

Poésie chinoise et modernité

Wang Yucheng 王禹偁 (954-1001)

(1) Le chant de l'âne blessé par un corbeau 烏啄瘡驢歌

Pourquoi les corbeaux des monts Shang sont-ils si cruels,
Avec leur bec plus long qu'un clou, plus pointu qu'une flèche !
Qu'ils attrapent les insectes, qu'ils brisent des oeufs à leur guise,
Mais pourquoi s'en prendre à ma bête déjà blessée ?

Depuis un an que je suis banni à Shangyu,
J'ai confié tout mon bagage à mon âne boiteux.
Dans les Qinling aux falaises escarpées il est grimpé,
Avec mes nombreux volumes chargés sur le dos.

Une profonde blessure l'avait balafré de l'échine à la panse,
Et il a fallu six mois de soins pour qu'enfin il commence à guérir.
Mais hier ce corbeau a soudainement fondu sur lui,
Becquetant la vieille plaie pour arracher la nouvelle chair.

Mon âne a rugi, mon serviteur a grondé, mais envolé le corbeau !
Sur mon toit il s'est juché, aiguisant son bec et battant des ailes.
Mon âne n'a rien pu faire, mon serviteur n'a rien pu faire,
Quel malheur que de n'avoir ni arc ni filet pour l'attraper !

Nous devons compter sur les rapaces de ces montagnes,
Ou prier le voisin de prêter le faisan aux couleurs d'automne :
Que leurs serres de fer, que ses griffes crochues,
Brisent le cou de ce corbeau, qu'ils dévorent la cervelle de ce corbeau !

Mais qu'ils ne songent pas seulement à se remplir le ventre :
Il s'agit surtout d'aider à venger un âne blessé !

梅堯臣

Mei Yaochen (1002-1060)

舟中夜與家人飲

(2) La nuit sur un bateau, buvant avec mon épouse

月出斷岸口
影照別舸背
且獨與婦飲
頗勝俗客對

La lune qui se lève écorne la falaise,
Sa lumière découpe la poupe du bateau;
Je bois tout seul avec mon épouse,
Et c'est bien mieux qu'avec l'habituelle compagnie.

月漸上我席
暝色亦稍退
豈必在秉燭
此景已可愛

La lune peu à peu illumine notre natte,
Et les ombres lentement reculent;
Pourquoi vouloir allumer des torches?
Ainsi le spectacle est tout à fait ravissant.

梅堯臣

Mei Yaochen (1002-1060)

醉翁吟

(3) Chant of the Drunken Old Man (trad. Hawes)

翁來
翁來
翁乘馬
何以言醉
在泉林之下
日暮煙愁谷暝
蹄聳足音響原野
月從東方出照人
攬暉曾不盈把
酒將醒未醒
又挹玉壘
向身瀉
翁乎
醉也
(...)

The Old Man comes,
The Old Man comes,
The Old Man riding his horse.
How can one describe his drunkenness?
Beneath the forest and the spring
The sun sets in gloomy mist, the valley darkens,
Sounds of hooves echo through the rural plains.
The moon appears from the East and shines upon him,
He clutches its brightness but can never fill his hands!
The wine wears off, but before he sobers up
Again he grabs the jade wine-jar
And pours it down his throat -
This is the Old Man's
Drunkenness!
(...)

Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101)

(4) Les enfants 小兒

Mes petits enfants ignorent les soucis
Ils se lèvent, s'asseyent, agrippent mes vêtements
Je m'apprête à les sermonner
Mais ma vieille épouse m'arrête:
« Certes ils sont sots, mais vous l'êtes bien plus encore!
Pourquoi ruminer de la sorte vos soucis? »
Tout penaud je retourne m'asseoir
Elle rince une coupe et la pose devant moi
- Combien elle vaut mieux que la femme de Liu Ling
Qui le blâmait de dépenser pour son vin !

(5)

Zhang Xian 張先 (990-1078)

J'ai 80 ans et ma chérie en a 18
Ma chérie a les traits roses j'ai les cheveux blancs
En inversant les chiffres nous avons le même âge
C'est juste qu'il y a soixante ans de différence

Réponse de Su Shi:

La jeune mariée a 18 ans le marié en a 80
Chevelure toute blanche contre fard rouge
Nuit de noce sous la couette pour les amoureux
La fleur de poirier écrase le bégonia

Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1194-1229)

(6) Morpions 虱

On ne leur donne pourtant rien à manger dans le pantalon
Mais rien à faire contre eux au fond du caleçon
Le mieux pour en venir à bout: leur offrir un bain bouillant
Et les abandonner dans un royaume sans poils

Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262-1319)

(7) You and I 我儂詞

You and I
have too much passion.
Where the passion is,
is hot like fire.
I knead a piece of clay
into you
and a me
then smash them
and mix them with water.
Again I knead it into a you
then a me.
There is you in my clay,
and me in your clay.
I'll share your quilt while we live
and your coffin after death. (trad. Barnstone 2007: 138)

Gao Qi 高啟 (1336-1374)

(8) Complainte de l'épouse du soldat en campagne 征婦怨

Mon mari n'a jamais brigué de sceau de marquis,
Mais un commandement l'a envoyé au loin défendre les frontières.
Toutes ces nuits, tant de mauvais rêves en mon gynécée printanier!
Et finalement la lettre du quartier-général annonçant la défaite!
Son corps a disparu mais son vieil uniforme est devant moi,
Rapporté à l'est par l'un de ses vieux camarade de combat.
Née femme, je ne connais pas la route pour les bureaux de la frontière,
Par où passer pour gagner Wuwei et chercher ses ossements?
Je découpe dans du papier un fanion funéraire pour ramener son âme,
A l'endroit même où lorsqu'il est parti j'ai pris congé de lui.

