BEYOND PERFECTION –
THE RHETORIC OF CHÁN POETRY IN WÁNG WÉI’S
WÁNG STREAM COLLECTION

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In the Táng and especially Sòng dynasties, a rhetoric of Chán poetry emerges in China: ‘Discourse on poetry is like discourse on Chán’ 論詩如論禪.\(^1\) However, it is not until the Míng and Qíng dynasties that the so-called ‘Buddha of Poetry’ (shífó 詩佛), Wáng Wéi 王維 (?701–?761), is retrogressively linked to this rhetoric. In this paper, I will explore aspects of Wáng Wéi’s nature poetry that may have formed the basis for such a link.\(^2\) I will focus on the 20-poem cycle *The Wáng Stream Collection* 鼎川集, in which a famous Qíng critic finds that ‘every word accords with Chán’ 字字入禪.\(^3\) In particular, I will look at structural and linguistic features that may be of greater importance in this context than previously realised.

While many of the poems in Wáng Wéi’s *Wáng Stream Collection* contain overtly Daoist elements, none of them contains explicit links to Chán or any other kind of Buddhist doctrine. If this is Chán poetry, therefore, its force and beauty lie just as much in what is left unsaid as in what is made explicit.

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\(^1\) Yán Yǔ 嚴羽: Cāngláng shíhuà 滄浪詩話. Quoted from Guǒ Shāoyú 1961:11. Yán Yǔ was a Sòng critic, but his Táng predecessors include the monk Jiàorán 皎然 (late 8\(^{th}\) century) and especially the poet and critic Sīkōng Tù 司空圖 (837–908).

\(^2\) Wáng Wéi’s poems are quoted from Chén Tiēmín 1997, though a few misprints have been corrected on the basis of other editions. In addition to the conference participants and an anonymous reviewer, I have been helped a lot by discussions of this paper and these poems with Stephen Owen, Zhāng Bīn 張斌, Ann Kunish, participants at a talk at National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan in November 2007, and participants in a course for master students at the University of Oslo in the Spring of 2007.

\(^3\) Wáng Shìzhēn 1961:83.
Wáng Wéi and the Rhetoric of Chán Poetry

The association between Wáng Wéi’s non-doctrinal nature poetry and Chán is a late one. The first known instance is a comment by the Ming dynasty critic Lǐ Mèngyáng 李夢陽 (1473–1530):⁴

The best of Wáng Wéi’s poems are like Chán, while the lesser ones are like [the trivial products of] a monk.

王維詩高者似禪，卑者似僧。

Less than a century later, the association between Wáng Wéi and Chán has become standard, as shown by the following disapproving comment by the famous Chán master Hānshān Déqīng 憨山德清 (1546–1623):⁵

Poets like Wáng Wéi are full of Buddhist talk, and later generations have sought to outdo each other in praising his skill in Chán. But one should know that this is not [real] Chán, only literary Chán.

若王維多佛語。後人爭誇善禪。要之[知]豈[其]非禪耶。特文字禪耳。

During the same period, the poet and critic Hú Yīnglín 胡應麟 (1551–1602) may have become the first to link poems from the Wáng Stream Collection to Chán:⁶

‘Lotus flowers on branches of trees / Mountains filled with red calyces / Near the quiet and empty house by the brook / they blossom profusely and fall to the ground’ is a pentasyllabic quatrain entering Chán.

「木末芙蓉花，山中發紅萼。澗戶寂無人，紛紛開且落。」五言絕之人禪者。

He explains this statement further by the effect such poems have on the reader:⁷

When reading them, you forget both yourself and the outside world, and all thoughts come to rest. I never knew that metered poetry could convey such subtle truths.

讀之身世兩忘，萬念皆寂，不稱聲律中，有此妙詮。

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⁴ Lǐ Mèngyáng n.d.
⁵ Hānshān 2005:203f.
⁷ *Ibid.*:119.
The famous Qīng critic Wáng Shìzhēn 王士禛 (1634–1711) goes even further in expounding the spiritual effect of this kind of poetry: ⁸

When reading Wáng Wéi and Pèi Dì’s ‘Wáng Stream Collection’ and Zǔ Yōng’s ‘Lingering Snow on the Zhōngnán Mountains,’ even a dull-minded beginner may reach sudden enlightenment.

觀王裴《辋川集》及祖詠《終南殘雪》詩，雖鈍根初機，亦能頓悟。

The reference to enlightenment (wù 悟, or often miàowù 妙悟 ‘subtle enlightenment’) as a common feature of poetry and Chán had been a stock of the trade for poetry critics since the famous Sòng critic Yán Yǔ 嚴羽 (?1195–?1245) said: ⁹

Generally, the way of Chán is only about subtle enlightenment, and the way of poetry is also about subtle enlightenment.

大抵禪道惟在妙悟，詩道亦在妙悟。

While Yán Yǔ is primarily using Chán as an analogy (yù 喻) for poetry, not an equation, later critics are far more prone to equate the two. Furthermore, Yán Yǔ is primarily referring to similarities in the procedures of Chán discipline and the study of poetry, and only secondarily to the enlightened state of the Chán practitioner and the poet (or even poem). Later critics tend to focus on poetry as the expression of an enlightened mind or, as in the quotes by Hú Yínglín and Wáng Shìzhēn above, the power of poetry to enlighten the reader. Finally, Yán Yǔ is not much concerned with Wáng Wéi at all, clearly preferring other Táng poets. It was only during the Míng and the Qīng dynasties that the analogies and equations between Chán and poetry were applied to Wáng Wéi’s non-doctrinal nature poetry, such as the Wáng Stream Collection.

**Modern Counterarguments**

It should not surprise anyone, therefore, that the view of the Wáng Stream Collection as Chán poetry has been strongly contested. In *The Chan Interpretations of Wang Wei’s Poetry: A Critical Review*, Yang

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⁹ Guó Shàoyù 1961:12.
Jingqing 2007 argues that Wáng Wéi’s nature poetry should not be read as Chán poetry, because:

- there is no indication that the poet himself intended these poems to allude to Chán, and his contemporaries do not seem to have read any Chán significance into them;
- although the analogies between Chán and poetry were discussed already during the Táng dynasty and became very fashionable in the Sòng, the link between Wáng Wéi’s nature poetry and Chán was not even hinted at before the Mín dynasty;
- Wáng Wéi’s purported reclusive tendencies were never strong enough to make him refuse any offer of an official position;
- in Wáng Wéi’s time, reclusion was not usually linked to Buddhism anyway, and he himself never explicitly associated reclusion with Chán;
- among the approximately 15 Buddhist monks mentioned in Wáng Wéi’s surviving works, only two were known to be from the Chán school, and he also had close contact with Daoists;
- in Wáng Wéi’s nature poetry, words like kōng 空 ‘empty; emptiness’ and jìng 靜 ‘silence; quiet’ are used in their general meanings with no obvious Chán or even Buddhist implications.

