writers decried its damage to the classical tradition.⁴ Historian Tan Daoluan 檀道鸞 (fl. 459) traced the trend to its full-blown development in Sun Chuo and Xu Xun 許詢 (fl. ca. 358), who were said to have continued the work of inserting Daoist terms into poetry that was started by Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324); they moreover “added the [Buddhist] language of the three worlds [past, present, and future], and the normative style of the *Shi* 詩 and *Sao* 騷 came to an end.”⁵ Critic Zhong Rong 鍾嶸 (ca. 469–518) then faulted their works for lacking appeal. His critique was nothing short of scathing: he argued

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1. Lanting is commonly translated as “Orchid Pavilion.” In a recent article, David Knechtges has persuasively argued against this translation and proposed instead that Lanting be understood as “Lan Commune” or “Lan Precinct House.” Knechtges’ article demonstrates that “Lan” was the name of a local stream and “ting” originally referred to an administrative division and the administrative building within it since the Han dynasty. The function of the structural “ting” seemed to have shifted from an administrative office to a “pleasure lodge,” which served as the site for excursions of the local elite. See Knechtges, “Jingu and Lanting: Two (or Three?) Jin Dynasty Gardens,” in *Studies in Chinese Language and Culture: Festschrift in Honor of Christoph Harbsmeier on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday* (Oslo: Hermes Academic Publishing, 2006), 399–403.

2. The total of forty-one poems includes the four additional pentasyllabic pieces attributed to Wang Xizhi.

3. *Xuanyan*-style poetry refers to metaphysical discussions in verse that draw both material and language from the *Yijing*, *Laozi*, and *Zhuangzi* (and their commentaries). The term *xuan* appears in the first chapter of the *Laozi* as a reference to the Dao: “These two [being 有 and non-being 無] have the same origin, but different names. Both are called the mystery (*xuan*); mystery upon mystery is the gateway to all marvelousness.” See also Paul Kroll’s helpful explication of the term *xuan* in “Between Something and Nothing,” *JAOS* 127.4 (2007): 409.

4. In recent years, several Chinese language monographs on *xuanyan* poetry have each paid some attention to the Lanting poems. See Zhang Tingyin 張廷銀, *Wei Jin xuanyanshi yanjiu* 魏晉玄言詩研究 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2008); Hu Dalei 胡大雷, *Xuanyanshi yanjiu* 玄言詩研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007); Wang Shu 王樹, *Wei Jin xuanxue yu xuanyanshi yanjiu* 魏晉玄學與玄言詩研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2007); and Chen Shunzhi 陳順智, *Dong Jin xuanyanshi pai yanjiu* 東晉玄言詩派研究 (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2003). The most extensive study of these poems in the English language is by Friedrich Alexander Bischoff, who argues that the Lanting gathering was a homosexual orgy and creatively reads the poems through this lens. I do not think that was the case. See *The Songs of the Orchid Tower* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1985).

5. Tan Daoluan, *Xu Jin yangqiu* 續晉陽秋 (Continuation of the annals of Jin), quoted in *Shishuo xinyu*, 4/85.

that they represented a continuation of the insipid (淡乎寡味; “bland in its lack of taste”) works of the Yongjia period (307–313) in which “philosophical principles surpassed diction” 理過其辭, and “were all flat and pedantic, like *Discourses on the Way and Virtue*. The vigorous style of the Jian’an period thus came to an end” 皆平典似道德論, 建安風力盡矣.⁶

Over the past two decades, scholars (mostly in China) have begun to revisit *xuanyan* poetry, resulting in a growing body of scholarship that purports to reassess these poems. However, many of these studies cling to some of the same old prejudices against these poems and thus yield limited scholarly value. One prevalent pattern has been to recognize the importance of these poems in literary history but then to conclude that their flaw remains a lack of lyrical quality.⁷ Another approach has been to treat these poems as essentially abstract works that ultimately transcend the material world to grasp at the mysterious principles alluded to in Lao-Zhuang thought and manifested in the workings of nature.⁸ In the following article, I wish to complicate our view of *xuanyan* poetry by examining a special subset of it, the Lanting poems. Not only are they among the best and most developed examples of this type of poetry, they also represent early experimental landscape verse. This article will address how the Lanting poems utilize poetic devices and techniques such as imagery, metaphor, and heightened language. These poems will be shown to reveal individual stances on shared intellectual interests as well as to sketch out the terms of early landscape poetry, forging together a common language and set of tropes. In addition, as the best-known example of group poetry, this set of poems, along with its two prefaces, provides fertile ground for exploring the social dynamics of the banquet party. Group composition meant to commemorate the event inspires both a sense of camaraderie, in which fathers and sons, patrons and friends share in particular concerns or appreciation of the experience at Lanting, as well as a spirit of competition, in which performers vie to exhibit more understanding or wit than the others. My discussion of the performance of intellectual attitudes and the representation of the natural setting in the Lanting collection begins with the event itself.

WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN

Wang Xizhi, who was serving as Governor of Guiji, hosted the spring excursion at Lanting and provided the most detailed account of the events that took place during the Lustration Festival or the Double-Three Festival in 353. Beyond the ostensible purpose of the outing, which was to perform purification rites by the water, Wang Xizhi’s preface describes

6. Zhong Rong, *Shipin jizhu* 詩品集注, ed. Cao Xu 曹旭 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994), 24. For another example of a condemnatory judgment of *xuanyan* poetry, see Shen Yue’s 沈約 (441–513) postscript to the “Biography of Xie Lingyun,” *Song shu* 67.1778.

7. E.g., Hu Dalei 胡大雷, “Xuanyan shi de meili ji meili de shiluo” 玄言詩的魅力及魅力的失落, *Wenxue yichan* 2 (1997): 59–68; Zhang Tingyin, *Wei Jin xuanyan shi yanjiu*, 327. It is interesting that even studies that do attempt to defend *xuanyan* poetry against the charge of lacking in lyrical quality do little more than assert that its type of lyricism (*shuqing* 抒情) has been misunderstood; that is to say, *xuanyan* poems do express feelings, though they are of the mild and even-tempered variety. See, for example, Chen Shunzhi’s generally excellent study, *Dong Jin xuanyan shipai yanjiu*, 109. It is my view that analytical categories must be historicized and not presumed to be absolute across time. I have argued this point in my other works. See, for example, *Reading Tao Yuanming: Shifting Paradigms of Historical Reception (427–1900)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2008). Regarding the case at hand, scholarly opinion presumes the constancy of the definition of “feeling/sentiment” (*qing*) and its inherent centrality to poetic composition, whereas in fact ideals of lyrical expression were neither unchanging nor absolute, and there were competing notions of what poetry should consist in and what types of feelings should be versified.

8. E.g., Luo Zongqiang 羅宗強, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao wenxue shixiangshi* 魏晉南北朝文學思想史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 141ff.; Hu Dalei, “Zenyang du xuanyan shi” 怎樣讀玄言詩, *Gudian wenxue zhishi* 6 (1998): 12–19.

the activities of floating wine cups down a winding stream, composing verses, and contemplating nature and the cosmos. Eleven of the forty-one participants left us with at least two poems each, one in pentasyllabic and another in tetrasyllabic form.⁹ Writing a pentasyllabic poem and a tetrasyllabic one to the same topic was common practice for Jin social situations such as group banquets and poetic exchanges.¹⁰ Another fifteen participants each wrote only one poem.¹¹ As for the fifteen attendees who could not produce a poem, they were each subjected to the not so cruel and unusual punishment of drinking three *dou* 斗 (approximately 6.5 quarts) of wine.¹² There is precedent for this punishment of three *dou* of wine: at the Jingu yuan 金谷園 (Golden Valley Garden) gathering in 296, those among Shi Chong's 石崇 (249–300) guests who could not compose a poem had apparently been penalized with three *dou* of wine.

The forty-one Lanting poems, though varying dramatically in skill and interest, bear a collective imprint: common themes, references, and vocabulary thread together these poems. Some poems share apt allusions to the famous passage in the *Analects* describing Zeng Xi's (and Confucius') wish to visit the Rain Altar in a late spring outing to the Yi River or to the well-known passage in the *Zhuangzi* asserting the joy of fish swimming in the Hao River.¹³ Other Zhuangzian ideas and images also figure prominently in the collection. For example,

9. According to several Song sources, the total number of participants was forty-two, though Wang Xizhi's "Linhe xu" 臨河序, which is quoted in *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, suggests it was forty-one. See Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫, ed., *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), 16/3 (p. 630). For a useful summary of the Song sources on this issue, see Sun Mingjun 孫明君, *Liang Jin shizu wenxue yanjiu* 兩晉士族文學研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 147–49. Since we have poems by twenty-six participants, the question remains whether it was fifteen or sixteen participants who did not leave us with any record. The eleven poets who produced at least two poems each are Wang Xizhi, Sun Chuo, Xie An 謝安, Xie Wan 謝萬, Sun Tong 孫統, Yuan Jiaozhi 袁曠之, Wang Ningzhi 王凝之, Wang Suzhi 王肅之, Wang Huizhi 王徽之, Wang Binzhi 王彬之, and Xu Fengzhi 徐豐之. Following *Shi ji* 詩紀, Lu Qinli 逯欽立 titles Wang Xizhi's poems as "Lanting shi ershou" 蘭亭詩二首, but lists six poems (one in tetrasyllabic and five in pentasyllabic form). Modern scholars generally accept the attribution of all six poems as Wang's work. See Lu Qinli, ed. *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 2:895–96; hereafter XS.

10. See Lu Qinli's comment in XS, 1:570.

11. The following poets each left us with one poem: Sun Si 孫嗣, Chi Tan 郗曇, Yu You 庾友, Yu Yun 庾蘊, Cao Maozhi 曹茂之, Hua Mao 華茂, Huan Wei 桓偉, Wang Xuanzhi 王玄之, Wang Huanzhi 王渙之, Wang Fengzhi 王豐之, Wei Pang 魏滂, Yu Yue 虞說, Xie Yi 謝繹, and Cao Hua 曹華.