(9) A la vue des fleurs, je me souviens de Shu, ma fille défunte 見花憶亡女書

Ma petite deuxième, je t'aimais tellement,
Lorsque tu avais six ans je te portais encore volontiers,
Te regardant manger un fruit dans mes bras,
T'apprenant des poèmes sur mes genoux.

Au lever tu imitais les parures de ton aînée,
Dressée sur la pointe des pieds pour te voir dans le miroir.
C'est que toute petite tu aimais déjà les habits de soie,
Et nous étions bien trop pauvres pour te contenter.

Lorsque le soir je rentrais après avoir ruminé mes échecs
Tout le long du difficile chemin de neige et de pluie,
Tu venais m'accueillir, si remplie de gaieté
Qu'inafailliblement tu changeais ma rancoeur en douceur.

Il n'y eut rien à faire lorsqu'un matin tu tombas malade,
Qui plus est en ces temps particulièrement troublés.
Epouvantés nous vîmes ton mal s'aggraver d'un coup,
Et tu mourus avant d'avoir pu recevoir le moindre remède.

Nous nous hâtâmes de te préparer un petit cercueil,
Que nous escortâmes en pleurant jusqu'à un tertre lointain,
Trop perdus pour nous souvenir ensuite de l'endroit,
Accablés et dévastés par l'insoutenable chagrin.

Et je repense à toi quand, au printemps de l'année dernière,
Les fleurs s'ouvraient près de l'étang dans le vieux jardin,
Que tu me tirais par le bras pour m'entraîner sous les arbres,
M'ordonnant de te couper le rameau le plus fleuri...

Cette année-ci les fleurs sont à nouveau écloses,
Nous séjournons sur des rivages bien lointains,
La famille est complète, à part toi qui es morte,
Et je verse sur les fleurs des larmes impuissantes.

Ma coupe de vin ne saurait me reconforter:
Qu'il est glacé ce soir le vent derrière les rideaux!

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Meaning Beyond Words: Games and Poems in the Northern Song

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BOOTH Chinese and Western studies have tended to overlook the importance of the playful aspects of northern Song poetry. Although there were periods in the late-Ming and Qing dynasties when critics attempted to revive its reputation, the typical account of northern Song poetic style as rational, discursive, and plain has prevailed.¹ This characterization—prevalent as early as Yan Yu’s 嚴羽 *Canglang shihua* 滄浪詩話—is at best a half-truth, neglecting many aspects of northern Song poetry that make it literature rather than mere rhymed philosophizing, namely, its wit, humor, ingenious structuring, and what I have termed “caricatured reasoning.”²

¹ For a detailed analysis of the Qing enthusiasm for Song poetry, see J. D. Schmidt, *Within the Human Realm: The Poetry of Huang Zunxian, 1848–1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 79–92. More recent Chinese critics, including even the contemporary wit and scholar Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書, in his *Song shi xuan zhu* 宋詩選注 (1958; rpt., Beijing: Renmin wenzue, 1989), have generally neglected or derided the less serious works of northern Song poets, focusing instead on their works of social criticism.

² “Caricatured reasoning” means using the rhetoric and forms of philosophical argument in an exaggerated or humorous way for the purpose of entertainment. See my papers entitled “Fowl and Bestial? A Defense of Ouyang Xiu’s Poems on White Creatures,” *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies* 28 (1998):123–53; and “Mundane Transcendence: Dealing with the Everyday in the Poetry of Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072),” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 21 (1999):99–129. For Yan Yu’s remarks on Song poetry, which were pejorative in tone, see *Canglang shihua*, in *Yushutang shihua (ji qita san zhong)* 娛書堂詩話 (及其他三種), Congshu jicheng edition, 1st. ser. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 4.7. In particular, Yan accuses northern Song poets of incorporating prose, arguments, and even cursing into their poetry.

Yet scholars often seem uncomfortable with the idea that some of the greatest and most soberly moralistic statesmen and ancient-prose writers—Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) and Wang Anshi (1021–1086), for instance—should have expended so much creative energy on seemingly trivial poetic subject matter, lighthearted literary games, and ridiculous self-caricatures. Unlike the writers themselves, who were quite happy to publish the entertaining fruits of their leisure alongside more serious literary and philosophical undertakings, scholars have censured them for their frequent lapses of taste, or focused only on poems whose rational, plain appearance outweighs their entertainment value. The remarks of the modern scholar Zhu Dongrun 朱東潤 concerning the poetry of Mei Yaochen (1002–1060) are representative of this tendency:³

From the beginning of the Song period, more and more answering poems and rhyme-matching poems were written. The effect of this was to push compositions on personal topics strongly in the direction of word games. This was a bad practice! . . . When we see that among [Mei] Yaochen's poems there are quite a few compositions full of noble ideas and significance, but still more compositions that are insignificant or do not rise above the level of word games, how should we evaluate him? . . . The only standard we should use to measure a poet's greatness should be that of his best compositions.