All this makes sense. At the same time, however, there is no doubt that Wáng Wéi was indeed a Buddhist. He became particularly devout during the last few years of his life, but even in his twenties, he had a Buddhist teacher and practised Buddhist meditation. Buddhism did play a central role in his life.

Wáng Wéi also wrote explicitly Buddhist poetry. According to Chén Tiěmǐn 1990, 43 of 376 surviving poems (as well as 19 out of 70 surviving prose pieces) contain overt references to Buddhism.10 Buddhism seems to have played a significant role, therefore, not only in Wáng Wéi’s life, but also in his poetry. The later reference to Wáng Wéi as ‘Buddha of Poetry’ (shīfó 詩佛) is by no means unfounded.

Yang argues, however, that: (1) there is little reason to read Buddhist meaning into poems that contain no overt reference to Buddhism, and (2) the kind of Buddhism to which Wáng Wéi subscribed cannot be identified with Chán.

By Chán, Yang refers to the Southern Chán School that grew out of Shénhuí’s 神惠 attacks on the Northern School. This seems to make sense, since in the year 745 Wáng Wéi met Shénhuí and conversed

10 See also Lomová 2006.
with him for several days. As Yang himself notes, however, it is not always clear which of the many meanings of the word \textit{chán} 禪 is implied by those who insist on the presence of such elements in Wáng Wéi’s nature poetry: ‘[…] the process of meditation [Wáng Wéi did refer to his own meditative practice as \textit{chán}], the mental state of enlightenment through meditation, Chan doctrines, or the strange ways in which Chan masters behaved in order to enlighten students as to the ultimate truth’ (Yang 2007:7). In fact, by Ming times, the term \textit{chán} had become so vague and all-encompassing as to allow an even wider range of interpretations, and the assertion that Wáng Wéi’s nature poetry has \textit{chán} qualities is probably unfalsifiable unless one restricts the meaning of the term, as Yang does, and then risks testing a hypothesis that is more restricted and specific than anyone ever intended.

In fact, the early comparisons of poetry and Chán do not at all aim at showing the adherence of poets to Buddhism, and even less to any specific school of Chán. When Yán Yū says that ‘those who study the poetry of the Hán, Wèi, Jin and High Tâng are of the Linjì school [of Chán]’ 學漢、魏、晉與盛唐詩者，臨濟下也,\footnote{Guò Shàoyù 1961:12.} he is not making an historical statement, since Linjì himself lived after all these periods. He is simply comparing what he considered the best of poetry to what he and many other Sòng literati considered to be the greatest school of Chán. The Ming and Qing critics associating Wáng Wéi’s poetry with Chán may have had similar preferences, but are again mostly concerned with the qualities of Wáng Wéi’s poetry, not with historical or biographical facts. They may, however, be less prone than Yán Yū to use the Chán label for poets with no historical connection to Buddhism, and some of them, such as Lí Wéizhën 李維楨 (1547–1626) do mix accounts of Wáng Wéi’s Chán orientation with statements about the Chán qualities of his doctrinal and non-doctrinal poems. He and others, therefore, are moving in the direction of a modern rhetoric that relates the assumed Chán qualities of Wáng Wéi’s nature poems to the biographical facts of his life and the historical facts concerning Chán Buddhism.
Characteristics of Chán Poetry

This paper is less concerned with proving or disproving specific hypotheses concerning the Chán nature of Wáng Wéi’s poetry than with exploring the qualities that have prompted Chinese poetry critics to associate the poems in question with Chán.

One such feature is their perceived non-reliance on language, as when Lǐ Wéizhēn claims that Wáng Wéi’s poems on a variety of topics ‘show evidence of Chán enlightenment beyond the words’悟禅於言外,12 when Shēn Déqián 沈德潛 (1673～1769) asks if it is not true that some of Wáng Wéi’s poetic lines ‘contain a flavour beyond language’言外有餘味,13 and when Wáng Shízhēn says that Táng quatrains often express ‘the subtness of attaining the meaning and forgetting the words’得意忘言之妙.14 Poems, of course, rely on language, but in this case language is compared to a raft used to cross the river to the other shore, i.e., to enlightenment. The real meaning of poetry lies beyond the words. Wáng Shízhēn quotes several famous Chán stories as illustrations: the Buddha holding a flower in his hand and Mahākāśyapa expressing his enlightenment with a silent smile (世尊拈花，迦葉微笑), Vimalakīrti replying with silence when asked by the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī about the ultimate truth (淨名默然), and the first Chán patriarch Bodhidharma stating that Huīkě’s silence on a similar occasion indicated he had reached the ‘marrow’ of his teaching (達磨得髓).15

A related feature is the perceived lack of traces of Chán poetry, compared by Yán Yǔ to sounds passing through the air, the complexion of a face, the moon reflected in water, and an image reflected in a mirror空中之音，相中之色，水中之月，鏡中之象.16 Xú Zēng links this to an originality that springs from subtle enlightenment, and compares Wáng Wéi favourably to the more famous, but in his opinion less original, poet Dù Fǔ杜甫.17

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12 Quoted from Yang 2007:199.
15 Ibid.:69, 83.
While Dù Fǔ observes strictly his predecessors’ legacy and bases himself on detectable standards, Wáng Wéi is only concerned with subtle enlightenment with absolutely no reachable marks.

To Xú Zēng, Dù Fǔ’s diligence and obedience produces a lesser kind of poetry than what he perceives as Wáng Wéi’s free, unrestrained and non-attached state of mind.

Both the non-reliance on language and the lack of traces indicate that the Chán qualities of poetry, as perceived by these critics, lie in a certain freedom of the spirit, purportedly resulting from subtle enlightenment. If we look for more concrete signs of this spiritual freedom, however, we will soon find ourselves at a loss. While many of the critics quote lines of poetry that they find particularly Chán-like, they remain quite abstract in their interests and seldom explain in any detail what exactly this means. Modern scholars have been slightly more specific, and have suggested that even in his non-doctrinal poetry, Wáng Wéi is concerned with typical Chán themes like emptiness (kōng 空), quietude (jing 靜), and ‘following conditions and yielding to destiny’ (suí yuàn rèn yùn 隨緣任運).  

