

Wang Wei: the Wheel River Poems

Wang Wei (王维; traditional 王維; pinyin, *Wáng Wéi*; 699–761) was a Chinese musician, painter, and poet during the Tang Dynasty (618 to 907). He was a devout Buddhist and used the courtesy name Wang Weimojie in homage to the early Buddhist teacher and bodhisattva *Vimalakirti* (Chinese name 維摩詰 *Wéimójié*). *Vimalakirti* taught the practice of *sunyata* (Sanskrit, emptiness; Chinese 空 *Kōng xìng*), a meditative state wherein the mind is emptied of the self and becomes one with the universe. After a tumultuous life, Wang Wei retired to his villa on the Wang River about 40 km southeast of the imperial capital Chang'an (present day Xi'an). There he composed the *Wǎngchuān jí* (輞川集 The Wheel River Collection): a set of twenty quatrains describing various locations near his villa. Each quatrain was accompanied by a reply from his protégé Pei Di (裴迪; pinyin, *Péi Dí*, 714-?).

A Poet of the High Tang

Wang Wei was born to an aristocratic family in Shanxi province in northeast China. He was a precocious child and quickly showed his talents for music and painting. By 721 he had passed his imperial exams and was appointed as Court Musician in Chang'an. Over the following years he continued with his music and painting, while serving in various official positions in the imperial court. In 755, the general *An Lushan* instigated a revolt against the emperor. Within a year the rebels advanced on Chang'an. The emperor and his court fled over the mountains to Sichuan in the West, but Wang Wei was captured and taken to the rebel capital of Luoyang some 350 km to the East. The imperial forces regrouped and defeated the rebels in 757, releasing Wang Wei. However, since Wang Wei had been forced to serve in the rebel government, he was indicted for treason. After finally being exonerated, Wang Wei retired

to his villa on the Wang River, where he wrote the poems in the *Wangchuan Ji* (Wheel River Collection). Wang Wei died in 761. Followers of *An Lushan* continued fighting against the empire until 763.

Although plagued by intense civil disorder, these times were remarkable for the glorious poetry that was written. Li Bai (701-762), Du Fu (712-770) and Wang Wei were the three greatest poets of a period that became known as the “High Tang” (Owen, 1981). Each of these poets had their own view of life:

Wang Wei became known as the Poet-Buddha, Li Bai as the Poet-Immortal, and Du Fu as the Poet-Sage, respectively symbolizing Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian approaches in their poems. Accordingly, Wang Wei was characterized as the contemplative, Li Bai as the visionary, and Du Fu as the social conscience of the age. (Cartelli, 2019).

However, Cartelli notes that these differences are far from categorical. The religious threads of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism are fully intertwined both in Chinese society (Ching, 1993; Hinton, 2020) and in the poetry of these three writers.

Wang Wei's nature poetry simply describes his experience of the world with little if any interpretation or metaphorical explanation:

Wang's quatrains often ended in enigmatic understatement – a statement, a question, or an image that was so simple or seemed so incomplete that the reader was compelled to look beneath it for the importance. (Owen, 1981, p 38)

Owen (1981, p 45) describes Wang Wei's state of mind as “unselfconsciousness” and relates it to the Buddhist idea of *sunyata* (emptiness). Only if the mind is emptied can one

become aware of truth. And truth perhaps differs between East and West:

in contrast to the West, in the Chinese tradition truth usually lay not behind a mask of orphic complexity but rather behind a mask of guileless simplicity. To draw on this philosophical tradition was to alter entirely the way in which poetry was read: what was said was no longer necessarily all that was meant, and the surface mood might not be the real mood. Particularly in the *Wang Stream Collection*, we find poems that are visually complete but intellectually incomplete, which tease the reader to decipher some hidden truth. (Owen, 1981, p 39)

Yip (1972, p xi) remarks

In a mode of consciousness in which there is no disturbance of intellectual impositions, no hurry-scurry to establish causal relations, each object or moment is given the fullest chance to emerge in spotlighting distinctiveness very much the way everything appears keenly fresh in the orbit of a child's vision.