According to Zhu, among Mei Yaochen's two thousand plus poems, only "thirty or forty" can be ranked among his "best" compositions. Not surprisingly these are Mei's plain and serious poems of social criticism, such as *Rufen pin nu* 汝墳貧女 ("The Poor Girl of Ru Riverbank") and *Tianjia yu* 田家語 ("Words of a Farmer").⁴

This selective approach is unfortunate for two reasons: it gives

³ See Zhu Dongrun, ed., *Mei Yaochen ji biannian jiaozhu* (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1980) [hereafter *Mei Yaochen ji*], introduction, p. 16.

⁴ *Mei Yaochen ji*, p. 16. For translations of these two poems, see Jonathan Chaves, *Mei Yaochen and the Development of Early Sung Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 164–67. Chaves's excellent evaluation of Mei's poetry is much more balanced than Zhu Dongrun's critique; but, perhaps influenced by previous Chinese studies of Mei, Chaves still underplays the wit, humor, and ingenious craftsmanship of many of Mei's poems. Other more recent Western studies of northern Song poets, especially those of the Su Shi generation and later, have paid greater attention to the wit and ingenuity of their compositions. See, for instance, Michael Fuller, *The Road to East Slope: The Development of Su Shi's Poetic Voice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 164–67, 180, 256–60; and Ronald Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 169–79.

the impression that the Song was a period when earnest moral endeavor overshadowed aesthetic and artistic achievement, and when prose and philosophy became more significant than poetry. It also ignores many of the most successful poems of the period—successful, that is, in their artistic ingenuity, range of emotion, and profundity of insight—simply because they appear to deal with slight topics in a jocose manner.

This paper will adopt an approach diametrically opposite to that of such earlier scholars. My starting point will be the most light-hearted and apparently ephemeral poetry of the northern Song period: poems produced from literary games with rhyme, imagery, and meter. By “literary games” I mean contests among two or more participants in which the object was to produce a poem based on specified rules. These contests usually took place at a social gathering where food and wine were consumed and an atmosphere of levity prevailed. As I shall demonstrate, these games, far from being strange anomalies in the otherwise serious oeuvre of northern Song literati, helped to promote one of their central aesthetic and political ideals: the revival of *gu* 古 (“ancient”) style in both prose and verse.

Though certainly not the first Chinese poets to engage in ludic pursuits, Ouyang Xiu, Mei Yaochen, and their colleagues were tireless refiners of inherited literary games and imaginative inventors of new ones. More important, they left numerous poetic records of game playing scattered among their collected works. Using these records, I will address the questions of why literary games became so popular in the northern Song; what broader social roles they might have served; and how they may have influenced the development of Chinese poetry and aesthetics.

ANYTHING YOU CAN DO: GAMES WITH RHYME

A number of poems in Ouyang Xiu and Mei Yaochen’s collections bear titles indicating that the poem originated in a rhyme game, such as: *Renri Juxingtang yanji tanyun de feng zi* 人日聚星堂燕集探韻得豐字 (“On *Ren* Festival We Gathered at Constellation Hall, Drew Lots for Rhymes, and I Received the Character *feng*”).⁵ The participants

⁵ *Ouyang Xiu quanji*, 2 vols. (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1991) [hereafter *Ouyang ji*], p. 29. Ouyang composed this poem in 1050. *Ren* (literally, “people’s”) festival was on the seventh day of the

would look up the randomly selected character—in this case, *feng*—in a rhyming dictionary such as the *Guangyun* 廣韻, find other words in the same rhyming category, and spontaneously compose a poem using as many of those rhyme words as possible.⁶ Presumably the content of the poem would also be wittily related to the particular social occasion. The poem on the *Ren* festival, for instance, includes the lines:⁷

Look at me: I'm really crude and shallow
 This crowd of heroes futilely places me on a pedestal;
 But to receive anything at all [from them] is already an honor,
 So even if it's too much, can I refuse such "abundance" [*feng*]!

顧予誠鄙薄，群俊枉高蹤，得一不爲少，雖多肯辭豐。

The wit of the poem lies in the double function of the word *feng*. If we read the fourth line literally, Ouyang seems grateful to his friends: he appreciates their "abundance" (*feng*) of generosity in allowing such an untalented fellow as himself to join their poetic gathering. However, behind the surface politeness we can sense Ouyang's resentment, albeit tongue-in-cheek, that he must produce a poem on demand: "I cannot refuse [this difficult challenge of rhyming with] *feng*."

This kind of rhyming game sets up a test of ingenuity, a competitive challenge, in which the victor is not so much the profound or refined artist as the quick-thinking, clever, and spontaneous wit. Another point to note is that, if one were to read the poem without the clue provided by the title, one would almost certainly miss the game-like quality of the poem, and take it for a simple expression of Ouyang Xiu's self-deprecating modesty. In other words, these writers are anxious to let us know that this is just a game.

Random selection of rhyme categories was one of many rhyming games, and certainly not the most common, judging from the poems

first month, according to the traditional Chinese calendar. I have located eight such rhyme-category games in Ouyang Xiu's collected poems, and nine in Mei Yaochen's collection (*Ouyang ji*, pp. 21, 29, 42, 59, 348, 356, 369, 386; *Mei Yaochen ji*, pp. 32-33, 47, 267, 331, 502-3, 714, 896).

⁶ The *Guangyun* was first published in 1008. See *Chongjiao Songben Guangyun* 重校宋本廣韻 (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1961).

⁷ *Ouyang ji*, p. 29, lines 5-8 of poem.

that survive. Much more popular was for poets to compete at creating a verse using the rhyme words or rhyme category of a previous poet. This kind of game added a dimension to the random selection of rhymes. It enabled the participants not only to compete against their fellow literati at a social gathering, but also to seek to match or even outdo the compositions of famous writers of the past.