12. Whereas "Linhe xu" 臨河序 states that the number of attendees who were unable to produce a poem was fifteen, Sang Shichang's 桑世昌 *Lanting kao* lists sixteen attendees who could not produce a poem. Sang's list includes the following names: Xie Gui 謝瑰, Bian Di 卞迪, Qiu Mao 丘髦, Wang Xianzhi 王獻之, Yang Mo 羊模, Kong Chi 孔熾, Liu Mi 劉密, Yu Gu 虞谷, Lao Yi 勞夷, Hou Mian 后綿, Hua Qi 華馨, Xie Teng 謝滕, Ren Ni 任儼, Lü Xi 呂系, Lü Ben 呂本, and Cao Li 曹禮 (Sang, *Lanting kao*, CSJC [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985], 7). Of this list, one name in particular stands out: Wang Xianzhi, the seventh son of Wang Xizhi, who became a well-known calligrapher in his own right. It is surprising that someone with his family background could not produce a poem for the occasion. The *Shishuo xinyu* cites a relevant assessment from Tan Daoluan's 檀道鸞 (fl. 459) *Xu Jin yangqiu* 續晉陽秋 (Continuation of the annals of Jin): "Xianzhi's abilities in letters and discussion were not part of his strong suit. . ." *Shishuo xinyu jian shu*, 9/77 (p. 539). Or perhaps Wang Xianzhi sought to allow his reticence to speak for the inexpressible beauty of the Lanting (i.e., Shanyin, Guiji) landscape, as suggested by this anecdote from *Shishuo xinyu* which describes his temperament and attitude toward writing about nature: "Wang Xianzhi said, 'Whenever I travel by the Shanyin road (in Kuaiji [Guiji] Commandery), the hills and streams naturally complement each other in such a way that I can't begin to describe them. And especially if it's at the turning point between autumn and winter, I find it all the harder to express what's in my heart.'" [Translation from Richard Mather, tr., *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of the Tales of the World*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, Univ. of Michigan, 2002), 75; hereafter SSHY.] It is also remarkable that although Shi Chong's party was surely an important precedent for Wang Xizhi's and, according to an anecdote in *Shishuo xinyu* (16/3), Wang was pleased whenever people compared his preface to Shi Chong's, there are no references to the Jingu yuan event in the Lanting collection.

13. See *Analects* 11.26 and *Zhuangzi* 17 ("Autumn Floods").

the act of marveling at the “ten thousand pipings” (*wan lai* 萬籟), or the myriad phenomena, in one poem finds resonance in the philosophical perspective of “seeing things as leveled” (*qi wu* 齊物) in another. The *Zhuangzi*, along with the *Yijing*, or *Classic of Changes*, and *Daodejing*, or *Classic of the Way and Virtue*, formed the foundation of early medieval discourse: the literati freely drew ideas, vocabulary, and tropes from these so-called Three Mysterious (*san xuan* 三玄) texts to reinterpret the classics and express their positions on major issues ranging from politics to human behavior to nature. The many meditations found in the Lanting poems on the workings of the mysterious Dao, which is manifested by manifold phenomena in nature and the various existences or beings (*you* 有) that are perceptible, reflect as much the power of the physical environment of the gathering as the predominance of a major concern of the “learning of the mysterious,” or *xuanxue* 玄學. Indeed, one of the recurrent philosophical points in these poems is the relationship of the many, varied, and myriad to the one, unity, and single truth: the blending of the myriad into one single unity, that is to say, the Dao.

Above all, most of the poems express sheer exuberance over the opportunity to express freely; the terms *chang* 暢 (without restraint) and *san* 散 (to disperse) are favorites among the Lanting poets. In these free expressions, the poets consistently celebrate *ziran* 自然 (in both the sense of nature’s workings and freedom from office). While the Lanting poets composed verses in a group setting, and thus drew from a common pool of ideas and sentiments, many appeared to have engaged directly with nature in a personal, contemplative manner. To say that distinct identities emerged from this group setting would be to understate the differences in view and attitude among them.

THE TWO PREFACES

Although Wang Xizhi’s preface to the Lanting poems has been primarily treated as calligraphic art, its summary account of the Lanting outing has also been valued as the main source of information about the collective experience. Both it and Sun Chuo’s lesser-known preface represent a contemplative engagement with nature, but their narratives diverge dramatically in terms of response and mode of representation. We begin with Wang’s preface, which gives one of the most picturesque descriptions of the landscape in the entire collection: “The place was one of mighty mountains and towering ridges covered by lush forests and tall bamboo, where a clear stream with swirling eddies cast back a sparkling light upon both shores” 此地有崇山峻嶺，茂林修竹；又有清流激湍，映帶左右。¹⁴ This vivid image of a shiny sash of water flowing between two shores, surrounded by towering mountains, helps explain the heightened sense of wonder expressed in a subsequent passage in the preface: “Above us we looked on the immensity of the universe; then lowering our eyes, we then saw nature’s infinite variety. And as we let our eyes roam and our hearts speed from thought to thought we could experience the greatest delights of ear and eye—this was true happiness” 仰觀宇宙之大，俯察品類之盛。所以遊目騁懷，足以極視聽之娛，信可樂也。 As the day went on, the joy felt in this occasion pervades the company as a coherent experience, already part of the past: “Then, as we weary of the direction in which we are going, our mood shifts with life’s events, and depression inevitably follows. In the blink of an eye the

14. Wang Xizhi, “Sanyue sanri Lanting shi xu” 三月三日蘭亭詩序, *Quan Jin wen* in *Quan Shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 26.1609a–b; hereafter QW. Translation from Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 283.

joy that has been becomes an experience past—yet still we cannot help having our feelings stirred by it.”

In the final passage, the downbeat note struck by ponderings over such timeless concerns as the transience of things and the inevitability of death is answered by a hopeful belief in the continuity of like-minded men:

Those in later times will look on today as we today look on the past—there is the sadness! For this reason I have written out the list of those present at that time and copied their compositions. Though ages change and experiences differ, all share what stirs deep feelings. And those who read this in later times will also be moved by what is in the writing.

後之視今，亦猶今之視昔。悲夫！故列敘時人，錄其所述，雖世殊事異，所以興懷，其致一也。後之覽者，亦將有感於斯文。

Ultimately, the claim advanced by Wang's preface is that reading and writing are what allow men to transcend fleetingness and link them to both past and future. Asserting a literary immortality when reckoning with death is a classical response, which developed from the idea of “three things that never decay” (*san bu xiu* 三不朽) from the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (Zuo commentary [to the Spring and Autumn Annals]), which are, in hierarchical order, virtue, deeds, and words. This was powerfully reformulated in Cao Pi's 曹丕 (187–226) “Discourse on Literature” 論文, which came to privilege the transmission of words above other forms of legacies.¹⁵ The notion of literary immortality functions most credibly within the framework of a spiritual community of like-minded men that transcends temporal boundaries. Like men of old who left records of their feelings, Wang too wrestles with the prospect of death and leaves future readers a personal testimony.

This final affirmation of a spiritual community that extends beyond individual mortality has not overshadowed for later readers Wang Xizhi's bleakest reckoning with death. In the penultimate section, Wang famously repudiates Zhuangzi's leveling of life and death. This spiritual community of writers and readers is what seems to allow Wang to make this bold repudiation. He writes that he cannot read the writings of men from the past without sighing, and continues: “Thus I know that the belief that life and death are the same is a grand deception; to say that Ancestor Peng's centuries are no more than the lifespan of an infant who died untimely—this is delusion, a forced conceit” 固知一死生為虛誕，齊彭殤為妄作。¹⁶ Wang Xizhi charges Zhuangzi with misleading his audience with clever rhetoric. In “Discussion on Seeing Things as Equal” 齊物論, Zhuangzi questioned whether loving life and hating death are but delusions: “How do I know that the dead do not regret ever having longed for life?”¹⁷ Much of the scholarship on Wang's preface has been concerned with the question of enlightenment or attainment (*da* 達) of the Way, or rather, the lack of it.¹⁸ Indeed, the disparity between Wang's specific refutation in the preface and his avowal

15. See *Zuo zhuan*, Duke Xiang 14. See also Cao Pi, “Lun wen,” in *Quan Sanguo wen* in QW, 8/1098a. Owen's translation of the relevant passage in “Lun wen” reads: “I would say that literary works are the supreme achievement in the business of state, a splendor that does not decay. A time will come when a person's life ends; glory and pleasure go no further than this body. To carry both to eternity, there is nothing to compare with the unending permanence of the literary work.” Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 68.

16. Italics mine. I have slightly modified Owen's translation.

17. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, ed., *Zhuangzi ji shi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 1:103.

18. For early examples, see comments by Chao Jiong 晁迥 (951–1034), quoted in Wei Ju'an's 韋居安 (*jinshi* 1260–64) *Meijian shihua* 梅磻詩話, in Ding Fubao's *Xu lidai shihua* 續歷代詩話 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1983), 1:642; and by Ge Lifang 葛立方 (d. 1164), who defends Wang against the charge of *weida* 未達, quoted in Sang, *Lanting kao*, 8.71. Some scholars have attempted to explain why Wang Xizhi would refute Zhuangzi and have

of Zhuangzi's general point in his second pentasyllabic poem ("Ten thousand differences are all on a level") has made this issue even more curious. Instead of judging how Wang's discussion of life and death measures up to the Zhuangzian philosophy of equanimity, however, it may be more fruitful to consider how it reflects his Lanting experience as recounted in the preface. It seems that for Wang, this philosophical musing is, alas, incommensurate with the reality of things, which is born of actual feelings. It is surely not incidental that words of visceral emotion appear with remarkable frequency in the preface: for example, "stirring" (*xinggan* 興感, *xinghuai* 興懷, *gan* 感, or *gankai* 感慨; five times), and "feelings" (*huai* 懷, *huaibao* 懷抱 or *qing* 情; five times), "joy" (*le* 樂 or *xin* 欣; three times), and "pain" or "sorrow" (*tong* 痛 or *bei* 悲; twice). His refutation of Zhuangzi's categorical, gross assertion should be read in the context of a nuanced, intricate response to his experience at Lanting. The preface represents the experience of nature as leading to aesthetic appraisal as well as contemplation of death. There are subtle shifts in tempo (from "hearts speed from thought to thought" to "in the blink of an eye the joy that has been becomes an experience past—yet still we cannot help having our feelings stirred by it") and dramatic swings in mood (from "a brief moment of satisfaction, a cheerful self-containment with never a thought of old age coming on" immediately to "as we weary of the direction in which we are going, our mood shifts with life's events, and depression inevitably follows"). The narrative seems guided less by the spirit of making a philosophical disquisition than an attempt to give a record of the major and subtle twists and turns of feelings evoked by the experience of both beauty and ephemerality.

Contemplation of nature leads to a different set of concerns in Sun Chuo's preface, which begins by celebrating nature not with the type of impressionistic natural description that grace Wang's work, but instead with a layered reference to the symbolic significance of water:

The ancients used water as a metaphor for human nature. There is import indeed in this statement. Did they not think that by stopping it [i.e., water], it would become clear, and by roiling it, it would become murky? Because of prior experience, feelings shift and change; things move that which encounters them and stir emotions. Therefore, "pull on the reins" in the court and marketplace, then a suffocating heart is born. But take a leisurely stroll through the wooded wilds, and then an expansive intent arises.

古人以水喻性。有旨哉斯談。非以停之則清。混之則濁邪。情因所習而遷移。物觸所遇而興感。故振轡于朝市。則充屈之心生。閑步于林野。則遼落之志興。¹⁹

Water figured in ancient texts in a variety of ways. From symbolizing the virtue of action in the *Analects* (in contrast to the stasis represented by mountains) to the power of submissive-

argued that, as a religious Daoist seeking means of longevity, Wang would certainly have rejected this equanimous view of death. See Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, *Guanzhui bian* 管錘編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 3:1115. This view is also held more recently by Donald Holzman in "On the Authenticity of the 'Preface' to the Collection of Poetry Written at the Orchid Pavilion," *JAOS* 117.2 (1997): 306–11. For a discussion of the various approaches to this topic, see Cheng Yu-yu 鄭毓瑜, "You xiuxi shi lun Lanting shi, Lanting xu 'da' yu 'wei da' de yiyi" 由修禊事論蘭亭詩、蘭亭序「達」與「未達」的意義, *Hanyue yanjiu* 12.1 (1994): 251–73. See more recently Sun Mingjun's 孫明君 discussion, which first attempts a synthesis of various sides of the argument and then argues that Wang and his Guji associates were lofty-minded (*da*) in terms of philosophical outlook and literary output, but *weida* in terms of political and economic ambitions. Sun, *Liang Jin shizu wenxue yanjiu* 兩晉士族文學研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 150–68.