However, although the character ‘空’ does occur three times in the Wáng Stream Collection, its use does not seem to be linked to Buddhist ideas, and there is even less concern with quietude and following conditions and yielding to destiny. There is more interest in solitude (jì 寂, dú 獨, etc.), which might be seen as representing Chán-like reclusion, but there is even more concern with the pleasures of friendship and company.

For concrete signs of the qualities associated with Chán within this rhetoric, we clearly have to look elsewhere. In this paper, therefore, I shall not primarily look for such signs in the content of the poems, but in their structure and language. I shall argue that most of the poems in the Wáng Stream Collection employ structural and linguistic features that serve to convey an impression of a free and unrestrained frame of mind that is, at least for the moment, able to let go of the constraints of officialdom, imperial grandeur and highbrow literacy and enter into a more low-key and good-humoured mode of rustic simplicity and relaxed immediacy. The features involved include the use of direct

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imagery, rustic language, unconventional structures, the pentasyllabic (rather than heptasyllabic) quatrains (rather than octave form), and the use of old-style rather than new-style rules for tones and rhymes. In addition, there comes the use of Daoist allusions, playfully indicating that this spiritual freedom provides a way towards immortality. More seriously, this poetic language is used to explore multiple perspectives on reality, and a more direct perception of it, in order to liberate the mind from its habitual modes of cognition. Modern scholars, like Yang Jingqing, may be right in doubting the Chân underpinnings of these poems, but they easily accord with the quite open notion of ‘subtle enlightenment’ underlying the Ming and Qing rhetoric of Chân poetry.

The Perfect Poem

Let us begin with a Wáng Wéi poem that no-one, as far as I am aware, has ever associated with Chân, ‘Visiting the Qin Emperor’s Tomb’ (Guó Qínhuáng mù 過秦皇墓). This is one of his earliest surviving pieces, possibly written when the author was no more than 14 years old (or 15, according to the Chinese way of counting age, though there are also sources indicating he was 19/20). As such, it is an extremely impressive poem, showing the young Wáng Wéi as a precociously adept poetic craftsman, mastering all the complex formal and structural requirements of regulated verse (lǜshī 律詩). In and of itself, it does not come through as a particularly memorable poem, its formal perfection making it a little stiff and stolid, but for a teenager it is truly brilliant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>過秦皇墓</th>
<th>Visiting the Qin Emperor’s Tomb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>古墓成葦嶺</td>
<td>The ancient tomb has become a verdant hill,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>幽宮象紫台</td>
<td>the secluded palace is like a celestial abode.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>星辰七曜開</td>
<td>The stars above keep apart the seven planets,20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>河漢九泉開</td>
<td>the Milky Way opens onto the Netherworlds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>有海人寧渡</td>
<td>Though there is a sea, men can hardly cross;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>無春雁不回</td>
<td>when there is no spring, geese will not return.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>更聞松韻切</td>
<td>I also hear the imploring sound of the pines,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>疑是大夫哀</td>
<td>as if the senior officials were mourning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19 The use of 紫台 plays on its double meaning, either ‘imperial palace’ or ‘abode for Daoist gods.’
20 The seven ‘planets’ are the sun, the moon and five planets.
If the main quality of Wáng Wéi’s nature poetry lies in its simplicity and directness, this poem offers a sharp contrast. The only direct reference to what is actually perceived lies in the word cāng líng 蒼嶺 ‘verdant hill’ in line 1 and possibly the word sōng 松 ‘pine(s)’ in line 7. The rest is allusions to what the young poet has read or been told about the tomb he is visiting. The very fact that this is the tomb of the First Emperor—or indeed any tomb at all—would hardly have been possible to know if it were not for tradition, and the palace imagery builds on the same traditions. The reference to stars, planets and the Milky Way hardly indicates that he visited the tomb at night, but reflects the Hánshū 漢書 account of artificial stars inside the First Emperor’s tomb. The idea of the jiǔ quàn 九泉 ‘nine wells > the Netherworld’ is of course based on beliefs, not on perception. The presence inside the tomb of an ‘ocean’ (rivers of mercury) and of (artificial) geese is also based on Hánshū accounts. The pine trees referred to in line 7, even if they are real pine trees, are also references to the story about the First Emperor jocularly appointing a pine tree under which he sought shelter during rainfall to the position of minister of the fifth rank.

In Wáng Wéi’s time, the division of poems into one predominately descriptive part (‘scene,’ jǐng 景) and one more subjectively reflective part (‘emotion,’ qíng 情) was already standard. So was, in practice, the division of poems into the four elements opening qǐ 起, continuation 承, turn-around 轉 and conclusion 合, although these terms were coined later and were more often applied to quatrains than to eight-line poems:

- 古墓成蒼嶺，幽宮象紫台 OPENING
- 星辰七曜隔，河漢九泉開 SCENE
- 有海人寧渡，無春雁不回 CONTINUATION
- 更聞松韻切，疑是大夫哀 TURN-AROUND
- 但聞松韻切，疑是大夫哀 CONCLUSION
- 承開生長牙，疑是大夫哀 EMOTION

As in most poetry of its type, the content-wise division of the poem into two-line units (couplets) is underlined by the perfect level-toned rhymes at the end of each paired line (and the oblique-toned non-rhyme at the end of each odd line), as well as the parallelism between the two lines of each couplet not only in the required second and third couplet, but also in the first couplet, and there are even intimations of parallelism in the last couplet:
The semantic (as opposed to purely syntactic) parallelism is complex. The * mù 墓 ‘tomb’ and * lìng 禮 ‘ridge’ of line 1 and the * gōng 宮 ‘palace’ and * tái 台 ‘terrace’ of line 2 all refer to the same hill, functioning as the tomb of an emperor and therefore as an imperial abode. The * gǔ 古 ‘ancient’ of line 1 and * yōu 窮 ‘secluded’ of line 2 both refer to a time or a space that is not directly accessible, and the * cāng 蒼 ‘verdant’ of line 1 and * zǐ 紫 ‘purple’ of line 2 both refer to colours, either the directly perceived colour of the hill or the symbolic colour of the emperor. The * xīngchén 星辰 ‘stars’ and * qūyào 七曜 ‘planets’ of line 3 refer to celestial bodies, while the literal meanings of * Hé-Hàn 河漢 ‘the Yellow River and the Hán River’ and * jiù quán 九泉 ‘the Nine Springs’ of line 4 refer to sources of water, though * Hé-Hàn 河漢 actually refers to the celestial bodies of the Milky Way, and * jiù quán 九泉 to the Netherworld, underlining the fact that the celestial bodies occur on the inside of the tomb, not in the world of the living. Lines 5 and 6 both contain a subordinate clause with an existential verb and its object, followed by a matrix clause in which animate (though in the case of the geese actually artificial) beings are described as being unable to move. And, in lines 7 and 8, * sōng yún 松韻 ‘sound of the pines’ and * dàfǔ 大夫 ‘official(s)’ actually refer to pine trees, and * qìè 切 ‘imploring’ and * āi 哀 ‘sorrowful’ to intense feelings.