Paintings

Although Wang Wei was a renowned painter, none of his paintings have survived to the present day. Nevertheless, later artists made many copies and interpretations of his work. One of his most famous paintings was a scroll depicting the various locations mentioned in the *Wangchuan Ji*. This essay will include images from three such copies: one by Guo Zhongshu (929-279) now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, a copy of the Zhongshu scroll in The Freer Gallery in Washington, and a much later scroll by Wang Yuanqi, dated 1711, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. An intriguing website provides images of a scroll together with translations of the *Wangchun Ji* poems.

Wheel River Poems

The *Wǎngchuān jí* (望川集) is a collection of poems containing 20 quatrains (四句 *juéjù*, literal meaning “cut-off lines”) by Wang Wei and 20 replies by his young protégé Pei Di. Each line is composed of 5 characters in a format is known as 五言 (*Wǔyán*). The poems describe various locations near Wang Wei’s villa on the Wang River. The name of the river (望 *Wǎng*, a different character from that in the poet’s name) specifically refers to the rim (felloes or felly) of a wagon wheel, and Hinton (2006) translates the title “Wheel-Rim River.” The river was so named

because of its small eddies and whirlpools which resembled wheels, or because of the spot at the mouth of the river where the current flowed around an island like a wheel (Wagner, 1981, p 88).

Many authors have translated Wang Wei’s contributions to the collection (e.g., Yu, 1980; Barnstone et al., 1991; Hinton, 2020), but only a few include the replies of Pei Di (Yip, 1972, Powell, 2019; Rouzer & Nugent, 2020). The general evaluation has been that Pei Di’s poems were inferior to those Wang Wei. However, Pei Di was a talented young scholar, and a close reading of the poems shows that the pairing of the poems enhances their overall effect (Warner, 2005). This essay will consider five of the poems in the collection. For consistency and because of the sensitivity and precision of the translations, the English versions will all be from *Hiding the Universe* by Wai-lim Yip (1972). The poems will be presented with Wang Wei on the left and Pei Di on the right. The translations will then be followed by the Chinese text, with Wang Wei above and Pei Di below.

Deer Park

Empty mountain: no man is seen,
out, cold mountain in view.
But voices of men are heard.

Day in, day

A

at Wang Wei (1987). Chinese characters often have many meanings, and can be translated as nouns, verbs or adjectives, depending on the context. One difficulty with Wang Wei is his lack of a personal viewpoint. The ending of the first line is therefore better translated “no one is seen” rather than “I see no one.”

The presence of a deer park on Wang Wei’s estate was probably related to Buddhist teachings. Gautama gave his first sermon, wherein he delineated the four noble truths and the eightfold way, at a deer park in Sarnath in Northern India. The Chinese character 柴 *chái* now means “firewood,” although it likely once also meant a “fence,” such as that enclosing a park.

The opening word of the poem 空, *kōng* means empty or emptiness. Wang Wei is clearly alluding to the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* (Yang, 2001; Stepien, 2014).

The characters 返照 translated as “returning or reflected sunlight” might simply mean the light from the setting sun.

The complementary poem by Pei Di makes Wang Wei’s feeling of emptiness extend over time as well as space. He also comments on the difference between the human wayfarer who knows nothing of the way of the forest, and the deer who are naturally attuned to its secrets.

The following illustration of the Deer Park is from the Zhongshu scroll in Tapei:



Lakeside Pavilion

Light barge to welcome guests.
Freely from the lake.
Before windows, toasting bottles of wine.
Hibiscus blooms on all four sides.

The window is brimming with ripples.
The moon, by itself, lingers, back and forth.
At the gorge, bursts of monkey cries.
Wind sends them into the room.