19. Sun Chuo, "San yue san ri Lanting shi xu" 三月三日蘭亭詩序, *Quan Jin wen*, in QW, 61.1808a-b. I am grateful to David Knechtges for his insight on the interpretation of several key passages of the text.

ness and weakness in the *Laozi*, water is shown to be both adaptive and reflective.²⁰ In addition, water carries important lessons for the gentleman in the *Mencius*, in which water from an ample source evokes the plenitude, momentum, and pervasiveness of the Way, and in the *Xunzi*, which extensively compares the Way of the gentleman to the nature of water.²¹ In Sun Chuo's view, water could be clear or murky, depending on what one does with it. Similarly, one's mind/heart (*xin* 心) could be constricted or free, depending on external circumstances such as engaging with office or withdrawing into nature.

In Sun Chuo's preface, nature is featured more as the embodiment of the Dao in a characteristic *xuan*-style treatment than an object of the aesthetic gaze. What Sun Chuo wrote praisingly of Yü Liang 庾亮 (289–340) in his epitaph not only aptly characterizes Sun's own approach to nature here, but it also suggests that *xuan* may function as a mode of thought: "facing mountains and rivers in mystic contemplation" 以玄對山水.²² (It is noteworthy that the broader point of Sun's praise of Yü Liang is his ability to maintain an untrammelled

20. See *Analects*, 6.23: "The wise find joy in water; the benevolent find joy in mountains. The wise are active; the benevolent are still. The wise are joyful; the benevolent are long-lived." 子曰：知者樂水，仁者樂山：知者動，仁者靜：知者樂，仁者壽。 Translation from D. C. Lau, *The Analects* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 84. See also *Laozi*, chapter 78: "In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it. This is because there is nothing that can take its place." 天下莫柔弱於水，而攻堅強者莫之能勝，其無以易之。 Translation from D. C. Lau, *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 85.

21. See *Mencius* 4B.18: Xuzi asked Mencius what Confucius saw in water. Mencius replied that, "Water from an ample source . . . comes from tumbling down, day and night without ceasing, going forward only after all the hollows are filled, and then draining into the sea. Anything that has an ample source is like this. What Confucius saw in water is just this and nothing more. If a thing has no source, it is like the rainwater that collects after a downpour in the seventh and eighth months. It may fill all gutters, but we can stand and wait for it to dry up. Thus a gentleman is ashamed of an exaggerated reputation." 徐子曰：仲尼亟稱於水曰：水哉水哉。何取於水也。孟子曰：源泉混混。不舍晝夜。盈科而後進。放乎四海。有本者如是。是之取爾。苟為無本。七八月之間雨集。溝澮皆盈。其涸也。可立而待也。故聲聞過情君子恥之。 Tr. D. C. Lau, *Mencius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 131. See *Xunzi*, chapter 28: To Zigong's question about the need for a gentleman to contemplate whenever he sees a great stream, Confucius replied: "Ah! Water—it bestows itself everywhere, on all living things, yet there is no assertion: in this it resembles inner power. Its direction of flow is to descend toward the low ground and whether its course is winding or straight, it necessarily follows its natural principle: in this it resembles morality. Its vast rushing waters are neither subdued nor exhausted: in this it resembles the Way. If there should be anything that blocks its course, its response will be to react against it, like a reverberating echo. It will travel through chasms a hundred rods deep fearlessly: in this it seems as though it had courage. Led to an empty place, it is sure to make itself level: in this it resembles the law. It will fill something completely and not require a leveling stick: in this it resembles rectitude. Indulgent and restrained while penetrating into the subtlest matters: in this it resembles the transforming power of the good. Through myriad turns and twists its course is certain to flow eastward: in this it resembles the mind with a sense of purpose. It is for such reasons that whenever the gentleman sees a great stream he feels the necessity of contemplating it." 孔子曰：夫水大與諸生而無為也，似德。其流也埤下，裾拘必循其理，似義。其洸洗乎不滯盡，似道。若有決行之，其應佚若鑿鑿，其赴百仞之谷不懼，似勇。主量必平，似法。盈不求概，似正。渾約微達，似察。以出以入以就鮮絮，似善化。其萬折也必東，似志。是故見大水必觀焉。 Translation from John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1994), 3: 248.

22. Quoted in *Shishuo xinyu*, 14/24. The entire passage reads: "Those things which Yü Liang always loved and to which his heart was committed were constantly beyond the defilement of the world's dust. Even though from time to time he compromised his heart to accommodate to the world he would retract his traces like the inchworm so that the square inch space of his heart remained profoundly tranquil, and he would continue as before in mystic contemplation of hills and streams." Translation from Mather, *SSHY*, 336–37. This laudatory characterization of Yü Liang reads like an ideal (or at least a reputation) to which Sun Chuo would have aspired. Sun Chuo described his thoughts as being set on the "Mysterious and Transcendent" (*xuansheng* 玄勝), but he could never turn his back on the vulgar world and was at times chided by his contemporaries for brazen acts of self-promotion. See, for example, *Shishuo xinyu*, 9/36 and 9/61.

mind/heart and probe the mystery instantiated in nature, even when engaged with worldly affairs, an issue that pertains to Sun Chuo's discussion of activism versus quietism in the opening of the preface.) The preface continues thus:

I lift my head to look upon Fu Xi and Tang Yao; how remote and distant they are. I sing verses on terraces and pavilions nearby. As my gaze intensifies, my feelings increase. In order to return to the state of mystical alertness,²³ and contemplate the Way of "rubbing to a gem-like luster," I often avail myself of mountains and rivers to transform my pent up condition.²⁴

仰瞻羲唐。邈已遠矣。近詠臺閣。顧深增懷。為復于曖昧之中。思縈拂之道。屢借山水。以化其鬱結。

Mountains and rivers become the vehicle through which the contemplative poet may return to a state of mystical alertness, which ultimately identifies with clear vision and unlimited cognition. The *xuan* principles gleaned from the natural landscape enable our observer to dispel illusions and see truth with brilliant clarity, as suggested by the metaphor of "rubbing to a gem-like luster."

The transformation from illusion to truth, and from fetters to freedom, finds resonance in a later passage describing the profound state of unawareness that results from the ability to see things as leveled or equal. This ability is aided by, we are told, some unspecified quantity of rich ale.

At the start of the last month of spring, we perform purification rites along the shores of the southern stream. Lofty ridges stand at a thousand *xun* high; long lakes measure ten thousand *qing* wide.²⁵ Lofty, towering ridges and placid, deep lakes form the lay of the land. One can say that it is magnificent. Thereupon we take a seat on fragrant grasses, and make a mirror of the limpid stream. We look at the trees and grasses, and observe the birds and fish. All things share in the same splendor. Things imbued with life all flourish. Hence, we become mellow with rich ale and see things as leveled in a sweeping gaze [with an implication of an enlightened view]. We enter into profound unawareness. How can one still perceive the Great Peng and the little quail as two distinct things?

視于南澗之濱。高嶺千尋。長湖萬頃。隆屈澄汪之勢。可為壯矣。乃席芳草。鏡清流。覽卉木。觀魚鳥。具物同榮。資生咸暢。于是和以醇醪。齊以達觀。決然兀矣。焉復覺鷓鴣之二物哉。

The obliteration of any distinction between the Great Peng and the little quail, which represented in the "Free and Easy Wandering" chapter of the *Zhuangzi* a radical difference in perspective and understanding, recalls a similar merging between two opposite entities in another one of Sun Chuo's works. The concluding lines from his "Rhapsody on Roaming the Celestial Terrace Mountains" 遊天台山賦 describe the disappearance of all distinction between the self (*wo* 我) and object (*wu* 物):

渾萬象以冥觀 I merge the myriad phenomena in mystic contemplation,

23. "Mystical alertness" better captures the positive sense of the term *aimei* 曖昧 than its literal translation "obscurity and unawareness." I am grateful to Paul Kroll for his comments on this point.

24. Instead of 縈拂, I have taken the variant reading 瑩拂 (rubbing to a gem-like luster) found in *Lanting kao* 1.7 and Zhang Pu's 張溥 (1602–41) collection of Sun Chuo's works in *Han Wei Liuchao Baisan mingjia ji* 漢魏六朝百三名家集 (Yangzhou shi: Jiangsu Guangling guji keyinshe, 1990), 3: 215. The term 瑩拂 also appears in Xie Lingyun's "Yu zhu daoren bianzong lun" (Discussing the essentials with various monks). See Gu Shaobo 顧紹柏, ed., *Xie Lingyun ji jiao zhu* 謝靈運集校注 (Zhongzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1987), 293.

25. One *xun* equals approximately eight feet. One *qing* equals a hundred *mou*. In the Six Dynasties, one *qing* was approximately twelve and a half acres.

兀同體於自然 Unconsciously join my body with the Naturally-so.²⁶

The assurance with which Sun Chuo embraces the Zhuangzian notion of “seeing things as leveled” through the erasure of distinctions and boundaries is matched only by the certitude with which Wang Xizhi repudiates in his preface the leveling of at least some things: life and death. A contemplative appreciation of nature elicited divergent responses from the two preface writers: Sun Chuo pondered on the virtue of quietism and metaphysical truths abstracted from nature, while Wang Xizhi reflected on mutability and the transcendent power of reading and writing.²⁷ Moreover, whereas philosophical symbolism defines Sun’s representation of nature, impressionism seems to have guided Wang’s brush. The differences between their prefaces are as pronounced as those between their poems, which show somewhat of a reversal, as we will see below.

PLAYING WITH WORDS: EXPERIMENTING WITH LANDSCAPE DESCRIPTION

The Lanting poems have long been treated (and dismissed) as metaphysical “verse,” abstract discourse that probes the mysterious principles embodied by natural phenomena. Yet they also occupy a crucial if underappreciated place in literary history as early examples of landscape poetry. My discussion of these poems will give due attention to the art of poetic composition, especially the ways in which nature is represented, therefore problematizing any reading that simply reduces these poems to an abstract point. A contrastive reading of poems by two leaders of the Lanting group, the two preface writers Sun Chuo and Wang Xizhi, sketches out the range of images, poetic devices, and techniques found in the collection. Unlike his preface, Sun Chuo’s poems are filled with ingenious descriptions of the natural scene. His tetrasyllabic poem is cleverly constructed through the principles of doubling in the first half and of contrasting in the second half.