As in most pentasyllabic regulated verse, the rhythmic units of each line are 2+2+1, regardless of whether this fits with the syntactic pattern. This division has consequences for the distribution of level and oblique tones. The rule for the monosyllabic unit at the end of each line is simple: If it rhymes, it must be level tone, if not, it must be oblique. The rule for the two disyllabic units are as follows:

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[ATTR N][V [ATTR N][V]]

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[[V N][ADV][V]][S]

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X [[V][[ATTR N][V]][S]]

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1. In each line, the last syllable of the two disyllabic units must have opposite tones, as when the oblique tone of 墓 alternates with the level tone of 洗.

2. In each couplet, the two lines must have opposite tone patterns, as when the oblique-level pattern of 墓 – 洗 in the first line alternates with the level-oblique pattern of 畔 – 紫 in the second line.

3. In each four-line unit, the two couplets must have contrasting tone patterns, as when the oblique-level/level-oblique pattern of 墓 – 洗 / 畔 – 紫 in the first couplet contrasts with the level-oblique/oblique-level pattern of 辰 – 曦 / 湧 – 泉 in the second couplet.

4. In an eight-line poem, the two four-line units must have the same tone patterns, as when the oblique-level/level-oblique/level-oblique/oblique-level pattern of 墓 – 洗 / 畔 – 紫 / 辰 – 曦 / 湧 – 泉 in the first four-line unit is repeated in 海 – 寧 / 春 – 不 / 声 – 娲 / 是 – 夫 in the second.

The resulting tone pattern is illustrated below:

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古墓 成斯 嶴 oblique-level / level-oblique
幽宫 象紫 那 CONTRAST
                      CONTRAST
星辰 七曜 隔 level-oblique
河汉 九泉 開 CONTRAST
                      REPEITION
                      CONTRAST
有海 人寧 渡 oblique-level
無春 雁不 回 CONTRAST
                      CONTRAST
更闇 松韻 切 level-oblique
疑是 大夫 哀 CONTRAST
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The young Wáng Wěi follows these rules strictly, as most writers of regulated verse would do in his time, and as he himself would continue to do whenever he wrote regulated verse later in life.

There are also tonal rules for the remaining syllables, but most of these are optional, and some of them are, in fact, violated by Wáng Wěi, as in the characters marked with bold:
The three violations that affect syllable 1 in a line are in fact quite normal, and are not considered serious at all. The one violation affecting syllable 3 is less acceptable, since tone-rule violations in syllable 3 are usually either avoided or made up for by also changing the tone of syllable 3 in the following line, which is not the case here. Note, however, that the young Wáng Wéi clearly has a purpose in breaking the rules. In fact, he adheres even more strictly to the principle of tone-contrast in disyllabic rhythm units than the conventional rules do. Whenever he breaks the rules, he changes what has been a lack of tonal contrast between two disyllabic units within a single line to a perfect contrast. As a result, each line contains a perfect tonal contrast between its two disyllabic rhythm units:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>古墓成葦</th>
<th>幽宮象紫</th>
<th>星辰上曜</th>
<th>河漢九泉</th>
<th>有海人寧</th>
<th>無春雁不</th>
<th>更聞松韻</th>
<th>疑是大夫</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>oblique-oblique</td>
<td>level-level</td>
<td>oblique-oblique</td>
<td>level-level</td>
<td>oblique-oblique</td>
<td>level-level</td>
<td>oblique-level</td>
<td>level-oblique</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is as if the rigid and complex rules of new-style poetry were not enough for the young Wáng Wéi. Both the over-elaborate use of parallelism and the exaggerated tonal symmetry express an eagerness to display his own impressive ability to abide by rules that are even stricter. The young Wáng Wéi was still far removed from the style that would later be associated with Chán.

Beyond Perfection: Unassuming Privacy

Like ‘Visiting the Qin Emperor’s Tomb,’ the 20 poems in the Wáng Stream Collection are written to commemorate scenic spots. In most other respects, however, these poems constitute sharp contrasts to the
one we have been looking at above, and these contrasts may illustrate some of the features that have prompted later readers to regard these poems as Chán poetry.

First of all, the spots commemorated are private and unassuming, located on a property owned by Wang Wei himself and used as a place of retreat. As opposed to the imperial grandeur of the First Emperor’s tomb, these are sites of little or no historical interest, apart from the fact that the poet Song Zhīwén 宋之問 (ca. 650—ca. 712) had once lived there. There is none of the perfect geometry of a palace-like tomb with stars above and rivers and oceans below (and men and geese in between), nor is there any indication of nature directly responding to the affairs of the human world the way the pine trees are seen to do in response to the First Emperor's death.

The poems themselves are equally unassuming. While in ‘Visiting the Qin Emperor’s Tomb’ the poet appears to speak to the world in grand terms, the Wang Stream Collection is composed in what seems to be the light and sometimes humorous mood of comradeship between the poet and his friend Pei Di 裴迪, who also composed 20 poems commemorating the same scenic spots.

This unassuming privacy is not only conducive to a reclusive orientation, but may also be seen as an expression of the ‘straightforward mind’ (zhīxīn 直心) expounded by many Chán teachers, including the Sixth Patriarch Huineng 慧能, for whom Wang Wei is known to have written a commemorative stele. We have no indication that Wang Wei himself thought of the Wang Stream Collection in terms of the straightforward mind (though he obviously did think of the Wang Stream as a place for reclusion), but for later readers this association may have been part of what was conceived of as a Chán feature.

In the following, we shall look at various linguistic and structural features that may be seen, at least in retrospect, as expressions of this straightforward mind.

_Beyond Perfection: Direct Imagery_

With some notable exceptions to which I shall return below, the imagery of most of the poems in the Wang Stream Collection is exceedingly simple and direct. The most extreme case is perhaps ‘The Luán Rapids,’ _Luánjiā lài_ 樂家瀨:
At least on the surface, this poem is purely descriptive, with no allusions or metaphors, and even without the almost obligatory subjective reflection or reaction at the end. The poem seems to invite us to see things as they are when they are not distorted by the usual veil of personal and cultural associations, much in line with a Chán view.