臨	湖	亭
lín overlook	hú lake	tíng pavilion

輕	舸	迎	上客	
qīng light	gě boat/barge	yíng welcome	shàng high/above	kè guest
悠	悠	湖	上	來
yōu distant	yōu distant	hú lake	shàng high/above	lái come
當	軒	對	尊	酒
dāng face	xuān window	duì deal with	zūn pot	jiǔ wine
四	面	芙蓉	開	
sì four	miàn face/aspect	fúróng hibiscus	kāi bloom/open	

當	軒	彌	滉	漾
dāng face	xuān window	mí fill	huàng deep	yàng ripple
孤	月	正	徘徊	徊
gū alone	yuè moon	zhèng up(right)	páihuái walk back and forth	
谷	口	猿	聲	發
gǔ gorge	kǒu mouth	yuán monkey	shēng voice	fā emit
風	傳	入	戶	來
fēng wind	chuán deliver	rù enter	hù door	lái come



The Chinese hibiscus (*Hibiscus x rosa sinensis*) is the most common variant of this showy flower. In China it often symbolizes success. The poem by Pei Di seems to occur after the party with the invited guests. The lake is now windswept, and the lonely cries of monkeys echo through the night.

The following illustration shows the lakeside pavilion in the Wang Yuanqi scroll:



Lake Yi

Flute music rides beyond water's reach.
lake has no limits.

Vast emptiness:

Sun at dusk: to see my lord off.
glimmer: sky's hue merges.

Blue

On the lake, merely turning my head:
with a long whistle:

Moor the boat

Mountain's green-curling, white clouds.
clear winds come.

From four sides

欹 湖
yī Yi hú lake

吹	簫	凌	極	浦
chuī blow/play	xiāo flute	líng cross	jí end/furthest	pǔ shore
日	暮	送	夫	君
rì sun/day	mù sunset	sòng see off	fū man	jūn lord
湖	上	一	迴	首
hú lake	shàng above	yī one/alone	huí rotate/turn	shǒu head
山	青	卷	白	雲
shān mountain	qīng blue/green	juǎn scroll/curve	bái white	yún cloud

空	闊	湖	水	廣
kōng empty	kuò wide	hú lake	shuǐ water	guǎng vast
青	熒	天	色	同
qīng blue/green	yíng shine	tiān sky/heaven	sè color	tóng same
艤	舟	一	長	嘯
yǐ moor (boat)	zhōu boat	yī one/alone	cháng long	xiào whistle
四	面	來	清	風
sì four	miàn face/aspect	lái come/arrive	qīng clear/pure	fēng wind

The Chinese character 青 *qīng* can describe colors ranging from light green to deep blue. Many languages do not discriminate between green and blue, and the term “grue” has been used for this range of colors (Bogushevsaya, 2015). One then takes the color from the context: in this pair of poems, one assumes that Wang Wei’s mountain is green and that Pei Di’s sky is blue. Modern Chinese has evolved the terms 藍 *lán* for blue and 綠 *lǜ* for green, but the older word is still used. In following illustration of Lake Yi from Wang Yuanqi’s scroll, the colors blue and green shade into each other. Pei Di mentions in his poem how the colors of the sky and the lake merge.



Wang Wei's poem is set in peaceful weather. By the time of Pei Di's quatrain, a blustery wind has risen. The sound of the flute has changed to the more strident whistle.

Bamboo Grove

I sit alone among dark bamboos,
the Bamboo Grove,
Strum the lute and unloose my voice.
close to the Way.
Grove so deep, no one knows.
only mountain birds.
The moon comes to shine upon me.
men of the world.