春詠登臺	In spring we sing as we climb a terrace,
亦有臨流	As we also look down upon the water’s flow.
懷彼伐木	I think of those “Hewn Trees,”
肅此良儔	How I revere these fine companions. ²⁸
修竹蔭沼	Tall bamboos shade the pool,
旋瀨縈丘	Swirling currents coil around the hills.
穿池激湍	A dredged pond and rapid flowing stream,
連濫觴舟	On it one after another float vessels of wine.

In the first couplet, action is twofold; in the second, meaning is doubled. “Hewn Trees” is the title of *Mao Odes* #165, a poem on feast and celebration. The Mao Preface states that “‘Hewn Trees’ describes feasting old friends and acquaintances” 伐木，燕朋友故舊也。²⁹

26. Sun Chuo, “You Tiantai shan fu,” in Xiao Tong, ed., *Wen xuan* 文選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 11/500. Trans. David Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), 2:253.

27. The conclusion of Sun Chuo’s preface broaches the topic of time’s passage, though it does not dominate his narrative in the way the topic does in Wang’s preface: “The sun-chariot loosens its reins; the swift sunlight passes to the west. Joy departs along with the time; sorrow inevitably follows it. Coming and going occur in alternation; new and old succeed one another. Today’s traces will be told of again tomorrow. I trace the source of the poets’ interest and try to understand the cause of their verses.”

28. I have followed *Lanting kao* and *Han Wei Liuchao baisan mingjia ji* in its variant reading of the line. Instead of 宿 (“for long”), they have 肅 (“to revere”), which yields a more sensible meaning. For Sun Chuo’s poem and others in the Lanting Collection, see XQ, 2:895–917.

29. *Mao shi zheng yi* 毛詩正義, in *Shisan jing zhu shu* 十三經注疏, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 1:410.

Through this textual reference, Sun Chuo was surely praising the good company in which he found himself, a polite convention in social gatherings. At the same time, these “fine companions” may well refer to the trees that in fact surrounded him, suggesting more generally the idea of nature as his companion. The second half of the poem is intricately balanced by creative contrasts. Mountain and water both figure in each line of the third couplet, rather than separately in parallel lines (which would become the dominant formula after the great landscape poet Xie Lingyun),³⁰ and are shown in interaction or relation to one another. Bamboos shade the pool, while currents coil around the hills, conveying a sense of intimacy, even playfulness. In the last couplet, the swift current steadily carries a continuous line of vessels of wine, without capsizing them.

The same type of careful descriptions are found in Sun Chuo’s pentasyllabic poem, but here they work toward a very different end.

流風拂枉渚	Long winds brush against the curving isle,
停雲蔭九皋	Hovering clouds cast a shade over the nine marshes.
鶯羽吟脩竹	Oriole feathers sing amongst tall bamboos, ³¹
游鱗戲瀾濤	Fish scales sport with the billowing waves.
攜筆落雲藻	With a brush in hand, I let fall the pattern of the clouds,
微言剖纖毫	Subtle words dissect the smallest matters.
時珍豈不甘	Seasonal delicacies—how are they not sweet?
忘味在聞韶	But one forgets flavor when listening to the Shao. ³²

In view of this spring scene, the poet, moved to great heights, expresses “subtle words” (*wei yan* 微言), which imply thought on the mysterious (“*xuan* thought”). In the last line, these “subtle words” are compared to the music of sage-king Shun (which is not so subtle self-promotion on Sun Chuo’s part): both lead their listeners to forget the material gratification afforded by meat and delicacies, and instead indulge in the spiritual satisfaction offered by significant sounds. Just as Confucius was transported to another era (the golden age of Shun), Sun Chuo is now transported to another realm (the metaphysical realm of *xuan* thought). Whereas the topic of *xuan* thought provides material for Sun’s writings, the *process* of *xuan* thought, more interestingly, appears to be formally illustrated by the structure of this poem. At play here are the notions popularized by Wang Bi’s Zhuangzian reading of the question concerning ideas, images, and words in the *Classic of Changes*: “Images are the means to express ideas. Words are the means to explain the images” 夫象者，出意者也。言者，明象者也； and “Getting the ideas is in fact a matter of forgetting the images, and getting the images is in fact a matter of forgetting the words” 得意在忘象，得象在忘言。³³ Images of the manifold activities in nature express the poet’s thoughts on the mysterious Dao, and words are all but forgotten once the poet has grasped the idea, as suggested by the last line of the poem. One contemporary scholar of *xuanyan* poetry applied the process of “forgetting the words once the idea is grasped” more broadly to other works of this subgenre: “*xuanyan* poetry integrates into its artistic composition the thought method of ‘establishing images to express fully the ideas; once the idea is grasped, then forget the words.’”³⁴

30. See, for example, the following lines by Xie Lingyun from his famous “Climbing Yongjia’s Green Crag Mountain” 登永嘉綠嶂山: “Gentle ripples congealed in wintry beauty, / Bamboos glistened in frosted strength” 澹激結寒姿，團樂潤霜質。Gu Shacbo, *Xie Lingyun ji jiaozhu* 謝靈運集校注, 56.

31. I have taken the variant 羽 in place of 語 in the received version. XS, 2:901.

32. I.e., the music of sage-king Shun; see *Analects* 7.14.

33. Wang Bi 王弼, “Ming xiang” 明象, in Lou Yulie 樓宇烈, ed., *Wang Bi ji jiao shi* 王弼集校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 2:609. Translation from Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994), 31–32.

34. Chen Shunzhi, *Dong Jin xuanyan shipai yanjiu*, 114–15.

Sun Chuo's Lanting poems display his art of landscape description in a way that his preface does not. In a similarly reversed fashion, Wang Xizhi's poems do not offer the same type of imagistic descriptions that his preface does. The following is the second of his pentasyllabic poems:

三春啟群品	Spring months give rise to myriad varieties,
寄暢在所因	I lodge my feelings in their cause. ³⁵
仰望碧天際	Upwardly I gaze at the edges of the azure sky,
俯鑿綠水濱	Below I look upon the shores of the verdant stream.
寥朗無厓觀	Across the vast expanse, my gaze knows no limits, ³⁶
寓目理自陳	Whatever my eyes meet, its inherent pattern manifests itself.
大矣造化功	Great indeed is the work of creation!
萬殊莫不均	Ten thousand differences are all on a level.
群籟雖參差	The myriad pipings, though not uniform,
適我無非新	To me there is nothing that is not refreshing.

The note on which Wang Xizhi chooses to conclude the poem suggests that he celebrates nature more for the infinite delights that it provides than the symbolic significance it embodies, as in Sun Chuo's pentasyllabic poem. The last couplet is indeed one of the most memorable in the entire collection, since it captures the feeling of sheer wonderment at the innumerable physical manifestations of nature's workings. An important textual variant for the last character, *qin* 親 ("dear"), even suggests a cozy intimacy with nature.³⁷ In this reading, Wang's profession of endearment toward nature at the poem's end represents a markedly different turn than the development toward abstract, metaphysical principles in Sun Chuo's pentasyllabic poem.

The way in which nature is represented in Wang's poem, among others in the collection, raises important questions about how to approach the Lanting poems and *xuanyan* poetry in general. In a recent book and set of articles, Hu Dalei has made as the core of his reading of *xuanyan* poetry the argument that natural objects in this type of poetry lack concrete specificity and that their literary purpose was to express *xuan* principles. Hu Dalei has moreover claimed that the natural descriptions in the Lanting poems have not left us with a deep impression of the actual characteristics of the Lanting site. Instead we must picture the natural landscape using such general terms as "winding stream" (*qushui* 曲水) from Wang's preface and Wang Suzhi's 王肅之 poem, "swirling currents" (*xuanlai* 旋瀨) and "curving isle" (*wangzhu* 枉渚) from Sun Chuo's poems.³⁸ Working from Tang Yongtong's 湯用彤 definition of *xuan* learning in his seminal article, "The Debate on Language and Meaning" 言意之辨, which is to "cast away concrete matters and things and focus intellectually on abstract principles" 略于具體事物而究心抽象原理, Hu Dalei explains that "in casting away the concrete aspect of things of the scene (*jingwu* 景物)" by de-emphasizing their appreciation and emphasizing a grasp of their significance, one may arrive at the *xuan* principles (*xuanli* 玄理).³⁹ In other words, landscape description in *xuanyan* poetry maintains a certain generic and symbolic quality; as a result, the focus does not remain on the material details of the

35. *Lanting kao* (1.2) and *Han Wei Liuchao baisan mingjia ji* (3:180) do not have the first couplet.

36. *Han Wei Liuchao baisan mingjia ji* (3:180) has the variant 寥闕 ("silent") in place of 寥朗 ("vast, expansive"). "Vast expanse" accords better with the idea of a roving gaze that knows no limits.

37. For this variant, see *Lanting kao* (1.2), *Han Wei Liuchao baisan mingjia ji* (3:180), and Feng Weina's 馮惟訥 (*jinshi* 1538) *Gu shi ji* 古詩紀 (XQ, 2:895).

38. Hu Dalei, *Xuanyan shi yanjiu*, 146.

39. Tang Yongtong, "Yan yi zhi bian" 言意之辨, in *Wei jing xuanxue lun gao* 魏晉玄學論稿 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), 23. Hu Dalei, "Lun Dong Jin xuanyan shi de leixing yu gaizao xuanyan shi de qi ji" 論東晉玄言詩的類型與改造玄言詩的契機, *Ningxia daxue xuebao* (Renwen shehui kexue ban) 29.22 (2007): 31.

natural scene and instead transcends toward the *xuan* principles represented by nature. Hu Dalei singles out Wang Xizhi's second pentasyllabic poem, especially the phrases "edges of the azure sky" (*tianji* 天際) and "shores of the verdant stream" (*shuibin* 水濱), to illustrate his point about the generic quality of landscape descriptions in *xuanyan* poetry.⁴⁰ Hu's evaluation of these early experimental landscape poems seems to rely on the stylistic criteria and rhetorical habits established by later landscape poetry. The anachronism of this interpretation aside, its point is accurate. Wang Xizhi's description of the natural scene in this pentasyllabic poem (which happens to be the only scenic description in his six poems) is in fact general: blue sky and green water. And the poem indeed teems with conceptual terms common to *xuan* discourse, such as "principle," "creation," "ten thousand differences," and "myriad pipings." However, we are not transported to the metaphysical realm of *xuan* thought at the end of the poem, and we suspect neither was Wang Xizhi. The poem concludes with an image of the poet basking in the joy of a material environment filled with spring sights and sounds. Wang's expression of feelings of pleasure and endearment are most impressive in this poem.

Impressive descriptions of nature may derive not only from concrete references to things of the scene but also from detailed representation of their interplay. To say simply that natural descriptions in *xuanyan* poems in general consist of generic, conceptual references would be to overlook the *relationality* of things in the scenes in the Lanting poems, which is often highlighted by the ingenious use of verbs. A number of pieces from the collection showcase choice usage of verbs that not only name the relation between two objects but also animate the scene by rendering the objects dynamic.⁴¹ The creative use of verbs in the Lanting collection, in fact, presages what later readers admired in the landscape poems of Xie Lingyun (often credited as the founding master of this genre).⁴² Although the questions of whether and how Xie Lingyun was influenced by the Lanting poets in developing his landscape style exceed the scope of this article, it is worthy of note that he would have been familiar with the works of his great-granduncle Xie An and his associates. Consider how the character *yi* 翼 (wings) enlivens the scene in following couplet from Xie An's pentasyllabic poem.