Several variations on this rhyme game appear in Ouyang Xiu and Mei Yaochen's collections. There are poems emulating the skill of mid-Tang writers—especially Han Yu (768–824)—at using particular rhyme categories for expressive effects.⁸ Another variation was a game known as “matching rhymes” (*ci yun* 次韻 or *yi yun* 依韻). Here the poet used not just the same rhyme category of a previous poem but exactly the same rhyme words in the same sequence. The object was to come up with a composition quite different from the model—a fresh mood, or even an opposite conclusion—despite being restricted to the same rhymed endings.

When they matched rhymes, poets obviously delighted in rhyme words with double meanings, especially if they allowed for an incongruous contrast with the original poem. A poem by Ouyang Xiu and its matching composition by Mei Yaochen will illustrate this point.⁹ Ouyang's poem was, according to the title, itself written to

⁸ See, for instance, Ouyang's poem “Lu Mountain High! Given to Fellow Student Liu Zhongyun [Huan] on His Retirement to Nankang” 廬山高贈同年劉中允歸南康, in *Ouyang ji*, p. 35–36; and Mei's poem, “Ancient Willow Tree” 古柳, in *Mei Yaochen ji*, pp. 524–25, both of which imitate what Ouyang terms the “difficult” rhymes of Han Yu's poem, “While Sick, Presented to Eighteenth Zhang” [i.e., Zhang Ji, c. 766–830] 病中贈張十八. The Chinese text of Han's poem is in Qian Zhonglian, ed., *Han Changli shi xinian jishi* 韓昌黎詩繫年集釋 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1984) [hereafter *Han Changli shi*], pp. 63–71; for an English translation, see Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Meng Chiao and Han Yu* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 52–53. Note Ouyang's praise of Han Yu's skill at rhyming these poems in his *Shihua* 詩話 (*Remarks on Poetry*), in *Ouyang ji*, p. 1040–1. Ouyang and Mei admitted only to imitating the rhyming techniques of Han Yu, but they did state that several of their poems were composed “in the style of” Meng Jiao, Li He and other mid-Tang poets. Some of these poems may also have borrowed the rhymes of the earlier poet. See *Ouyang ji*, pp. 23, 26, 37, 45, 77; *Mei Yaochen ji*, pp. 65, 410, 497–500, 930.

⁹ A glance at most northern Song poetry collections will show that rhyme-matching compositions make up a very large proportion of the surviving poems. However, since rhyme-matching quickly developed into one of the most widely used poetic composition techniques, many of these examples are serious in mood. Hence, rather than attempting an exhaustive citation, I have selected this single example of rhyme-matching involving Ouyang and Mei to demonstrate their use of the technique as part of a game.

respond to an earlier work by Mei. In the translation, I have put the matched rhyme words in bold type:

Answering Shengyu's 'Don't Drink Wine' [1057]¹⁰

You say, "Don't drink wine!"
 I say, "Don't write **poems!**"
 Flowers bloom, leaves fall, insects and birds grow **forlorn**,
 All four seasons the hundred creatures
 disturb my **cogitation**, 4
 Mornings I chant, shaking my head; evenings I knit my **brows**,
 "Carving liver and sculpting kidneys,"
 I keep hearing [Han] **Tuizhi**,¹¹
 And with those words, that old man
 even **contradicted** himself!
 Can this compare with drinking wine
 and losing all **awareness?** 8
 From ancient times, even abstainers have
 not escaped mortality,
 There were some that performed good deeds,
 but they too could not **delay** it.
 Offer yourself to your generation with sagely
 and worthy behavior,
 Or compose essays and writings to be **passed down**
 through the millennia, 12
 The rest of the time, get plastered on a goblet of fine wine,
 And all the strife of ten thousand affairs will become
 completely calm.¹²

¹⁰ *Ouyang ji*, p. 43. Shengyu was Mei Yaochen's style name. Mei's poem "Don't Drink Wine" 莫飲酒 is in *Mei Yaochen ji*, p. 925.

¹¹ Tuizhi was Han Yu's style name. The phrase "carving liver and sculpting kidneys" refers to painstaking literary composition. In his poem "Presented to Case Reviewer Cui Lizhi" 贈崔立之評事, Han Yu included the lines, "I urge you to cultivate yourself in private, and wait for the campaign summons, / There's no need to carve and sculpt, depressing your liver and kidneys" 勸君韜養待徵招, 不用雕琢愁肝腎 (*Han Changli shi*, p. 569). Han is politely telling Cui to stop sending poems importuning Han to recommend him for a high position. But Ouyang Xiu purposely takes Han's words out of context, as a claim that poetic composition inevitably harms one's equilibrium. In the following line (line 7) he then declares that Han Yu ("that old man") contradicted himself by composing a carefully crafted poem to criticize Cui for writing poems. It would be far better, Ouyang argues (in his own poem), simply to get drunk on wine and forget about poetry altogether.

¹² Literally, "the jagged peaks of ten thousand affairs can all be leveled [or made equal],"

“Rotting innards,” “pickled meat”: the theories
of both these schools
Are just so much pedantic tattle: **base** in the extreme!¹³ 16
And it’s hardly worth mentioning long life
or premature mortality,
Since even the span of a hundred years is really not much **time**.
So just drink wine,
Don’t write **poems**: 20
You should pay heed to my advice, so you won’t seem
like a **fool**!