Even when poems in this collection do contain allusions, the focus is still often on the concrete here-and-now rather than on any meaning provided by the reference source. For instance, when the first line of the poem ‘Magnolia Glen’ (Xīnyí wù 辛夷塢) mentions lotus flowers growing on the branches of trees, this refers concretely to actual magnolia flowers, which resemble lotus, but grow on trees rather than in water:

| 木末芙蓉花 | Lotus flowers on branches of trees |
|  | 山中發紅萼 |
|  | 潺戶寂無人 |
|  | 紛紛開且落 |

While the image alludes to a poem in *The Songs of Chū* (Chūcí 楚辭) in which the shaman-poet compares the likelihood of meeting with his goddess-love to that of finding lotuses on tree branches, this is more a humorous way of describing magnolia flowers than an actual invitation to enter into the original poem’s world of shamanism (though see further discussion of such allusions below). The rest of the poem makes no further reference to *The Songs of Chū*, and is again purely descriptive.

This direct imagery may be seen to reflect a wish to arrive at an equally direct and unornamented perception of the world, in line with Chán ideas of the straightforward mind.

*Beyond Perfection: Rustic Language*

In contrast to the imperial grandeur and literary images of ‘Visiting the Qin Emperor’s Tomb,’ the *Wăng Stream Collection* tends towards
the simplicity of rustic life, as in the last two lines of the poem ‘White Stone Rapids’ 白石灘:

家住水東西  Living both east and west of the stream
浣紗明月下  they wash their silk beneath the clear moon

A linguistic counterpart to this rusticity is the use of local words in many of the poem titles, which are at the same time place names. As observed by Stephen Owen, this linguistic rusticity includes words like ǎo 坑 ‘hollow,’ pàn 湘 ‘shore,’ chá 垵 ‘hillock,’ and zhài 筑 ‘enclosure.’

While Chán is not the only Chinese religious school tending towards the rustic, this being equally much a feature of Daoist reclusion, it was the only Buddhist school that tended to have its centres away from the big cities, and this was one of the reasons it survived the later anti-Buddhist purges to a greater extent than did other schools. In our context, rusticity is associated with reclusion and a life of relaxation, far away from the demands of officialdom, and also with straightforward reality, as opposed to the embellished surfaces of cultural expressions near the political centre.

Beyond Perfection: Breaking Expectations

We saw above how ‘Visiting the Qin Emperor’s Tomb’ represented a standard structural division of poems into two parts, the first part being a descriptive ‘scene’ jǐng 景 and the second a more personal expression of ‘emotion’ qíng 情, and a further division into four parts, ‘opening’ qǐ 起, ‘continuation’ chéng 承, ‘turn-around’ zhuǎn 轉, and ‘conclusion’ hé 合. In the Wǎng Stream Collection, there are poems that adhere to this standard structural division, such as the poem ‘Huázi Ridge,’ Huázi gǎng 華子岡:

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22 Owen 2005.
Much more typically, however, the poems in the *Wăng Stream Collection* break with these structural expectations and thereby force the reader to go beyond habitual ways of reading and thinking. We have already seen one example of this in the poem ‘The Luân Rapids,’ discussed above. Consider again the last two lines of the poem:

| 跳波自相激 | Waves splashing against waves |
| 白鹭驚復下 | An egret isstartled and settles again |

On the surface at least, these lines are no less descriptive and no more personal than the descriptions of rain and gushing water in the first two lines. The only intimation of a turn-around lies in the change from the purely downward movement of water in lines 1 and 2 to waves splashing against each other (and, thus, presumably rising before they fall) in line 3, and the only intimation of ‘emotion’ lies in the introduction of a startled bird (also rising before it falls) in line 4. Some critics have read the startled bird as representing the poet’s emotional reaction, but even if the one is seen as a resonance of the other, the focus here is clearly on the external scene rather than the poet’s personal feelings. By including no clear conclusion, and no openly subjective reaction on the part of the poet, the poem effectively creates a collision with genre-induced expectations, confronting the reader with his or her habitual mode of reading, forcing him or her to see the landscape as it is instead of making personal sense of it by adding subjective meaning to the rain and the gushing water, as well as the egret of the last line.

While ‘The Luân Rapids’ is extreme in being descriptive and impersonal from beginning to end, more often the poems move in the opposite direction of what is usually expected, from the personal to the purely descriptive, as in ‘Lake Qi,’ *Qi hú 歌湖*:
THE RHETORIC OF CHÂN POETRY

吹簫凌極浦  Crossing the waters playing the flute
日暮送夫君  Seeing you off as the sun goes down
湖上一回首  Turning my head looking back on the lake
山靑卷白雲  Green mountains rolled in white clouds

While the personal atmosphere of the first two lines is associated with friendship and the melancholy mood of the xiăo 箫 flute as friends are about to part with each other, the literal turn-around in line 3 serves as an introduction to the purely descriptive mode in line 4, in which the emotions of the first two lines seem to have become irrelevant. But precisely because line 4 is usually where the poet would be at his most personal, the perception of green mountains and white clouds is immensely intensified, as if the reader is brought to see them from inside the mind of the poet. Thereby, the personal and subjective nature of any perception, even the seemingly impersonal and objective view of mountains and clouds, is highlighted. Is this another possible reference to Chân?

A similar case is the poem ‘Deer Fence,’ Lù zhài 鹿柴:

空山不見人  I see no-one in the empty mountains
但聞人語響  but hear the voices of men who talk
返景入深林  The evening sun casts its rays into the forest
復照青苔上  and shines again on the lush green moss.

From the explicit presence of both the poet and others (who cannot be seen, but only heard) in the first two lines, the last two lines turn to a purely descriptive mode with no obviously personal elements. But once more, the expectation of a personal statement towards the end of the poem intensifies the perception of the rays of the evening sun illuminating the trees and the moss. Again, therefore, this poem points to the personal and subjective nature of perception.

Beyond Perfection: The Pentasyllabic Quatrain Form

The most immediately visible contrast between these poems and ‘Visiting the Qin Emperor’s Tomb’ is the choice of poetic subgenre. Each of the 20 poems in the Wâng Stream Collection contains only four lines (or two couplets), as opposed to the eight lines (or four couplets) of the former poem. In other words, all poems in the Wâng Stream Collection are juéjù 絕句 ‘quatrails.’
Of course, there is nothing specifically Chán-like in the quatrain form, and some of the most famous Chán poems of the Táng dynasty, such as the ones by Hánshān 寒山, are full-blown eight-line poems. Still, the choice of this subgenre is hardly accidental. The brief form provides an ideal frame for the simplicity and immediacy of these poems, and, one might argue, of the Chán experience.