薄雲羅陽景	Thin clouds veil the sunlight,
微風翼輕航	Gentle winds brood over the light boat.

The winds, endowed with wings, as it were, are animated: they brood over the light boat, like birds hovering over those under their care, gently swaying it. A later, though better-known usage of the word *yi* to describe the wind is found in Tao Yuanming's "Progression of the Seasons" 時運: "From the south there blows a breeze / Winging over the new grain" 有風自南, 翼彼新苗.⁴³ This example from Tao Yuanming would centuries later excite two late Ming masters of close textual reading, Zhong Xing 鍾惺 (1574–1625) and Tan Yuanchun 譚

40. Hu Dalei, "Zenyang du xuanyan shi," 13.

41. This kind of focal point (often though not always a verb), ingenious conceived and vividly put, would have been called "eye of the verse" (*shiyen* 詩眼) from the Song dynasty onwards. See, for example, Huang Tingjian's remark about Du Fu's poetry in "Presented to Gao Zimian, Four poems" 贈高子勉四首: "Sheyi's [Du Fu] every line has an eye" 捨遺句中有眼. *Shangu neiji*, in *Shangu shiji zhu*, 16.4a. SBBY.

42. For example, praise and commentary of one of Xie's most famous couplets have focused on his ingenious use of verbs: "The pond's banks grow spring grasses, / And garden willows have transformed the singing birds" 池塘生春草, 園柳變鳴禽. See "Climbing the Lakeside Tower" 登池上樓. There are many other examples of key verbs in Xie's oeuvre, but this sequence from "What I Observed as I Crossed the Lake on My Way from Southern Mountain to Northern Mountain" 於南山往北山經湖中瞻眺 provides a succinct illustration: "First bamboos shoots, enwrapped by green shells, / New rushes, enfolded in purple buds. Seagulls sport on the vernal shores, / Golden pheasants play with the gentle wind" 初篁苞綠籜, 新蒲含紫茸, 海鷗戲春岸, 天雞弄和風.

43. Gong Bin 龔斌, ed., *Tao Yuanming ji jiaojian* 陶淵明集校箋 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 7. Translation from James Robert Hightower, *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 16.

元春 (1586–1637), the latter of whom exclaimed: “the word *yi* is extremely rare and archaic (*qigu* 奇古)!”⁴⁴ An even earlier precedent for Tao’s pairing of wind and wing is the following lines from Shi Chong’s 石崇 (249–300) “Returning to the Capital” 還京詩: “The swift wind broods over the luxurious canopy, / Fluttering like a goose in flight” 迅風翼華蓋, 飄飄若鴻飛.⁴⁵ However, this couplet lacks the neat parallelism found in Xie An’s couplet. Xie’s brilliant use of the term *yi* leaves the reader with a vivid picture of animated winds gently brushing over a light boat. This line works together with the previous one about thin clouds, acting like a net in the same bird metaphor, which softens the sharp sunlight to create an image of a balmy spring scene by the water.

As if not to be outdone by his older brother, Xie Wan 謝萬 (320–361), exhibits his ingenuity through the same metaphorical use of verbs in his pentasyllabic poem.

靈液被九區	Numinous liquids cover the Nine Regions,
光風扇鮮榮	Sun-lit winds fan the fresh flowers.

The term “numinous liquids” has a double meaning: it refers to both the moisture (rain, dew) that nourishes all living things across the land (or Nine Regions, 九區 or 九州) and the ethereal wine that feeds the party guests.⁴⁶ Various kinds of *yi* (“liquids”) are described in alchemical manuals or other Daoist texts, though *lingyi*, a generic term for elixir, does not refer specifically to a particular preparation or substance.⁴⁷ *Bei* (“to cover”) not only refers to life-giving precipitation, but also plays on the wine, cast as longevity-inducing liquids, being consumed at the party through an evocation of the image of wine cups tipping over and spilling some of their fluids into the stream. *Lingyi* as immortality elixir resonates with concerns over the brevity of things expressed at the event, as if it might be the antidote to the problem of death. Sun-lit winds do not merely blow upon the flowers, but are said to fan over them, suggesting a gentle contact that is appropriate to new springtime growth. Animating verbs punctuate Xie Wan’s tetrasyllabic poem with even greater frequency than in his pentasyllabic poem, adding unexpected turns to the lulling rhythm of the four beats.

肆眺崇阿	I let my gaze wander across the lofty mound,
寓目高林	And my eyes dwell on the tall woods.
青蘿翳岫	Verdant evergreens cover the peak,
修竹冠岑	Lofty bamboos crown the mountain.
谷流清響	From the valley flow pure sounds,
條鼓鳴音	The branches drum forth chiming tones.
玄嶠吐潤	The black cliffs spew forth moisture,
霏霧成陰	Mists and vapors form a shade.

Drooping wisteria branches cap the mountain peak, just as a feathered canopy covers over a carriage in the old use of the term *yi* 翳. Tall bamboos do not simply stand on the mountain, but crown it. The real crowning achievement, however, is the surprising usage of verbs found in the penultimate couplet. We expect water to flow from the valley, but instead we hear pure music. We do not expect tree branches to beat like drum sticks, but they do to produce a tune. These key words (“cover,” “crown,” “flow,” and “drum”) reveal an analogical way of perceiving relations between things in nature that animate the whole scene.

44. Zhong Xing and Tan Yuanchun, *Gushi gui* (1617 ed.), 9.2a.

45. XQ, 1:645. I thank Tian Xiaofei, who brought my attention to Shi Chong’s use of *yi* (wings) during a discussion at the Third Annual Chinese Medieval Studies Workshop at Columbia University, December 10, 2005.

46. Li Shan glosses the term *lingyi* in Guo Pu’s “Wandering Immortals” No. 7 as a kind of “jade salve” (*yugao* 玉膏), an alleged ethereal substance capable of conferring immortality. See *Wen xuan*, 21.1024. By extension, *lingyi* can mean ethereal wine.

47. I am grateful to Robert Campany for his insight on the term *lingyi*.

Wang Yunzhi's 王蘊之 poem offers yet another good example of how the precise use of verbs imparts a lively impression of the activities that took place at Lanting, such as intoning verses and admiring nature.

仰詠挹餘芳 Looking up, I sing a verse, ladling out the lingering fragrance,
怡情味重淵 With joyous feelings, I savor the layered depths.

The verbs *yi* (to ladle out) and *wei* (to taste) have gastronomic connotations: to ladle out liquids and to savor food. When applied to the acts of chanting poetry and admiring nature, these verbs render perceptible, almost palpable the ideas with which they are paired: his companions' good reputation for poetry (or virtue) and, in turn, the inspiration gathered from this company can be sensed as a lingering fragrance, which the poet imbibes. Furthermore the beauty or mystery of nature as a permeating flavor invites the poet to savor the watery reaches of the vast cosmos below him. The gesture of physically consuming nature, which resonates with the double-reference of *lingyi* ("numinous liquids") in Xie Wan's poem above, points to an understanding of the Dao as a matter that engages more than the intellect. The synaesthetic effect of these lines suggests a complex coalescence of sensory perceptions and abstract notions in the poet's experience of nature.

PERFORMANCE AND COMPETITION

The various yet concerted efforts to experiment with landscape representation underscore an important dynamic in the formation of this group identity: the Lanting poets appear to try to distinguish themselves individually within the context of a common experience. Each is expected to commemorate the outing with a unique response to a sense of continuity with the past, the collective feeling of pleasure in the moment, and melancholy in the transience of things. Competition underlies any group activity where individual performance is required and group-sanctioned punishment is meted out. But beyond the arena of aesthetic competition, the differences expressed in the prefaces and poems must also be seen in light of competitive differentiation in contemporary debates on understanding the Dao. More broadly, a spirit of contest pervaded social situations in the Wei-Jin period during which "pure conversation" (*qingtan* 清談) took place, as described throughout *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (A new account of tales of the world, compiled around 430). Conversationalists debated various metaphysical, ontological, and semiotic issues within *xuan*-discourse in front of audiences, who would deem one or another the winner. Performance and reputation made the man to a considerable extent during this period. The Lanting gathering may have been a nice party, but the stakes were rather high: a reputation that would go into the annals of history. Wang Xizhi not only recorded the poems of those who fulfilled the task, but also the names of those who could not perform.

The Lanting poems functioned as much as a platform for proclaiming one's understanding of the Dao as a stage for showcasing one's wit. Consider, for example, the following poem by the keen-witted Xie An.

相與欣佳節 Together we take joy in this fine occasion,
率爾同褰裳 And casually we also hike up our skirts.
薄雲羅陽景 Thin clouds veil the sunlight,
微風翼輕航 Gentle winds brood over the light boat.
醇醪陶丹府 This rich ale delights my pure heart,
兀若遊羲唐 Mindlessly we roam with Fu Xi and King Yao.
萬殊混一理 Ten thousand differences blend into one truth,
安復覺彭殤 How can one still distinguish between Old Peng and the dead child?

The poem begins with a sense of identity, which refers as much to the present company as to exemplars of the past who spoke of a similar spring outing. In the *Analects* (11.26), Zengzi had expressed a particular wish to go with some men and boys to bathe in the River Yi in late spring, enjoy the breeze on the Rain Altar, and go home chanting poetry. Confucius heartily concurred. In Xie An's poem, a sense of group spirit at the beginning turns into a spirit of competition in the end. In a display of superior understanding, Xie An expresses a diametrically opposite view from Wang Xizhi concerning Zhuangzi's paradoxical leveling of the extreme old age of Pengzu 彭祖 and the premature death of a child: "no one has lived longer than a dead child, and Pengzu died young." This paradox and its implications seem to neutralize death by suggesting that there is neither longevity nor brevity of life if one's life is measured not in terms of countable time but fulfillment of one's natural course.⁴⁸ Wang Xizhi absolutely rejects such applied indistinction between what are conventionally considered long and short lives as he bemoans human mortality in his preface. In contrast, Xie An suggests that he has grasped the ultimate truth and has transcended the limiting distinction between many and a few years, thus no longer worrying about life's brevity. We cannot be certain if Wang or Xie expressed his view first, nor who tried to best the other: the preface was in all likelihood written after the poems were composed, but the ideas in the preface could have been aired at the occasion before Xie's poem was composed. What is clear, however, is the spirit of competition that pervades their camaraderie.