答聖俞莫飲酒

子謂莫飲酒，我謂莫作詩，
花開木落蟲鳥悲，四時百物亂我思，朝飲搖頭暮蹙眉，雕肝琢腎聞退之，
此翁此語還自違，豈如飲酒無所知，自古不飲無不死，惟有爲善不可遲，
功施當世聖賢事，不然文章千載垂，其餘酩酊一樽酒，萬事崢嶸皆可齊，
腐腸糟肉兩家說，計較屑屑何其卑，死生壽夭無足道，百年長短才幾時，
但飲酒，莫作詩，子其聽我言非痴。

Matching the Rhymes of Yongshu’s Irregular Meter Poem
Urging Me to Drink Wine and Not Compose Poetry [1057]¹⁴

In my life there is little I crave,
My only desires: wine and **poems**,
A single day without these two, and my heart grows
quite **forlorn**;

probably a tongue-in-cheek reference to the second chapter in the *Zhuangzi*, entitled “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” 齊物論. See Wang Xianqian, ed., *Zhuangzi jijie* 莊子集解 (1974; rpt., Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1985), p. 6; Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang-Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 36.

¹³ “Rotting innards” actually refers indirectly to fine wine and good food, which act like medicine to “cure” one’s stomach, as in Bai Juyi’s poem, “Sent to Lu Shaoqing” 寄廬少卿: “Excellent dishes and vintage wine / Are truly balm for rotting innards!” 嘉肴與旨酒，信是腐腸膏，in *Quan Tangshi* 全唐詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 14:452.5114. “Pickled meat” is a reference to the *Jinshu* 晉書 biography of Kong Qun 孔群, a wine lover. When a friend warned him of the harmful effects of drinking, Kong retorted: “Do you not see that when meat is pickled [in wine lees], it is able to last much longer?” See Fang Xuanling, *Jinshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 46:78.2061. These seem to be two theories claiming that wine drinking will bring good health and long life. Ouyang dismisses both, declaring that, since everyone will die sooner or later, it is better to forget about justifications and just drink (lines 16–19).

¹⁴ *Mei Yaochen ji*, p. 926. Yongshu was Ouyang Xiu’s style name.

- Lasting name or noble status: these I never **long for**, 4
 My jars are empty, my cooking pots cold,
 but I do not hang my **head**;
 My wife and children freeze and go hungry:
 they often rage about **that**,
 Yet once I begin to chant and get drunk, I **turn away**
 from the world,
 Beyond this, ten thousand affairs no longer
 give me **concern**. 8
 For meetings with the high and mighty, everyone else
 departs early,
 But as I grow old I've grown lazier: I don't arrive till **late**,
 The sun towers high: like a weary servant, my face
 becomes dejected,
 Especially riding my skinny horse, its two ears
 drooping down. 12
 I cannot stand such trouble and suffering; no longer
 enjoy going out,
 Only in writing, now and again, can I still manage to perform;
 Yet all my friends still fear that I'll exhaust
 my stores of wisdom.
 They urge me to drink and be merry, to stop
 looking down at myself! 16
 Thanks again for giving your advice,
 It's just that **when** you corrected me,
You loved **poetry** alone,
 But you said that *I* was the **fool**!¹⁵ 20

依韻和永叔勸飲酒莫吟詩雜言

我生無所嗜，唯嗜酒與詩，
 一日舍此心腸悲，名存貴大不輒思，甌空釜冷不俯眉，妻孥凍飢數恚之，
 但自吟醉與世違，此外萬事皆莫知，王公調請罕去早，既衰愈懶身到遲，
 日高倦僕顏色沮，況騎瘦馬兩耳垂，厭此勞苦不喜出，唯有文字時能爲，
 諸公尚恐竭智慮，勤勤勸飲莫我卑，
 再拜受公言，竊意公矯時，只愛詩，謂余痴。

¹⁵ I assume this ending refers to Ouyang's foolish attempt to attack poetry while still clearly being attached to poetic composition. Mei, by contrast, sees no contradiction in loving both wine and poetry, since both help him deal with life's troubles.

The rhyme scheme is irregular: a partial *Boliangti* 柏梁體.¹⁶ Lines 2 to 8 rhyme on every line; from lines 10 to 18 the rhyme relaxes to alternate lines; and the final two lines again share the same rhyme words. Mei managed to match Ouyang's rhymes almost completely. Only in line 14 was he unable to use the same rhyme word as Ouyang.

Looking at the rhyme words shared by the two poems, it is clear that Mei played with variant meanings of the same character. For instance, the *zhi* 之 in Han Yu's style name Tuizhi 退之 in Ouyang's poem (line 6) becomes the object pronoun *zhi* 之 ("that; it") in Mei's work. And *chui* 垂, which means "lasting" or "to be passed down" in Ouyang's poem (line 12), takes on the more literal meaning of "drooping" in Mei's poem, in the process replacing Ouyang's heroic sentiments ("essays and writings . . . passed down through the generations") with a pathetic self-caricature of himself as a cantankerous old man on his skinny, droopy-eared horse.

Although the two writers used the same rhymes and a similar method of argumentation—the caricatured reasoning typical of the northern Song—they also managed to draw opposite conclusions: Ouyang wrote a poem to persuade Mei that writing poems will only bring trouble; and Mei responded by declaring that writing poems (and getting drunk while doing so) was the only way he could escape his troubles.