Have been to
Daily to get
In and out,
Deep solitude: no

竹	里	館
zhú bamboo	lǐ within	guǎn guesthouse

獨	坐	幽	篁	裏
dú alone	zuò sit	yōu dark	huáng bamboo grove	lǐ within
彈	琴	復	長	嘯
tán play(music)	qín zither	fù again/return	zhǎng increase	xiào hum
深	林	人	不	知
shēn deep	lín forest	rén person	bù not	zhī know
明	月	來	相	照
míng bright	yuè moon	lái come	xiàng appear	zhào shine

來	過	竹	里	館
lái come	guò pass by	zhú bamboo	lǐ within	guǎn guesthouse
日	與	道	相	親
rì day/sun	yǔ approach	dào way/path	xiàng appear	qīn close
出	入	惟	山	鳥
chū exit	rù enter	wéi but/only	shān mountain	niǎo bird
幽	深	無	世	人
yōu quiet	shēn deep	wú not(hing)	shì world	rén person

The Chinese *guqin* is a plucked seven-stringed instrument favored by Chinese scholars. The illustration below shows an example (c 1700) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The upper board of *wutong* wood represents heaven, and the bottom board of *zi* wood earth. The 13 studs (*hui*) indicate positions for fingering. The strings are made of twisted silk.

The following is a reading of the Wang Wei poem from Librivox:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ww-bamboo-grove.mp3>

Yu (1980, p 191) points out that the *xiào* referred to in the second line was

a combination of Taoist breathing techniques and whistling

which was said to express feelings and was associated with harmonizing with nature and achieving immortality; the word has also been translated as “humming,” “singing,” and “crooning.” The tradition of the Xiao began during the Jin dynasty and has always been linked with Taoism. Its most famous practitioner was Sun Deng, a friend of the poet Ruan Jiu whose Xiao was said to sound like a phoenix.

The ideas of solitude and emptiness in the Wang Wei quatrain are extended in Pei Di’s reply. He talks specifically about the *Dao* (道) commonly translated as “The Way” – the underlying principle of the universe considered in Taoism. The character 無 *wu*, a negative term (“not” or “no”), is used in Taoism and Chan Buddhism to denote “nonbeing” or “absence” (Hinton, 2020, pp 49-55). Thus, the ending of Pei Di’s poem might be describing the state of mind wherein the world and its people have become nothing.

The following illustration shows the lodge in the bamboo grove as represented in the Freer gallery scroll:



Poetry, calligraphy and painting – the “three perfections” – are often combined in Chinese art (Sullivan 1974). The following illustration shows Wang Wei’s poem about the Bamboo Grove as written by different calligraphers. On the right is regular script from Yip’s *Hiding the Universe*: this presents the quatrains of both Wang Wei and Pei Di. The other examples show only Wang Wei’s contribution. From right to left: calligraphy from the *Wangchuan Ji* scroll of Guo Zhongshu; from the scroll of Wang Yuanqi; modern cursive calligraphy by the Japanese artist Nakamura Furetsu from around 1915.

竹里館

獨坐幽篁裏，彈琴復長嘯。
深林人不知，明月來相照。

同詠

裴迪

來過竹里館，日與道相親。
出入惟山鳥，幽深無世人。

獨坐幽篁裏，彈琴復長嘯。
深林人不知，明月來相照。

竹里館

獨坐幽篁裏，彈琴復長嘯。
深林人不知，明月來相照。

獨坐幽篁裏，彈琴復長嘯。
深林人不知，明月來相照。

不抄書



Pepper Orchard

Cassia wine to welcome the Lord's child.
Sweet pollia to give to the Beauty.
Nectar of pepper for libation at a jewelled mat.
About to descend, Lord of Clouds.

Scarlet thorns catch one's clothes.
Sweet scent stays with transient guests.
Happily, they are good for spice-cooking.
Please bend down and pick a few.