The rivalry between Wang Xizhi and Xie An is the subject of a well-known anecdote in *Shishuo xinyu*, in which Xie affects a similarly untrammelled and transcendent attitude in a verbal exchange with Wang. Once, upon noticing that Xie An seemed to have decided to transcend the mundane world and become a recluse, Wang Xizhi sought to remind him that sage kings of old, such as Yu of Xia and Wen of Zhou, governed with a diligence that allowed no leisure for themselves, and that one must be even more dedicated today when "the four suburbs are filled with fortifications." In a pointed manner, Wang tells Xie: "But if instead people neglect their duty for empty talk, and hinder essential tasks with frivolous writing, I'm afraid that's not what is needed right now." Xie replies that "The Qin state followed the principles of Shang Yang [商鞅 (d. 338 B.C.)], and perished with the Second Emperor. Was it 'pure conversation' which brought them to disaster?"⁴⁹ In the spirit of one-upmanship, Xie An counters Wang Xizhi's assertion about the negative role of metaphysical discourse in the precarious state of affairs: although the Qin state followed the so-called legalist doctrines of the famous Qin minister Shang Yang and had nothing to do with "pure conversation," it still came to ruin. Xie An won this contest of words according to the Wei-Jin esteem for witty speech and lofty-minded attitude.

Although the social dynamics of group poetry composition involve elements more difficult to demonstrate than the competitive display of wit in words, it may be possible to infer a sense of pressure and anxiety in the clumsier attempts to avoid public humiliation. Two prime examples of lesser poems in the collection that bear striking resemblance to each other belong to the sons of Wang Xizhi and Sun Chuo. One might expect more than this facile poem from Wang Ningzhi 王凝之, the second son of Wang Xizhi and husband of Xie Daoyun 謝道韞, who upstaged her male cousin in a poetry game with a brilliant description

48. My interpretation draws from Guo Xiang's 郭象 (d. 312) commentary, which Wang Xizhi surely knew. See *Zhuangzi ji shi*, 1:81.

49. *Shishuo xinyu*, 2/70. I have used Mather's translation with modification (*SSHY*, 66-67).

of snow flurries (like “willow catkins lifted up by the wind” 柳絮因風起) and thus earned her the admiration of her uncle, Xie An.⁵⁰

莊浪濠津	The waves of Zhuang Zhou at the ford of the Hao,
巢步潁澗	The paces of Chaofu along the banks of the Ying.
冥心真寄	Stilling the mind and entrusting it to the true,
千載同歸	A thousand years apart, we share the same orientation.

Wang Ningzhi must have barely escaped the punishment of three *dou* of ale with this unimaginative poem that lists the usual patron saints of reclusive values, Zhuangzi and Chaofu 巢夫, the legendary hermit who gave Xu You 許由 a lesson at the banks of the Ying River on how to be a proper recluse. Sun Si 孫嗣, the son of Sun Chuo, also seemed to have had trouble putting together a poem for the occasion.

望巖懷逸許	Gazing at the cliffs, I feel for the detached Xu You,
臨流想奇莊	Looking down onto this flow, I think of the rare Zhuang Zhou.
誰云真風絕	Who says that the aura of purity is of no more?
千載挹餘芳	After a thousand years, we ladle out their lingering fragrance.

Even given the general tendency toward common themes that derive from normative allusions and vocabulary in these texts, these two poems follow the same structural pattern in a way no other poems in the collection do. Both pay tribute to the same group of past worthies (Zhuangzi and Chaofu/Xu You) in the first two lines and both use the same catchwords of the day: “truth/purity” (*zhen* 真) in line three and “a thousand years [apart]” (*qianzai* 千載) in line four. One wonders whether, in a fit of feeling an anxiety of influence, one son unfortunately imitated the other rather than their more talented fathers. While their state of mind remains a matter of speculation, the act of copying another’s work in a similar group setting is attested by an incident recorded in *Sushuo* 俗說 (Tales of the mundane world; attributed to Shen Yue 沈約 [441–513]). At a Double-Three outing hosted by Wang Gong 王恭 (d. 398), the brother-in-law of Emperor Xiaowu 孝武 (r. 372–396), his adjutant Tao Kui 陶夔 wrote out a poem, which was copied down by the person sitting behind him. While Tao spent the rest of the day polishing his work, the plagiarist had already presented the poem as his own. When Tao finally submitted his work, Wang Gong was surprised to see that Tao “copied someone else’s poem” 復寫人詩. The bewildered and humiliated author knew not what had happened. The truth later came to light, and Wang Gong dismissed the plagiarist.⁵¹ That one courtier would hazard the consequences of copying another’s work indicates the high stakes (e.g., favor, reputation) involved in a performative social situation.

Competition at the Lanting party even extended to the ancient forebears Zengzi, Confucius, and Zhuangzi, whose stories had become the ideal standards of springtime excursion against which subsequent outings were measured. To be sure, most of the poems that allude to these past exemplars emphasize an identification of the past and present experiences. A few poems, however, sought to distinguish the present experience from the past model. Wang

50. *Shishuo xinyu*, 2/71; *SSHY*, 67.

51. Cited in *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 249.1179. In the *Wenyuan ge Siku quanshu* version of *Taiping yulan*, which is less reliable than the Song edition reprinted by Zhonghua shuju, the story (here attributed to a work by the title of *Shishuo* 世說; this story does not appear in the extant *Shishuo xinyu*) highlights the element of humiliation in failing a performance with additional words (in italics): “Wang, greatly surprised, mocked Adjutant Tao for copying someone else’s poem” 王大怪，笑陶參軍乃復寫人詩 (249.16). For a brief discussion of Lu Xun’s collation of *Sushuo* and some of the issues surrounding the different versions of it, see Zhao Wei 趙偉, “Lu Xun ji yi *Sushuo* bianyi” 魯迅輯佚《俗說》辨疑, *Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan* 4 (2010): 77–79.

Suzhi 王肅之, Wang Xizhi's fourth son, contrasts *our* journey of the spirit with *their* journey of the body. The valuation of the two types of journeys, one that transcends physical space and provides spiritual rewards and the other that is limited by the physical landscape and gives sensuous pleasure, is clear.

在昔暇日	In times of old, on days of leisure,
味存林嶺	The pleasure one savored remained in the wooded hills.
今我斯遊	Today on this outing of ours,
神怡心靜	Our spirits are at ease, our minds at peace.

In a stranger twist in this story of competition, Wang Binzhi 王彬之 claims that he is every bit as satisfied as the fish from the *Zhuangzi* story.

鮮葩映林薄	Fresh flowers shine in the grove,
游鱗戲清渠	Swimming scales sport in the clear channel.
臨川欣投釣	Looking down onto the river, I happily cast my fishing rod.
得意豈在魚	How could it be that only fish are contented?

Ironically, like the happy fish swimming in the Hao River, Wang Binzhi appears to experience utter content at the mortal expense of his emotional rivals, even as he pursues a quietist activity of catching and thereby killing the fish to demonstrate that he too has attained perfect understanding.

The Lanting collection offers an invaluable window into the dynamics of the early medieval social outing and group poetry composition. Camaraderie and competition defined the interaction between fathers and sons, brothers and friends, patrons and inferiors. With reputation at stake, it was as important to distinguish oneself (in understanding and talent) as it was to play by the collective rules of engagement (e.g., polite praise of the company, use of common language).⁵² The poems and prefaces moreover attest to the variance in early medieval intellectual debates on the Dao as well as competing views on life and death. Yet this collection represents more than a philosophical discourse on *xuan* and its implications. An approach that investigates its philosophical points but is balanced by consideration of its poetic quality yields a more complex picture of the collection. Descriptions of the Lanting scene and experience animated by choice and often metaphoric usage of verbs point to an analogical mode of cognition that sees relations and interconnections among things. These metaphoric verbs speak not only to the power of sensory perceptions (sight and hearing, smell and taste) in the Lanting experience, but also their complexity: plural meanings, synaesthesia and metaphor bridge between the abstract and sensual experiences of the event. These poems are early examples of landscape verse, in which nature is seen for more (or less) than its symbolic value and in which it becomes the object of extended aesthetic appraisal. As one Lanting poet put it: "I lodge my joy in what my eyes dwell on, / My mind tacitly accords with the two marvels" 歸目寄歡, 心冥二奇.⁵³ They thus sought truth and beauty in nature's two marvels: mountains and waters (*shanshui* 山水).

52. Demonstration of cultural competence involved much more than pride in one's reputation; rather, poetic performance, intellectual stock, and cultural knowledge could be converted to economic or political gain (e.g., favor, advancement). See my discussion in "Cultural Capital," in *Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook*, ed. Wendy Swartz et al. (Columbia Univ. Press, forthcoming in 2012).

53. From one of the Lanting poems by Wang Huizhi, the fifth son of Wang Xizhi. For a full translation, see the appendix.

APPENDIX: TRANSLATIONS OF THE LANTING COLLECTION

Wang Xizhi (six poems)

1.

代謝鱗次	Renewal happens on an orderly scale,
忽焉以周	Suddenly another year has gone by.
欣此暮春	I delight in this late spring,
和氣載柔	The mild air feels tender.
詠彼舞雩	I sing of that Rain Altar,
異世同流	A different era—but the same fellowship.
迺攜齊契	I shall clasp the hands of my like-minded companions,
散懷一丘	And release our feelings across the hill. ⁵⁴

2.

悠悠大象運	Ever onward go the workings of the Great Image, ⁵⁵
輪轉無停際	The wheel turns without a stopping point.
陶化非吾因	The molding and shaping do not originate with me,
去來非吾制	The coming and going are not what I can regulate. ⁵⁶
宗統竟安在	Where, at last, is the Primal Source? ⁵⁷
即順理自泰	Through acquiescence, the patterns naturally unfurl. ⁵⁸
有心未能悟	Though one has consciousness, one cannot comprehend,
適足纏利害	Just when one is sated, one becomes entangled by profit and harm.
未若任所遇	Better to take what one encounters,
逍遙良辰會	And be carefree at the gathering on this fine day.

3.

三春啟群品	Spring months give rise to myriad varieties,
寄暢在所因	I lodge my feelings in their cause. ⁵⁹
仰望碧天際	Upwardly I gaze at the edges of the azure sky,
俯磐綠水濱	Below I look upon the shores of the verdant stream.
寥朗無涯觀	Across the vast expanse, my gaze knows no limits, ⁶⁰
寓目理自陳	Whatever my eyes meet, its inherent pattern manifests itself.
大矣造化功	Great indeed is the work of creation!
萬殊莫不均	Ten thousand differences are all on a level.
群籟雖參差	The myriad pipings, though not uniform,
適我無非新	To me there is nothing that is not refreshing.

54. For Chinese texts of the Lanting poems, see XQ, 2:895–917.

55. *Laozi* 41 states that the “Great Image has no form,” which is a reference to the formless and shapeless Dao.