Writers of Ouyang and Mei's generation tended to restrict exact rhyme-matching to their contemporaries' works. Later generations greatly extended the game, frequently matching the rhymes of famous past writers too. The best-known example, of course, was Su Shi's almost obsessive project to match the complete poems of his illustrious predecessor Tao Qian (c. 365–c. 427). By this stage, rhyme-matching had developed from a lighthearted game into a

¹⁶ The *Boliangti* was a poetic form that supposedly originated during the reign of the Han Emperor Wu (r. 140–80 B.C.) at a place called Boliang Terrace. The distinctive feature of this form was that every line bore an end rhyme, in contrast to the alternate-line rhyming of most Chinese poetry. The "partial" *Boliangti* varied sections where every line rhymed with sections of alternate-line rhyming. There were no fixed rules about how many lines should rhyme in a partial *Boliangti*: this depended on the skill of the poet. For discussion of the origins of the form, and further examples, see Wang Li 王力, *Hanyu shilu xue* 漢語詩律學 (1958; rpt., Shanghai: Jiaoyu chubanshe, 1979), pp. 14–15, 366–79.

fully fledged poetic technique that could be used to express a broad range of human emotions.¹⁷

A third variation on rhyme games promoted by Ouyang, Mei, and their acquaintances involved writing a whole series of poems with matching rhyme words. The model setting the rhyme could be one's own poem or that of a fellow poet; and the challenge was to produce as many different compositions as possible without duplicating the content of earlier poems in the series. If a group of poets was involved, one of them would compose a model, and the others would all compete to match its rhymes two or three times. Either the winner or losers would then presumably be forced to drain a goblet of wine.¹⁸

Yet another, slightly different approach was for a pair or group of poets to compose "linked verses" (*lian ju* 聯句): the first player would write, say, three lines of a poem, and the others would take turns to complete the second—or overhanging—couplet, then add another line of their own to continue the game. Various combinations of poem and line lengths were possible, although normally Song linked verses preserved the same rhyme category throughout the poem. The challenge was to maintain a consistent style, even though several writers were participating in the composition. There was also the test of continuing the narrative line when the preceding player had willfully sent it in a quite unexpected direction.¹⁹

¹⁷ For further discussion of Su Shi's expressive use of rhyme-matching, see Alice W. Cheang, "Poetry and Transformation: Su Shih's Mirage," *HJAS* 58:1 (June 1998):147–82, esp. 169–72. Cheang's article also notes the strong influence of Han Yu on Su Shi, a feature that is evident in my own discussion of the Ouyang Xiu circle. I am indebted to Cheang for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of my paper. See also Yoshikawa Kojiro, *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*, trans. Burton Watson (1967; rpt., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 39–41, 116–17.

¹⁸ A typical series begins with Mei Yaochen's poem of 1059, "On New Year's Eve I Went with My Host to Climb the Eastern Tower of the Secretariat" 上元從主人登尚書省東樓, which Mei then matched twice himself. See *Mei Yaochen ji*, pp. 922–23. Ouyang Xiu then composed three poems to match Mei's: *Ouyang ji*, p. 88. Another series begins with Ouyang Xiu composing a long poem on Fujian tea in 1058, "Tasting New Tea, Presented to Shengyu," 嘗新茶呈聖俞, and matching it himself (*Ouyang ji*, pp. 49–50); Mei Yaochen then chips in with two matching poems (*Mei Yaochen ji*, pp. 1008–10).

¹⁹ Examples of linked verses involving Ouyang Xiu and various colleagues are in *Ouyang ji*, 375–76. Mei Yaochen's collection also contains a number of early linked verses: *Mei Yaochen ji*, pp. 47–49. Su Shunqin 蘇舜欽 (1008–1048) and his brother Su Shunyu 蘇舜元 (1006–1054) were probably the most enthusiastic practitioners of linked verse in the north-

Few of these rhyming games were actually invented by Ouyang Xiu or his contemporaries—in fact, examples of most rhyming games appear in the collections of mid-Tang poets like Han Yu and Meng Jiao (linked verses), and Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen (rhyme-matching).²⁰ One could also argue that prototypes of these literary games appeared even earlier, in the Wei-Jin and Six Dynasties period (220–589), as illustrated by anecdotes in the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (“A New Account of Tales of the World”).²¹ Nevertheless, the sheer numbers of such games in northern Song poetry collections, especially when augmented by the other kinds of literary diversions, which I shall mention below, provide ample evidence that game playing was particularly common among the literati during this period. Whether or not Song poets actually indulged in literary games more than their predecessors had, they certainly placed a higher value on recording and preserving the poems that such games inspired.

How did these rhyming games relate to the broader stylistic and cultural concerns of northern Song poets? While saving detailed discussion of this issue for my conclusion, I will summarize three features of these games that poets of the period found especially captivating. I will then trace these features as they recur in other kinds of literary games involving meter and imagery.

The first noteworthy characteristic of northern Song rhyming games is that the great majority were composed in ancient-style verse forms—long, often rambling, poems with plain diction, few parallel couplets, and little description of natural scenes. A second feature, as I noted above, is the spontaneous and competitive nature of these games, which produces poems that are witty, humorous,

ern Song. See numerous examples in Fu Pingxiang 傅平驪 and Hu Wentao 胡問陶, eds., *Su Shunqin ji biannian jiaozhu* 蘇舜欽集編年校注 (Chengdu: Ba-Shu shushe, 1990), pp. 2, 23, 30, 45, 74, 77, 99, 120.

