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# Wang Wei

## Master of Jintishi

During the Tang Dynasty, poetry continued to flourish in China with Wang Wei as one of the three most prominent poets. His poems reflect the three main teachings of the major schools of thought of the time, the Buddhist ideals concerning the impermanence of life, the philosophical Taoist ideal of eremitism, and the Confucian emphasis on moral responsibility and government service. The poems, succinct in length, appeal to the senses with vivid imagery that lets the imagination fly. Although Wang Wei lived life at court, he built an expansive country estate as his escape as was popular among officials of the time. It was here amidst his gardens that many of the poems in his canon were written. Many of his poems are written in a type of standard form made to balance the four tones of classical Chinese, a level tone, rising, falling, and entering tone. Tang Dynasty poets perfected this regulated verse, or Jintishi meaning the “modern-form poetry”. Of his poems, “Fields and Gardens by the River Qi” and “Mourning Yin Yao” are ideal poems to analyze as they exemplify traditions of Tang dynasty poetry including regulated verse.

“Field and Gardens by the River Qi” is written in the lüshi form, the basic form of jintishi. Poems in this style are 8 lines long and divided into couplets with a parallelism between the second and third couplets. Paul Rouzer’s

translation stays true to the formal elements of the Chinese. The opening couplet sets the scene and the second and third elaborate giving details of the landscape and the time of day. The requisite parallelism is easily seen in lines 3 and four of the poem in which nouns, verbs, and adjectives are paired, “The sun darkens beyond the mulberry trees; / The river glistens through the villages.” By creating these parallelisms and juxtaposing the images, Wang Wei was instilling them with deeper meaning, placing the human world as a part of the natural world rather than the uncultivated wild being separate from the world of villages and neatly kept gardens made by man. In the third couplet he establishes the contrast between hunting and agrarian life. Wang Wei also brings in philosophical ideas setting the speaker of the poem as a man who has withdrawn from society to live as a recluse, reflecting the Taoist ideal of eremitism, as well as posing the question, “When a man’s at peace, what business does he have?” which may be interpreted as addressing the Buddhist idea that we should not get caught up in the “ensnaring passions and appetites (that) keep us from our better natures.”(Weinberger 17) Overall this poem is a recluse’s contemplation life and the world around him.

Wang Wei’s “Mourning Yin Yao” is a very different poem from “Fields and Gardens by the River Qi” in not only form, but also in content. It is written in a form of jintishi called pailü, which follows the same conventions of parallelism as lüshi but may be any length. In this poem Wang Wei establishes his Buddhist beliefs in the opening couplet, which not only sets the scene by alerting us to the death of an individual, but also points to the Buddhist belief in

life's transience, and the idea of wu or non-being. Parallelism can be seen clearly in the third and fifth couplets. In the third couplet Wang Wei pairs Yin Yao's mother and daughter greatly differing in age to emphasize how tragic Yin Yao's death is at such a young age. The fifth couplet pairs images, as was done in the previous poem, juxtaposing clouds floating in the sky with the birds that fly through that same sky. This poem is also very different in tone, rather than the quiet reflective tone of a recluse pondering at the end of the day, this poem has a tone that is reflective of many of the feelings a person experiences after the death of a friend, guilt and lamentation are prevalent. The way the speaker talks of Yin Yao makes it apparent that this was not a natural death, whether suicide or execution it is clear that the speaker feels that they and other friends of Yin Yao had a hand in his untimely death, Wang Wei writes in the last three couplets, "But my guidance came too late. Sad/ How you never found understanding./ ...friends.../ They never reached you either. So many/ Ways we failed you."

Wang Wei's poems known for their ability to inspire the imagination and leave the reader dreaming of mountains and rivers, are able to introduce philosophical ideals without being imposing or overly verbose. Succinct in length and crafted with carefully chosen words to follow the conventions of the regulated verse which he excelled at, Wang Wei did not write just on the beauty of nature, he also wrote on the nature of man as seen in "Mourning Yin Yao". His poems give rise to contemplation of one's own life and to the path one will follow. Not aiming to convert the reader to any of the school's of thought to which he subscribed but perhaps to convince the reader to adopt some of the

ideas of the three schools of thought as their own, especially the Buddhist belief in the transience of life, akin to the Western idea and poetic form of Carpe Diem which expresses the belief that life is short we must seize the day.

### **Fields and Gardens by the River Qi**

I dwell apart by the River Qi,  
Where the Eastern wilds stretch far without hills.

The sun darkens beyond the mulberry trees;  
The river glistens through the villages.

Shepherd boys depart, gazing back to their hamlets;  
Hunting dogs return following their men.

When a man's at peace, what business does he have?  
I shut fast my rustic door throughout the day.

\*Translation by Paul Rouzer

## **Mourning Yin Yao**

How long can a life last? And once  
It's gone it's formless all over again.

I think of how you waited for death:  
Ten thousand ways a heart wounds.

Your gentle mother's still not buried,  
Your daughter's hardly turned ten,

But outside the city, cold silence wind-  
scoured expanses, I listen to lament

on and on. Clouds drift boundless skies, 8  
birds wing through without a sound,

and travelers travel deserted silence  
through a midday sun's frozen clarity.

I remember you back then, still alive,  
Asking to study unborn life with me,

But my guidance came too late. Sad  
How you never found understanding.

And those old friends here with gifts—  
They never reached you either. So many

Ways we failed you. All bitter lament, I  
Return to my brush-and-bramble gate.

\*Translation by David Hinton

Bibliography:

Weinberger, E and Paz, O. *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei: How a Chinese Poem is Translated*. Moyer Bell. 1987