56. I.e., life and death.

57. The compound *zongtong* appears in Yü Ai’s (262–311) “*Fu* on Ideas,” which clearly signifies the Dao: “The Primal Source at the beginning does not make any discriminations, / Great virtue eradicates those passions and wishes” 宗統竟初不別兮，大德亡其情願。See *Jinshu*, 50.1395. *Hanyu dacidian* glosses Yü Ai’s usage of the compound to mean a “system of clan relationships,” but that would not make much sense here. It is more likely that *zongtong* here refers to the Dao, rather than the more common meaning of ancestral or paternal lineage (see, for example, *Hou Hanshu*, 1b.65).58. I am taking *tai* 泰 in the sense of *tong* 通 (as in 通達, 通暢). See the gloss on the Hexagram Tai as *tong* in the *Xugua* 序卦 (Providing the sequence of the hexagrams) of the *Yijing*.59. *Lanting kao* (1.2) and *Han Wei Liuchao baisan mingjia ji* (3:180) do not have the first couplet.60. *Han Wei Liuchao baisan mingjia ji* (3:180) has the variant 寥闕 (“silent”) in place of 寥朗 (“vast, expansive”). “Vast expanse” accords better with the idea of a roving gaze that knows no limits.

4.
 猗與二三子 Ah! Together along with two or three of us,⁶¹
 莫匪齊所託 All share in the same sentiment.
 造真探玄根 I pursue truth to probe the root of mystery,
 涉世若過客 We enter the world like passing guests.
 前識非所期 Foreknowledge is not what I wish for,⁶²
 虛室是我宅 An empty chamber is my dwelling.
 遠想千載外 I think afar to beyond a thousand years,
 何必謝曩昔 Why should we feel shamed by those in the past?
 相與無相與 Whether together with friends or not,
 形骸自脫落 Form and body shed on their own.
5.
 鑑明去塵垢 A mirror polished can dispel dust and dirt,
 止則鄙吝生 If one ceases, then vulgar desires are born.
 體之固未易 Comprehending this is not easy.
 三觴解天刑 Three goblets of wine remit divine punishment.⁶³
 方寸無停主 My mind never stops trying to master itself,
 矜伐將自平 This arrogance shall abate in time.
 雖無絲與竹 Though there are no strings and pipes,
 玄泉有清聲 In the dark pool there are pure sounds.
 雖無嘯與歌 Though there is neither whistling nor song,
 詠言有餘馨 In words intoned there is a lingering fragrance.
 取樂在一朝 We seize pleasure in this one day,
 寄之齊千齡 What we impart to it is shared across a thousand years.
6.
 合散固其常 Gathering and dispersing indeed have rules,⁶⁴
 脩短定無始 Longevity and brevity are surely not set at the beginning.
 造新不暫停 Generation of the new goes on without pause,
 一往不再起 Once something is gone, it never rises again.
 於今為神奇 Today what is unearthly and marvelous
 信宿同塵滓 After a few days become dirt and filth.⁶⁵
 誰能無此慨 Who is able not to have this melancholy?
 散之在推理 Releasing it lies in probing and understanding.
 言立同不朽 Words said shall not decay,

61. This line echoes the casualness of Zeng Xi's remark about taking along five or six adults and six or seven boys to go bathing in the Yi River. See *Analects*, 11.26. The outing Zeng Xi proposed about a thousand years before is also the reference point for the penultimate couplet of this poem.

62. Chapter 38 of *Laozi* speaks of "foreknowledge" (*qianshi*) as "the embellishment of the Dao and the beginning of dullness." Wang Bi's glosses foreknowledge as "knowing something before others," which describes men of "inferior virtue," who are activist and labor over worldly matters, but only to achieve an adverse end. Wang Bi suggests that it is better to embrace simplicity and the uncarved block (*su pu* 素樸). See his *Laozi Daodejing zhu* 老子道德經注 in *Wang Bi ji jiao zhu*, 1:94-95.

63. Those at the Lanting party who could not produce a poem received the punishment of drinking three *dou* of wine.

64. I have followed *Fashu yaolun* in its variant reading of the line. Instead of 其, it has 有 ("there are"), which parallels the 無 ("there are not") in the next line.

65. See *Zhuangzi* 22 ("Zhi Bei you" or "Knowledge Wandered North") for the argument that since ten thousand things are in fact one, the unearthly and marvelous (*shenqi* 神奇) may turn into the foul and rotten, and vice versa. *Zhuangzi jishi*, 2:733.

河清非所俟 For the River to clear is not what I wait for.⁶⁶

Sun Chuo (two poems)

1.

春詠登臺	In spring we sing as we climb a terrace,
亦有臨流	As we also look down upon the water's flow.
懷彼伐木	I think of those "Hewn Trees,"
肅此良儔	How I revere these fine companions. ⁶⁷
修竹蔭沼	Tall bamboo shade the pool,
旋瀨縈丘	Swirling currents coil around the hills.
穿池激湍	A dredged pond and rapid flowing stream,
連濫觴舟	On it one after another float vessels of wine.

2.

流風拂枉渚	Long winds brush against the curving isle,
停雲蔭九皋	Hovering clouds cast a shade over the nine marshes.
鶯羽吟脩竹	Oriole feathers sing amongst tall bamboo, ⁶⁸
游鱗戲瀾澗	Fish scales sport with the billowing waves.
搗筆落雲藻	With a brush in hand, I let fall the pattern of the clouds,
微言剖纖毫	Subtle words dissect the smallest matters.
時珍豈不甘	Seasonal delicacies—how are they not sweet?
忘味在聞韶	But one forgets flavor when listening to the Shao. ⁶⁹

Xie An (two poems)

1.

伊昔先子	Long ago a past worthy
有懷春遊	Had a longing for a spring outing.
契茲言執	In agreement, I seize the occasion,
寄傲林丘	And impart my lofty feelings to the wooded hills.
森森連嶺	Tall are the mountain chains,
茫茫原疇	Vast the leveled fields.
迥霄垂霧	In the distant skies mists hang,
凝泉散流	A frozen spring dissolves into a flow.

2.

相與欣佳節	Together we take joy in this fine occasion,
率爾同褰裳	And casually we also hike up our skirts.
薄雲羅陽景	Thin clouds veil the sunlight,
微風翼輕航	Gentle winds brood over the light boat.
醇醪陶丹府	This rich wine delights my pure heart,
兀若遊羲唐	Mindlessly we roam with Fu Xi and King Yao.
萬殊混一理	Ten thousand differences blend into one truth,
安復覺彭殤	How can one still distinguish between Old Peng and the dead child?

Xie Wan (two poems)

1.

肆眺崇阿	I let my gaze wander across the lofty mound,
寓目高林	And my eyes dwell on the tall woods.

66. It is said that once in every thousand years, the murky Yellow River clears up.

67. I have followed *Lanting kao* and *Han Wei Liuchao baisan mingjia ji* in their variant reading of the line. Instead of 宿 ("for long"), they have 肅 ("to revere"), which yields a more sensible meaning.

68. I have taken the variant 羽 in place of 語 in the received version. XS, 2:901.

69. I.e., the music of sage-king Shun; see *Analecets* 7.14.

青蘿翳岫 Verdant evergreens conceal the peak,
 修竹冠岑 Lofty bamboos crown the mountain.
 谷流清響 The flow from the valley emits pure sounds,
 條鼓鳴音 The branches drum forth chiming tones.
 玄嶠吐潤 The black cliffs spew forth moisture,
 霏霧成陰 Mists and vapors form a shade.

2.

司冥卷陰旗 The guardian of the shades rolls up the dark banners,
 句芒舒陽旌 The guardian of plants rolls out the bright flags.
 靈液被九區 Numinous liquids cover the Nine Regions,
 光風扇鮮榮 Sun-lit winds fan the fresh flowers.
 碧林輝英翠 Verdant woods shine in brilliant blue-green,
 紅葩擢新莖 Crimson flowers pull upon the new stalk.
 翔禽撫翰游 Soaring birds, flapping their wings, roam about,
 騰鱗躍清冷 Leaping scales jump into the crisp chill.

Sun Tong 孫統 (two poems)

1.

茫茫大造 Vast are the Great Designs,
 萬化齊軌 Myriad transformations share a leveled course.
 罔悟玄同 Men who do not grasp the unity of the Mysterious,
 競異擗旨 Vie to be different in showing their purpose.
 平勃運謀 Chen Ping and Zhou Bo used strategy,⁷⁰
 黃綺隱几 Xia Huanggong and Qili Ji leaned against a low table.⁷¹
 凡我仰希 All my desires and longings,
 期山期水 Are in these mountains and these rivers.

2.

地主觀山水 The host, observing the mountains and rivers,
 仰尋幽人踪 Looks up in search of the secluded ones.
 回沼激中逵 Whirling eddies splash at midway,
 疏竹間修桐 Sparse bamboos interspersed by lofty paulownias,
 因流轉輕觴 Following the flow, the light goblets turn,
 冷風飄落松 Chilly winds blow upon the shedding pines.
 時禽吟長澗 Seasonal creatures call out by the long ravine,
 萬籟吹連峯 Ten thousand pipings are blown across the linked peaks.

Sun Si

望巖懷逸許 Gazing at the cliffs, I feel for the detached Xu You,
 臨流想奇莊 Looking down onto this flow, I think of the rare Zhuang Zhou.
 誰云真風絕 Who says that the aura of purity is of no more?
 千載挹餘芳 After a thousand years, we ladle out their lingering fragrance.

Chi Tan 郗曇

溫風起東谷 Warm winds rise from the eastern valley,
 和氣振柔條 The mild air shakes the tender branches.

70. Chen Ping 陳平 and Zhou Bo 周勃 helped Liu Bang found the Han dynasty and later restored order after the attempted usurpation by members of Empress Lü's clan.

71. Xia Huanggong 夏黃公 and Qili Ji 綺里季 were two of the Four Whitepates, who sought refuge in Mount Shang during the last years of the oppressive Qin dynasty. The action of "leaning against a low table" alludes to the opening passage of "Qi wu lun," in which Ziqi 子綦 of the Southern Suburb sat leaning against a low table and stared vacantly into the void, losing himself in thinking about the ten thousand pipings of Heaven.

- 端坐興遠想 Sitting in stillness, stirred to remote thoughts,
薄言遊近郊 Which swiftly roam across the city's outskirts.⁷²
- Yu You 庾友
- 馳心域表 My mind races beyond the boundaries of the realm,
寥寥遠邁 Journeying into the distant empty vastness.
理感則一 Reason and feeling, in principle, are one,
冥然玄會 In profound dimness—an encounter with the mysterious.
- Yu Yun 庾蘊
- 仰想虛舟說 Looking up I think of the story of the empty boat,⁷³
俯歎世上賓 Looking down I sigh over being a sojourner of the world.
朝榮雖云樂 Flourishing in the morning—though one can say it's happiness,
夕弊理自因 Withering in the evening—this principle is self-so.
- Cao Maozhi 曹茂之
- 時來誰不懷 At the coming of seasons, who does not have feelings?
寄散山林間 I give expression to them in the mountains and groves.
尚想方外賓 I think reverently of the guests beyond the realm,
迢迢有餘閑 Detached and remote, they have leisure to spare.
- Hua Mao 華茂
- 林榮其鬱 The grove shows its splendor with its lushness,
浪激其限 Waves splash against the river bend.
汎汎輕觴 Floating and drifting these light goblets,
載欣載懷 There is joy, there is full feeling.
- Huan Wei 桓偉
- 主人雖無懷 Although the host has no longings,
應物貴有尚 In responding to things, he still prizes having aspirations.⁷⁴
宣尼遊沂津 Confucius wandered to the ford of River Yi,
蕭然心神王 In a carefree state, his spirit flourished.⁷⁵
數子各言志 His various disciples each told his intent,
曾生發清唱 Zeng Xi let out a pure song.
今我欣斯遊 Today I delight in this outing,

72. *Boyan* 薄言 in earlier poems has been glossed as either a compound particle or “hurriedly.” The image of sitting in meditation on a balmy spring day with quickened thoughts appears in similar form in Wang Xizhi’s preface: “The sky that day was luminous, and the air was clear; gentle breezes blew softly around us. Above us we looked on the immensity of the universe; then lowering our eyes, we saw nature’s infinite variety. And as we let our eyes roam and our hearts speed from thought to thought we could experience the greatest delights of ear and eye—this was true happiness.” Chi Tan’s poem also plays with contrasts: between wind rising and air shaking and between tranquil meditation and racing thoughts.