²⁰ See, for example, Bai Juyi's series “Matching Twenty Three Poems by Weizhi [i.e., Yuan Zhen],” 和微之詩二十三首, in *Quan Tangshi*, 13:445.4982–90. As for Han and Meng's linked verses, see the excellent discussion of these in Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Meng Chiao and Han Yu*, pp. 116–36.

²¹ See Richard Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo hsinyu: A New Account of Tales of the World* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1976), pp. 34, 321–22. For references to rhyme-matching in the later Six Dynasties, see Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), pp. 325–29.

and loosely argumentative rather than dense, emotional, and highly crafted. A third feature is the random quality of rhymes—that there is usually no semantic relation between words that rhyme—which results in incongruous, even awkward, transitions and juxtapositions within poems, as the writer strives to include as many rhymes as possible to win the competition while still retaining a modicum of sense.²²

These three features are also central to Song literati conceptions of “ancient” writing style; they are not simply aberrations confined to poetry produced from literary games. On the contrary, the literary games are an ingenious method of promoting ancient style through an enjoyable and fashionable pastime.²³

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT: GAMES WITH METER

In games involving poetic meter, we see emerging the same three characteristics I have just described. Even though the majority of poems composed in the Song adopted five- or seven-syllable meters whose regularity allowed little leeway for ludic variation, Ouyang Xiu, and to a lesser extent Mei Yaochen and Su Shunqin 蘇舜欽 (1008–1048), did engage in two kinds of games using irregular meters.

The first kind of game involved creating an unusual metrical scheme as the basis for “filling in the blanks.” An example is the peculiar composition entitled “Zuiweng yin” 醉翁吟 (“Chant of the Drunken Old Man”). According to a colophon by Ouyang Xiu, he and Mei Yaochen composed it together in 1056.²⁴ However, the text does not appear in Ouyang’s collected works, but survives only in one edition of Mei’s poetry.²⁵ It gives a whimsical portrait of Ouyang’s famous alter ego:

²² One example of a rather incongruous transition is the sudden appearance of a horse with “drooping” ears in line 12 of Mei Yaochen’s poem on wine quoted above. The rhyme-word *chui* 垂 (“droop”) triggers his imagination and, since it is only a game, he can introduce an unexpected self-caricature knowing that it will at least give his friends a laugh.

²³ For a more sustained characterization of northern Song poetics and aesthetic ideals, based on the literary criticism of Ouyang Xiu, see my “Competing with Creative Transformation: The Poetry of Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072)” (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1996), esp. pp. 321–91.

²⁴ See “Colophon on the Chant of the Drunken Old Man” 跋醉翁吟, in *Ouyang ji*, p. 540.

²⁵ Text of poem in *Mei Yaochen ji*, p. 882. Ouyang’s collection has two other poems with

The Old Man comes,
 The Old Man comes,
 The Old Man riding his horse.
 How can one describe his drunkenness? 4
 Beneath the forest and the spring
 The sun sets in gloomy mist, the valley darkens,
 Sounds of hooves echo through the rural plains.
 The moon appears from the East and shines upon him, 8
 He clutches its brightness but can never fill his hands!
 The wine wears off, but before he sobers up
 Again he grabs the jade wine-jar
 And pours it down his throat— 12
 This is
 The Old Man's drunkenness!
 Alpine flowers dazzle oh,
 Alpine trees tower high oh, 16
 The Old Man is plastered oh.
 Birds call to the right oh,
 Beasts cry to the left oh,
 The Old Man is unsteady oh. 20
 Insects and cicadas chirp oh,
 Stony spring-waters gurgle oh,
 The Old Man is sloshed oh.²⁶

醉翁吟

翁來，翁來，翁乘馬，何以言醉，在泉林之下，
 日暮煙愁谷暝，蹄聳足音響原野，
 月從東方出照人，攬暉曾不盈把，
 酒將醒未醒，又挹玉罌，向身瀉，翁乎，醉也，
 山花炯兮，山木挺兮，翁醕醕兮，
 禽鳴右兮，獸鳴左兮，翁颺颺兮，
 蟲蝻噪兮，石泉嘈兮，翁醕醕兮。

the same title, which Ouyang composed by himself during the same period (the years 1056-1057). However their meters are quite different from the example translated here. See *Ouyang ji*, pp. 45, 113.

²⁶ I use "oh" as a rough equivalent for the Chinese syllable *xi* 兮. The poem concludes by declaring that the Drunken Old Man does not bother anybody, and when he leaves at night, the poet somehow misses him.

This chant is playful in tone: note the various colloquial expressions for drunkenness in lines 15–23, mixed with folksy natural description. A note to the title makes it clear that this is as much a game as a literary work: “In this zither tune, the [line lengths] increase from two to seven syllables and then decrease [back to two].”²⁷ As far as I am aware, this kind of meter was not based on an existing zither tune, but was Ouyang and Mei’s own creation. Although there are earlier examples where meters gradually expand from one to seven or more syllables,²⁸ I have not come across any previous poem whose meter then shrinks back to two syllables. Doubtless the unsteady arrival and departure of their drunken subject inspired the poets to invent a new game.