椒	園
jiāo pepper	yuán orchard

桂	尊	迎	帝	子
guì cassia	zūn pot/cup	yíng welcome	dì lord/god	zǐ child
杜	若	贈	佳	人
dù pollia	ruò pollia	zèng present	jiā beautiful	rén person
椒	漿	尊	瑤	席
jiāo pepper	jiāng juice	zūn pot/cup	yáo jade	xí seat
欲	下	雲	中	君
yù desire	xià descend	yún cloud	zhōng center	jūn lord

丹	刺	胃	人	衣
dān red	cì thorn	juàn tangle	rén person	yī clothes
芳	香	留	過	客
fāng fragrant	xiāng fragrant	liú remain	guò pass	kè visitor
幸	堪	調	鼎	用
xìng lucky	kān be able to	tiáo cook/mix	dǐng cauldron	yòng use/eat
願	君	垂	採	摘
yuàn desire	jūn lord	chuí bend	cǎi pick	zhāi select

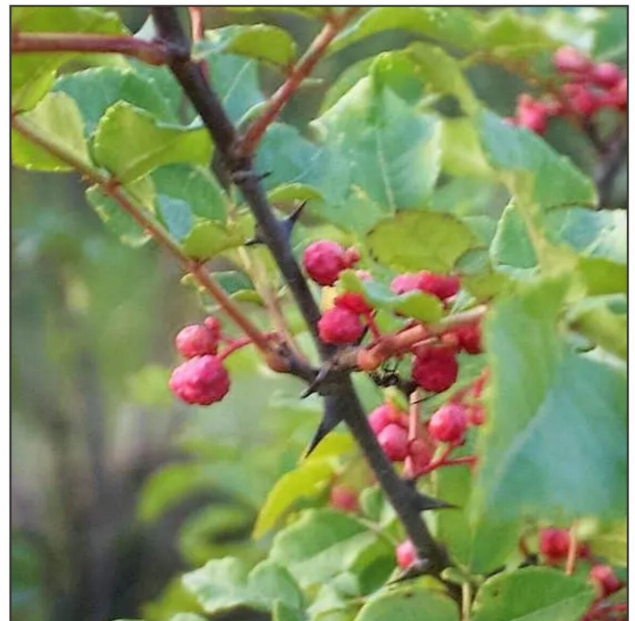
Wang Wei's quatrain alludes to some ancient Chinese songs used to invoke the appearance of the Gods. Several of these songs were included in the *Juejie* ("Nine Songs") which were anthologized in the collection called *Chuci* ("Songs of the South," or "Songs of Chu"). The following is from the first of these songs (as translated by Hawkes and Liu, 1959, p 36):

Song to the Great Lord of the Eastern World

On a lucky day with an auspicious name.
 Reverently we come to delight the Lord on High
 We grasp the long sword's haft of jade.
 And our girdle pendants clash and chime
 Jade weights fasten the god's jewelled mat.

Now take the rich and fragrant flower offerings
The meats cooked in melilotus, served on orchid
mats,
And libations of cinnamon wine and pepper sauces!
Flourish the drumsticks and beat all the drums!

Many different plants are used as gifts and food for the Gods. *Cinnamomum cassia* is Chinese cinnamon, the bark of which is used as a spice. *Pollia japonica* is a Chinese flowering plant that gives a strikingly beautiful (but inedible) iridescent purple fruit. Sichuan peppers are used to add spice to Chinese dishes. *Melilotus* or sweet clover is a herb with an aroma like vanilla. The following illustration shows *Pollia* fruit on the left and Sichuan peppers on the right.



Pei Di's poem describes the pepper trees in the orchard without making any allusions to the invocation of the Gods. The thorns on the pepper tree are very prominent.

The following illustration shows a *zun* and a *ding*, ceremonial bronze vessels from the Shang dynasty (second millennium BCE). The *zun* is from the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the *ding* from the Shanghai Museum:



The following illustration shows (on the left) the Pepper Tree Orchard from the scroll in the Freer Gallery. The neighbouring orchard (on the right) contains Lacquer Trees (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*), the sap of which is used in the production of lacquer. These trees are the subject of another pair of quatrains in the *Wangchuan Ji*.