This brevity is further underlined by the pentasyllabic (as opposed to heptasyllabic) lines, though this is something the Wáng Stream poems have in common with ‘Visiting the Qin Emperor’s Tomb.’

While the pentasyllabic quatrain is the most commonly used poetic form in the Táng, quite a few later critics relate it directly to the assumed Chán-like effect of some poetry. Wáng Shìzhēn says:23

The pentasyllabic quatrains of the Táng often enter Chán.

Many other critics produce comments to the same effect.

Wáng Wèi was not only a poet, but also a painter, and reportedly painted the same 20 spots on his Wáng Stream estate. Many of the poems are strongly visual, and the quatrain form is ideal for producing immediate snapshots. In contrast to painting, poems may also include other sensory input, particularly sounds (or their absence), but—with some notable exceptions to which we shall return below—most of the poems are based on the direct perception of sights and sounds with limited room for thought and reflection, ‘The Luán Rapids’ being the most extreme case of such naked, unadorned perception. An eight-line or heptasyllabic poem would probably require more intellectual reflection, emotional involvement or aesthetic adornment, all of which would have got in the way of the Chán-like immediacy of these poems.

The simplicity of these poems, however, should not be exaggerated. Even within the limited space of four pentasyllabic lines, the poet sometimes manages a number of changes of perspective, as in the changing time frame of ‘The Hole in the Meng Wall,’ Mèng chéng ào 孟城坳:

新家孟城坳 My new home lies by a gap in the wall of Mèng
古木餘衰柳 where of ancient trees only withering willows remain
來者復為誰 Who is the one who will come to this place again
空悲昔人有 vainly lamenting possessions of long-ago men

23 Xiāngzǔ bǐjì 《香祖筆記》
While the two first lines are concerned with the relation between the poetic here and now and a past of which little remains, the two last lines move this temporal relation one step forward, changing the here and now into a bygone past as seen by some future visitor. In fact, the last line is ambiguous and may refer either to the future visitor's lamenting of the poet or the poet's lamenting of past inhabitants (like Sōng Zhīwèn), thereby bringing together the two temporal frames of the poem in one single line. The effect is to see the self in a wider perspective and to see the present moment as part of a larger stream of passing time.

*Beyond Perfection: Old-style Poetry*

To the well-versed reader of Táng poetry, an equally obvious contrast between ‘Visiting the Qín Emperor’s Tomb’ and the *Wăng Stream Collection* is that the former is written in the so-called new style (*jintī* 近體), while the poems in the latter are written in the so-called old style (*gǔtī* 古體). The new style is formally much stricter and is often associated with palace poetry, while the old style is deliberately antithetic to this strictness, and also to the associations to life at the palace and higher officialdom. This form therefore fits well with the rusticity and simplicity of the *Wăng Stream Collection*.

To the modern mind, even old-style poetry is quite thoroughly regulated. Consider the rules for old-style poetry as applied to the poem ‘Bamboo Lodge,’ *Zhūlǐ guàn* 竹里館:

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one stanza, usually consisting of 2 [or 4] couplets, each consisting of 2 lines

5 [or 7] characters per line

| 猴坐幽篁里 | Sitting alone in a shaded grove of bamboo |
| 弹琴复长啸 | plucking my zither and humming a sorrowful tune |
| 深林人不知 | I am deep in the forest and nobody knows |
| 明月来相照 | when the bright moon comes and shines its light on me |

each line divided into [2+] 2+3

end-rhyme in all paired lines
[and sometimes in line 1] |
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These rules are shared by old- and new-style poetry. There are, however, a number of formal differences between the two types.

First, the tonal rules of the disyllabic rhythmic units of new-style poetry (see above) do not apply in old-style poetry. In fact, the tonal regularity of new-style poetry is consciously avoided, so that it occurs with lower-than-random frequency. Thus, the old style is usually chosen to mark opposition to the regularities of the new style. In this sense, the old style is not older than the new style, but on the contrary presupposes it. The old style is an active marker of a freer and less regulated frame of mind.

Second, while new-style rhymes are almost always in the level tone, old-style rhymes may be in either level tone or any one of the three oblique tones: rising, falling, or entering tone. In ‘Bamboo Lodge,’ for instance, we have falling-tone rhymes: xiào 嘟 and zhào 照. Again, the active opposition to new-style regularity is made evident by the higher-than-random frequency of oblique-tone rhymes in the Wáng Stream Collection, which has 12 poems with oblique-tone rhymes and eight poems with level-tone rhymes. Oblique-tone rhymes are a very conspicuous marker of the non-regularity of old-style poetry.

Third, the rhymes themselves are less restricted in old-style than in new-style poetry. While new-style poetry usually requires every rhyme to be taken from the same rhyme group (yùn 韻), old-style poetry often amalgamates several rhyme groups into larger categories (lèi 類), making it possible, for instance, to rhyme rèn 人 (belonging to rhyme group 11 zhēn 真) and jūn 君 (belonging to rhyme group 12 wén 文) in the poem ‘Pepper Garden,’ Jiāo yuàn 椒園. In ‘Apricot Lodge,’ Wēnxìng guǎn 文杏館, Wáng Wéi takes the relative freedom of old-style rhyming one step further by creating a homophonous rhyme, letting the phonetically identical yǔ 宇 and yǔ 雨 rhyme with each other. This is virtually unheard of in Táng poetry, and functions as a strong marker of individuality over propriety.