73. In *Zhuangzi* 20 “Shan mu” (The mountain tree), there is a parable involving an empty boat (*xu chuan* 虛船): a man’s barge is hit by an empty boat, but he does not get angry; however, if the other boat carried a passenger, the man would yell for the other to turn the boat this way or that. And if the other did not respond then the man would become enraged and scream out curses. The point is that by making oneself empty and wander thus through the world, one can sail through and avoid any harm. See *Zhuangzi jishi* 20.675.

74. The phrase “xing you shang” 行有尚 appears in the Judgment of Hexagram 29 “Xi kan,” meaning that one’s actions will find esteem if one proceeds with sincerity. See *Wang Bi ji jiao shi*, 1:362.

75. The phrase “shen wang” 神王 appears in *Zhuangzi* 3, “On Nurturing Life,” in a lesson on the way to nurture life (*yang sheng* 養生): living carefree is better than mere survival in a cage.

慍情亦翹暢 My troubled feelings find relief for a while.

Yuan Qiaozhi 袁嶠之 (two poems)

1.

人亦有言	There is a saying among men,
得意則歡	When you attain your intent, you rejoice.
佳賓既臻	Once the fine guests have all arrived,
相與遊盤	Together they roam around.
微音迭詠	Subtle sounds come forth in alternating songs,
馥焉若蘭	Emitting a fragrance like thoroughwort.
苟齊一致	If we share the same inclination,
遐想揭竿	Our remote thoughts drift upon a life in reclusion. ⁷⁶

2.

四眺華林茂	Glancing all around, I see a lush grove in bloom,
俯仰晴川渙	In a moment's time, the sunny stream grows full.
激水流芳醪	Along the swift current floats aromatic, murky wine,
豁爾累心散	Opening freely, my entangled heart feels release.
遐想逸民軌	My remote thoughts dwell on the tracks of the untrammelled ones,
遺音良可翫	Their lingering sounds indeed can be savored.
古人詠舞雩	The ancients sang of the Rain Altar,
今也同斯歎	Today we share in his sigh of admiration. ⁷⁷

Wang Xuanzhi 王玄之

松竹挺巖崖	Pine and bamboo stand tall on the crags and cliffs,
幽澗激清流	From a shaded stream splashes forth a clear flow.
消散肆情志	We freely release our feeling and intent,
酣暢豁滯憂	Drinking amply to clear away obstacles and woes.

Wang Ningzhi 王凝之 (two poems)

1.

莊浪濠津	The waves of Zhuang Zhou at the ford of the Hao,
巢步潁湄	The paces of Chaofu along the banks of the Ying.
冥心真寄	Stilling the mind and entrusting it to the true,
千載同歸	A thousand years apart, we share the same orientation.

2.

烟熅柔風扇	Like the primal air, the gentle breeze fans,
熙怡和氣淳	The pleasing, harmonious vapor purifies.
駕言興時遊	We take the carriage when in the mood for a seasonal outing,
逍遙映通津	Feeling carefree, we flash across the boundless ford.

Wang Suzhi 王肅之 (two poems)

1.

在昔暇日	In times of old, on days of leisure,
味存林嶺	The pleasure one savored remained in the wooded hills.
今我斯遊	Today on this outing of ours,

76. *Jie gan*, literally "lifting a fishing pole," here refers to life in reclusion.

77. After hearing Zeng Xi's description of what his heart is set upon (bathing in the Yi River with five or six adults and six or seven boys, enjoying the breeze on the Rain Altar and chanting poetry on the way home), Confucius sighed in admiration. *Analects*, 11.26.

神怡心靜 Our spirits are at ease, our minds at peace.⁷⁸

2.

嘉會欣時遊 At this fine gathering, we delight in the seasonal outing.
 豁爾暢心神 Opening freely, our minds and spirits know no bounds.
 吟詠曲水瀨 We chant poems by the bending river's currents,
 淥波轉素鱗 Under the clear waves, white fish twist and turn.

Wang Huizhi 王徽之 (two poems)

1.

散懷山水 I release my feelings among these hills and streams,
 蕭然忘羈 At ease, I forget all constraints.
 秀薄粲穎 Pretty foliage enliven the tender shoots,
 疏松籠崖 Sparse pines encircle the cliffs.
 遊羽扇霄 Roaming wings fan against the empyrean,
 鱗躍清池 Scales leap from the clear pool.
 歸目寄歡 I lodge my joy in what my eye dwells on.
 心冥二奇 My mind tacitly accords with the two marvels.⁷⁹

2.

先師有冥藏 Our former teachers possessed a profound treasure,⁸⁰
 安用羈世羅 What use is there for constraints of the worldly net?
 未若保冲真 Better to preserve the pure and perfect—
 齊契箕山阿 Let us join in a pact and retire to Mount Ji.⁸¹

Wang Huanzhi 王渙之

去來悠悠子 Carefree in his comings and goings,
 披褐良足欽 Clad in coarse cloth, the Master is truly reverend.
 超跡修獨往 He walked a solitary path, leaving lofty traces.
 真契齊古今 True agreement levels the past and present.

Wang Binzhi (two poems)

丹崖竦立 Vermilion cliffs stand towering,
 葩藻映林 Magnificent flowers brighten the grove.
 淥水揚波 Clear water stirs up waves,
 載浮載沈 Our cups now float, now sink.

鮮葩映林薄 Fresh flowers shine in the grove,
 游鱗戲清渠 Swimming scales sport in the clear channel.
 臨川欣投釣 Looking down onto the river, I happily cast my fishing rod.
 得意豈在魚 How could it be that only fish are contented?⁸²

Wang Yunzhi

散豁情志暢 In wide release, our feelings flow freely,
 塵纓忽已捐 Suddenly the dusty hat strings are gone.

78. Wang Suzhi makes a contrast between the physical and space-bound journey described in *Analects* 11.26 and the spiritual and metaphysical journey that he and his friends are experiencing.

79. I believe that the "two marvels," an otherwise unknown compound, here refer to *shan* ("mountain") and *shui* ("water"), the main subjects of appreciation in the Lanting collection.

80. The "profound treasure" likely refers to esoteric Daoist texts.

81. Mount Ji is where, according to legend, Xu You lived in reclusion.

82. See the dialogue between Zhuangzi and Huizi on the joy of fish swimming in the Hao River in *Zhuangzi* 17, "Autumn Floods."

仰詠挹餘芳 Looking up, I sing a verse, ladling out the lingering fragrance,
怡情味重淵 With joyous feelings, I savor the layered depths.

Wang Fengzhi 王豐之

肆盼巖岫 I let free my gaze across the cliffs and peaks,
臨泉濯趾 At the spring's edge, I wash my feet.⁸³
感興魚鳥 Feeling moved by the fish and birds,
安居幽峙 To dwell peacefully in the secluded hills.

Wei Pang 魏滂

三春陶和氣 We delight in the agreeable air of spring months,
萬物齊一歡 When myriad things share in one joy.
明后欣時豐 The enlightened leader is pleased by the season's bounty,
駕言映清瀾 We ride our carriage—its reflection on the clear waves.
亶亶德音暢 Perpetually his virtue sounds far and wide,
蕭蕭遺世難 Desolate and quiet: the difficulties of leaving behind the world.
望巖愧脫屣 I gaze at the cliffs, embarrassed by those who cast off their shoes,
臨川謝揭竿 I look onto the stream, shamed by those who cast their rods.

Yu Yue 虞說

神散宇宙內 My spirit is released within the universe,
形浪濠梁津 My body is freed along the ford at the Hao's bridge.
寄暢須臾歡 I impart my feelings to momentary pleasures,
尚想味古人 With reverent thoughts, I savor the way of the ancients.

Xie Yi 謝繹

縱觴任所適 We let the wine cups flow wherever they will,
回波縈遊鱗 Swimming scales coil in the ebbing waves.
千載同一朝 Across a thousand years, we share in one day,
沐浴陶清塵 We bathe and happily wash away the worldly dust.

Xu Fengzhi 徐豐之 (two poems)

1.

俯揮素波 Looking down, I brush the white waves,
仰掇芳蘭 And upward, I pluck the fragrant thoroughwort.
尚想嘉客 I hold the fine guests in honor,
希風永歎 And sing in praise of their admirable manner.

2.

清響擬絲竹 Pure sounds mimic strings and pipes,
班荊對綺疏 Spreading a mat is no different than sitting indoors,⁸⁴
零觴飛曲津 Descending cups fly along the river bend,

83. The fisherman from *Chu ci* told Qu Yuan that "when the waters of Canglang are clear, I can wash my hat strings in them; when the waters of Canglang are murky, I can wash my feet in them." The fisherman thus advocated following the way things are and adapting to circumstances. Whereas hat strings signify office-holding, washing feet signifies a reclusive life.

84. *Ban jing* appears in *Zuo zhuan*, Duke Xiang 26: Two friends, Jiaoju 椒舉 and Shengzi 聾子, both natives of Chu, happened to meet each other while fleeing to Jin. They spread bramble over the ground and sat down to a meal together. They together decided to return to their native state. *Qishu* means "lattice work window," and refers to a luxurious indoor space. Here, Xu Fengzhi is describing the simple joys afforded by natural music and sincere conversation with friends over a mat on the ground.

歡然朱顏舒 Happily our flushed faces relax with ease.

Cao Hua 曹華

願與達人游 I longed for an outing with enlightened men,
 解結遨濠梁 To undo my fetters and roam at the bridge of River Hao.
 狂吟任所適 I sing wildly and let myself do what pleases,
 浪流無何鄉 Waves flow to the Village of Not Anything.⁸⁵

85. This line refers to another well-known conversation between Zhuangzi and Huizi (see *Zhuangzi* 1, “Free and Easy Wandering”). Huizi once complained about the uselessness of Zhuangzi’s words, which he likened to a big *chu* tree he owned: both are “too big and useless” (*da er wu yong* 大而無用). Zhuangzi suggested that since Huizi found the big tree to be useless, why not plant it then in the Village of Not Even Anything (*wu he you zhi xiang* 無何有之鄉), and take a nice nap under it? No one would take an axe to the “useless” tree. And since it has no use, it would not be subjected to either trouble or pain.

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