Illusion and Reality

Ferguson (1927, pp 73-74) suggested that the Wangchuan estate described in the poems and depicted on the scroll was more imaginary than real:

The poem and the picture both represent Wang Ch'uan as a place of splendor and magnificence, but this was the product solely of poetical license ... Wang Wei could only have had a very humble cottage in this secluded spot. If it had been otherwise he would have attracted the attention of the rapacious myrmidons of the court, and the place would have been confiscated ... Wang Wei's imagination ... clothed a barren hillside with beautiful rare trees, with spacious courtyards, with a broad stream upon which boats plied and on whose bank stood a pretty fishing pavilion, with a deer park, with storks and birds—all of the delights of eye and ear were brought together in this one lovely spot by the fancy of a brilliant genius. Life had been hard and severe for him, but his spirit was untamed. It reveled in all of the sensuous delights which it could spiritualize, even though it had spurned them when they were thrust upon it.

However, Ferguson probably exaggerated the simplicity of Wang Wei's country home. Wagner (1981) claimed that it was far more than a "humble cottage"

The villa had previously belonged to the Early T'ang poet Sung Chih-wen (ca. 663-712), but was apparently unoccupied for about thirty years between owners. When Wang Wei acquired the estate he had it repaired, and he may have personally supervised the design and reconstruction of its various houses, pavilions, gardens, and parks. Paintings and poems depict the estate as a large piece of property with elaborate residential buildings and landscape architecture: it was by no means a simple rustic hut hidden in the woods.

Nevertheless, the scenes that Wang Wei and Pei Di described in the poems owe as much to poetic imagination as to reality. In this regard, we must wonder how the poems relate to Buddhism. The Buddhist idea of the perceived world is that it is illusion (*maya*). What then is the imagined world? Does the imagination exaggerate our illusions, or does it provide insight into what might be the true reality beneath them? Wagner (1981, p 140) remarks:

Wang Wei aspires to transcendence of the particular, and of the visual physical world, at the same time that he is attached to the sensual delights which he so sensitively perceives in that world. Through visual imagery he achieves metaphoric representation of that realm which cannot be seen, a realm which transcends the material world, the perceiving senses, the definitions of language, and the discerning consciousness. Wang Wei's vision, then, moves through the world of concrete natural objects to attain a glimpse of "distant emptiness."

Epilogue

We can conclude this brief discussion of Wang Wei's poetry

with another poem wherein he describes a trip to the *Zhongnan* (“far south”) Mountain near his Wangchuan Villa (translation by Rouzer, 2020, Volume I, p. 79):

終南別業 My villa at Mt. Zhongnan

中歲頗好道 In middle age I grow rather fond of the Way;

晚家南山陲 My late home is in a corner of Mt. Zhongnan.

興來每獨往 When the mood comes, I always go out alone;

勝事空自知 I myself know, emptily, of these splendid things.

行到水窮處 I walk to where the waters begin,

坐看雲起時 I sit and watch when the clouds arise.

偶然值林叟 By chance I meet an old man of the woods;

談笑無還期 We chat and laugh, no time we have to go home.

The Cleveland Museum of Art possesses a beautiful fan created in about 1256. On one side is calligraphy by Emperor Lizong (1205-1264) presenting the 5th and 6th lines of Wang Wei’s poem. On the other side is a painting by Ma Lin (~1180-1260) showing *A Scholar Reclining and Watching Rising Clouds*. The illustration at the beginning of this essay is a high-contrast rendition of the Ma Lin painting.



Stephen Owen relates the description of the rising clouds to another Wang Wei poem (*Floating on the Han River*) which contains the lines

江流天地外

The river flows out beyond Heaven and Earth

山色有無中

The mountain's color between Being and Nonbeing

what this describes is a mountain in a mist in that peculiar way in which you can just barely see a color space in the mist, and you think there's a mountain there, but in the Buddhist sense of the illusions of the world, you have this huge thing, this mountain and all of a sudden, its presence, its very existence, sort of half fades in and out. It's between being there and not being there.

The lines describe the ideas of yǒu (有, being/possession/existence) and wú (无, simplified 无, nonbeing, nothingness). A central idea in Chan Buddhism is *sunyata*: the meditative practice of emptying oneself of being to become one with the universe.

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