Fourth, while old-style poetry retain the tendency of new-style poetry to have non-rhyming final characters in the opposite tone of their rhyming counterparts, the Wáng Stream Collection also has cases where one of the non-rhyming final characters is in the oblique tone and the other in the level tone, such as lǐ 裡 and zhī 知 in ‘Bamboo Lodge’ above.
Finally, while parallelism is not required in either old-style or new-style quatrains, it may occur in both, and Wang Wei is a greater lover of parallelism than one would expect of someone who wishes to express an opposition to rules and regularities. Again, however, the rules for old-style parallelism are not as strict as those for new-style parallelism. The parallel pairs may be both grammatically and semantically further removed from each other, as when the concrete zé jīng 仄径 ‘narrow path’ is paired with the more abstract yōu yīn 幽阴 ‘secluded shadow’ in the first two lines of ‘The Path between the Locust Trees’ Gōng huái mò 宫槐陌, and when the noun+noun compound 宫槐 ‘palace locust’ is paired with the adjective+noun compound lǜ tài 绿苔 ‘green moss’ in the same lines. While not permissible in the new style, the parallel pairs may also be identical in the old style, as when the copula wéi 為 is used in both of the first two lines of ‘Apricot Lodge.’ Finally, old-style parallelism differs from new-style parallelism in that it usually displays no consistent tonal contrast between the lines. Again, however, Wang Wei’s obvious love of parallelism sometimes makes him create couplets that are a little closer to new-style poetry than we would expect in this collection:

仄徑宮槐 obl obl obl lev lev Narrow path shaded by palace locust
幽陰多綠苔 lev lev lev obl lev Secluded shadow full of green moss

The only exception to the strict tonal contrast between these parallel lines is in the two line-final characters, which have to be taken from the same tonal category, simply because they both rhyme.

The contrast between old-style and new-style poetry was utilised for Chán-like purposes by other poets of the Táng dynasty. In the Platform Sūtra (Tàn jīng 壇經), the diligent, ambitious and well-meaning, but unenlightened monk Shěnxìu 神秀 writes a gāthā in the form of an almost perfect new-style quatrain, while the illiterate novice Huínèng 慧能 shows his deep and unconventional insight into Chán in a gāthā (in some editions two gāthās) composed as an old-style quatrain. Huínèng’s gāthā starts almost demonstratively with blatant violations of new-style tone rules already in the first line, pútí běn wú shù 菩提本無樹, with no tonal contrast between characters 2 and 4, nor between characters 3 and 5. Here old-style poetry is used as an emblem of a spontaneous, sudden enlightenment that goes beyond the gradual cultivation and rigorous scholarship of traditional Buddhism.
Beyond Perfection: Allusions to the Realm Beyond

If the *Wăng Stream Collection* were only an expression of simplicity, rusticity and directness, we would have problems explaining the existence of poems like ‘Golden Dust Spring’ 金属泉 and ‘Pepper Garden’ 椒園, which are built almost entirely around mythical and fantastic images from the early Daoist reclusive tradition and *The Songs of Chû*, and have very little connection to anything that is directly perceived: 24

日飲金属泉  If you drink every day from the Golden Dust Spring
少當千餘歲  you will live to a thousand years or more
翠鳯翔文螭  You will ride in green phoenix carts pulled by striped
dragons
羽節朝玉帝  and bring your plumed wand to the Jade Emperor’s court
桂尊迎帝子  With a cinnamon cup greet the Emperor’s Child
杜若贈佳人  and make a *pollia* gift for the Beauty
椒漿奠華席  On a mat place libations of pepper-hot wine
欲下雲中君  to bring down to earth the Lord of the Clouds

The first of these poems is built around the Daoist and alchemist notion of a longevity potion, and in particular of gold as a means to immortality. The poem also refers to the striped, hornless dragons pulling an emerald phoenix chariot carrying the Daoist goddess of immortality, the Queen Mother of the West, and also to the Jade Emperor, ruler of Heaven and Earth, the feathered staff being the insignia of an official at court. Apart from the place name, the only connection to the spot commemorated is the presence of water, and possibly its yellow colour, which may have inspired the associations with gold. This poem, therefore, is just as heavily laden with allusion and just as far removed from the immediately perceptible physical world as was the case in ‘Visiting the Qin Emperor’s Tomb.’

The second poem is built around the mythical and semi-religious world of *The Songs of Chû*, the Emperor’s Child and possibly also the Beauty referring to Lady Xiāng, Xiāng fūrén 湘夫人, with whom the shaman-poet seeks sexual, as well as religious, union. The Lord of the Clouds also appears in *The Songs of Chû*, as does the use of pepper wine for sacrificial purposes. Though this poem contains more direct

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24 In addition to Chên Tiêmin’s annotations, my understanding of the allusions of these poems has been much helped by Pauline Yu (Yu 1980).
references to the physical features of the spot commemorated, cinnamon, *pollia* and pepper all presumably growing in the Pepper Garden, the focus is on the mythical and fantastic rather than on anything directly perceptible.

A third poem built almost entirely around Daoist allusions is ‘Lacquer Garden’ (*Qī-yuàn* 漆園), which takes its name from the garden over which the great Daoist Zhuāngzǐ 莊子 presided as a minor official after having refused a minister post at the royal court, in order to live a free life rather than being destroyed by the pressures near the centre of power. The first line of the poem refutes a statement to the effect that ‘there was a proud official in the Lacquer Garden’ (*Qī-yuàn yǒu ào lì* 漆園有傲吏) in a poem by Guō Pú 郭璞 (276–324):

| 古人非傲吏 | The ancient man was no proud official |
| 自開經世務 | but thought himself lacking in worldly skills |
| 偶寄一微官 | By chance he had gotten a minor position |
| 婆娑數枱樹 | and spent his time resting below a few trees |

Possibly apart from the trees in the last line (which has been interpreted in a number of widely different ways), this poem contains no concrete reference to the actual site commemorated, though the story of Zhuāngzǐ is undoubtedly used to describe Wáng Wéi’s own propensity for reclusion.

What is the relation between these three poems and the nature poems in the *Wâng Stream Collection*? What do these three poems have to do with simplicity and direct perception? And finally, what is the connection between Chán and these poems, which are all built on Daoist notions and images?

First, note that even the nature poetry of this collection often contains imagery associated with semi-Daoist ideas or with *The Songs of Chû*, as we saw above in the image of lotus growing on branches of trees in ‘Magnolia Glen.’ Another example is the solitary man in the shaded bamboo grove in ‘Bamboo Lodge,’ alluding to *The Songs of Chû*, in which the shaman-poet waits in vain for his lover-goddess to arrive in a dense and shadowy bamboo grove. Yet another poem, ‘Bamboo Ridge’ (*Jīnhū lǐng* 斤竹嶺), refers to Mount Shâng 商山, which actually lies not far from the area, but which also figures in Chinese history as the place to which four famous hermits retreated to avoid serving in the First Emperor’s government. As pointed out by
Stephen Owen in his article ‘Xuéhui jìngyà,’ the poem title (and place name) ‘Huází Hill’ 華子岡 is taken from a poem title by Xìe Língyùn 謝靈運 (385–433) and refers to the Daoist immortal Huà Zǐqí 華子期, while the poem title (and place name) ‘Bamboo Ridge’ 竹嶺 refers to the title of another of Xìe Língyùn’s poems, in which the poet sets out wandering to look for an immortal. The location of these place names is actually deceptive, Owen explains, as they are taken from the Lúshān 庐山 area of which Xìe Língyùn wrote rather than the area of the Wāng Stream.

The interplay between simple imagery and metaphysical and literary allusions is most gracefully displayed in the poem ‘Apricot Lodge’ 文杏館:

文杏裁為梁  Apricot cut to serve as beams
香茅結為宇   lemongrass bound to act as eaves
不知棟裡雲   Perhaps the clouds amidst the rafters
去作人間雨   will turn into rain in the world of men

On the surface, this poem is a concrete description of a simple hut made from materials available on the spot. The mist and the rain are also concrete, as is the high altitude of the spot. At the same time, the sheer simplicity of the little hut described is an obvious source of spiritual enjoyment, and this effect is intensified by the almost otherworldly position of the hut far above the realm of human beings. Furthermore, the clouds amidst the rafters clearly allude to a poem by Guō Pú, in which a Daoist recluse is said to reside in a place where ‘clouds appear amidst beams and rafters’ (yún shēng liàng dòng jiān 雲生梁棟間). Finally, the pairing of ‘clouds’ yún 雲 and ‘rain’ yǔ 雨 at the end of lines 3 and 4 is a standard allusion to the story of the sexual union between a king and a mythical goddess in The Songs of Chū. In the present context, sexuality is hardly the issue, but the myth-shrouded shamanic quest for a realm beyond is important in conveying the spiritual meaning of the poem.

In a playful way, the literary and metaphysical allusions of ‘Apricot Lodge’ add a layer of spiritual significance to what is otherwise an utterly simple, concrete and direct description of an equally simple spot. In a similar light-hearted vein, the three allusion-filled poems cited above, as well as the numerous allusions in the nature poems, also bring out the spiritual significance of the simplicity, rusticity and direct perception of these poems. In other words, the
immediacy of the directly descriptive language is the very basis for the spiritual frame of mind jocularly hinted at in the mythical and fantastic allusions.

Poetic Language and Poetic Structure

As we have seen, almost all Ming and Qing rhetoric of Ch'an poetry is built on statements from the Song critic Yan Yu, in particular his emphasis on 'subtle enlightenment' as a basic feature of both Ch'an and poetry. However, Ming and Qing critics radically reinterpreted Yan Yu's notions, making his analogies between Ch'an-induced and poetic enlightenment into an equation between the two, while basically restricting the Ch'an label to poets who might be plausibly conceived as Buddhists. In the ideal case, subtle enlightenment was seen as residing in the poet, in the poem, and, as an effect of the reading process, in the reader. Wang Wei’s non-doctrinal nature poems became standard examples of Ch'an poetry. However, apart from general and quite abstract statements about such Ch'an qualities residing beyond language and leaving no traces, we find few concrete descriptions of actual Ch'an-like features. In this paper, I have suggested that such features are at least partly to be located within the choice of poetic language and poetic structure.

In the Wang Stream Collection, the unassuming privacy of the spots commemorated forms a conspicuous contrast to the imperial grandeur and officialdom of 'Visiting the Qin Emperor's Tomb.' Such choices of content, however, are supplemented by a number of linguistic and structural choices, briefly summed up below:

1. Choice of imagery: Simple and direct, rather than embellished and allusion-filled;
2. Choice of linguistic style: Rustic and local, rather than literary and urban;
3. Choice of structure: Breaking with, rather than adhering to standard genre expectations;
4. Choice of poetic sub-genre: Quatrain, rather than octave;
5. Choice of poetic sub-genre: Pentagona, rather than hepta-
syllabic;
6. Choice of poetic sub-genre: Old style, rather than new style; and

These features are by no means universally applied. As we saw in the case of old style vs. new style, the rhetorical devices in question
are a means of marking an opposition, and the standard against which they react works as their point of departure. The language of these poems does contain rustic and local features, but its basic form is Literary Chinese, not some kind of dialectal vernacular. Similarly, the effect of ending a poem with descriptive ‘scene’ rather than subjective ‘emotion’ presupposes an expectation of the opposite, and this more traditional structure is indeed followed in some of the poems. Furthermore, the seeming opposition between the lack of allusions in No. 1 and the choice of specific types of allusion in No. 7 represents only two ways to bring about the same frame of mind.

The denial of the mode of officialdom and imperial grandeur is brought out most explicitly in the poem ‘Willow Waves,’ Liù liàng 柳浪:

分行皆緑樹  Row upon row of trees with silk-like threads
倒影入清漪  reflected upside-down in limpid ripples
不學御溝上  refusing to do as the ones on the imperial moat
春風傷別離  where the spring breeze is hurt by all the farewells

Line 3 has also been interpreted as an imperative: ‘Don’t do as the ones on the imperial moat!’ In either case, this line and the following one represent a refusal to associate these willows with the almost unavoidably standard theme of broken willow branches as tokens of friendship at the heartrending occasions when an official is sent out of the capital to serve in a faraway place.\(^{25}\)

One should think that the frequent use of Daoist motifs and the lack of Buddhist ones (if we accept that the three instances of the word kǒng 空 ‘empty; in vain’ are devoid of Buddhist meaning) would indicate a Daoist rather than a Buddhist orientation. On the other hand, the Daoist allusions are mostly playful, while the deep interest in perception and perspectivism seems to bring the reader into a philosophical and psychological exploration that comes closer to Buddhism—and Chán for that matter—than to the popular Daoism to which many of the poems allude. Thus, no matter what the poet actually intended, the later attribution of Chán meaning to these poems is not entirely groundless. If we see it this way, we can add another rhetorical device to the seven above: The choice of avoiding

\(^{25}\) An opposite and, in my opinion, less felicitous interpretation is provided by Stephan Schumacher 1982 who translates the last two lines: ‘Ähnelt sie nicht den Weiden am Palastgraben, / Die im Frühlingswind den Abschiedsschmerz vertiefen?’
explicit mention of the heart of the matter, of leaving unsaid what cannot be put into words in any case. As the Qing critic Shên Dèqián said: ‘In poetry, one values the presence of Chán principles and Chán spirit, not of Chán words’ (詩貴有禪理禪趣，不貴有禪語).²⁶

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²⁶ Dīng Fúbào 1963:555. A similar point was brought out by Ji Yún 紀昀 (1724–1805): ‘Poetry should investigate the atmosphere of Chán, but should not use the words of Chán’ 詩宜參禪味，不宜作禪語.
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