As I noted, most Chinese *shi* poetry adopted regular five- or seven-syllable meters, so no other examples of this game of fitting words to a tricky, pre-set irregular meter survive among Ouyang and Mei’s *shi*. However, the game closely resembles the technique of Song lyric (*ci* 詞) composition, which also involved a pre-set meter based on an existing tune and often included lines of irregular length. The mood of lyrics was normally melancholy, but northern Song poets such as Ouyang Xiu and Su Shi made the genre a vehicle for wit and humor as well.²⁹ Moreover, according to many anecdotes of the period, even apparently serious lyrics were often the result of competitive games. To give just one example from the collection entitled *Qianshi sizhi* 錢氏私志 (*Master Qian’s Private Records*) attributed to Qian Mian 錢榘 (late northern Song): the young Ouyang Xiu arrived at an official banquet late, disheveled and accompanied by a courtesan. The courtesan’s excuse for their tardiness was that she had been looking for a lost hairpin. Ouyang’s boss, Qian Weiyan 錢惟演 (973–1034), wanted to punish the courtesan, but agreed to pardon her if Ouyang would spontaneously compose a lyric containing the word “hairpin.” Ouyang acquitted himself brilliantly—“without hesitation” he created a lyric in two stanzas, using a highly irregular 7–6–7–4–5

²⁷ *Mei Yaochen ji*, p. 882.

²⁸ There is, for instance, a work by Bai Juyi entitled “Poem [with Lines Increasing] from One Syllable to Seven” 一字至七字詩, which, according to the title note, resulted from a drinking game. See *Quan Tangshi*, 14:462.5262.

²⁹ In connection with this point, see Ronald Egan, *The Literary Works of Ou-yang Hsiu (1007–1072)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 154–58, and *Word, Image and Deed in the Life of Su Shi*, pp. 332–36.

meter. Amidst applause from the assembled guests, Qian then ordered the concubine to reward him with a cup of wine.³⁰

Although such anecdotes may contain spurious information, they at least demonstrate that the northern Song penchant for game playing extended to lyric composition as well, a fact that is not always clear from the content of the lyrics themselves.

The second kind of game that northern Song poets played with meter was varying individual line lengths in ancient-style poems to produce specific expressive effects—what we might more accurately term a playful technique rather than a full-fledged game. Ouyang Xiu was especially keen on this device. For example, in his poem “Pan che tu” 盤車圖 (“Picture of a Climbing Cart”) the first few lines describe a tired traveler on a rickety cart, painfully negotiating rocky mountain roads. The meter is a correspondingly uneven 4-4-7:³¹

Pale mountains, crag on crag,
Jumbled stones, pile on pile;
Mountain rocks are sharp and jagged;
the cart goes bumpety bump.

淺山嶙嶙，亂石疊疊，山石礮聲車碌碌。

The asymmetrical placing of the three binomes (*linlin* 嶙嶙, *diedie* 疊疊, and *lulu* 碌碌) at the end of each line heightens the uneven effect, so that readers can almost hear the old cart lurching from side to side as it rolls up the road.

Ouyang delighted in creating such vivid metrical effects to emphasize his point. In the last line of his poem “Lu Mountain High!” for instance, he exclaims: “Alas, I would love to describe [your talent], but where can I find a huge brush, rising as high as a flagpole?” (嗟我欲說安得巨筆如長杠). The word translated “high” is actually *chang* 長 (literally, “long”), and it is no coincidence that this line, at eleven syllables, is the longest in the poem—almost as long as the brush Ouyang is looking for.³²

³⁰ *Moji (ji qita wu zhong)* 默集及其他五種, Congshu jicheng edition, 1st. ser. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), 3.2-3; see also Chu Djang and Jane C. Djang, trans., *A Compilation of Anecdotes of Sung Personalities* (Taipei: St. John's University Press, 1989), pp. 345-47. Cf. Text of lyric in *Ouyang ji*, p. 1076.

³¹ *Ouyang ji*, pp. 42-43. Poem dates to 1056.

³² *Ouyang ji*, p. 36. As I noted above, this poem also borrows Han Yu's rhymes: Ouyang

Ouyang similarly uses line length to make a point in his “Wu Xueshi shiping ge” 吳學士石屏歌 (“Song on a Stone Screen of Scholar Wu”), which describes the immense efforts expended by supernatural spirits to carve out a stone screen with a beautiful “natural grain” pattern.³³ The lines stretch out, as if embodying the painful and extended struggle: “Gods grieved and ghosts wept, night and day unable to take their rest; / Otherwise, could they achieve what cunning craftsmen and skillful hands—wearing their spirits, exhausting their thoughts—could not attain: / Visible yet almost invisible, faintly rising tendrils of mist?” (神愁鬼泣晝夜不得閑，不然安得巧工妙手憊精竭思不可到，若無若有縹緲生雲煙).³⁴

Su Shi, who was not normally given to such irregularity in his meters, produced a similar effect in a poem on the same topic as Ouyang’s. He claimed that the pattern on the stone screen resembled a small yet ancient pine tree; therefore he stretched out the line to embody the tree’s great longevity: “Who was it gave you this stone wind screen? / On it are the finest, wispiest traces of watery ink. / He did not paint towering forests or enormous trees, / But only the solitary pine that lives for ten thousand years without growing old on the snowy peaks of Emei’s western range!” (何人遺公石屏風，上有水墨希微蹤，不畫長林與巨植，獨畫峨嵋山西雪嶺上萬歲不老之孤松).³⁵

These literary games often ignored accepted aesthetic conventions: games with meter frequently generated poems that have a rough and uneven feel. Yet in many of these poems the irregularity is quite appropriate for their subjects—jagged mountains, strange-shaped stones, wizened trees. What may have begun as a game or playful technique ultimately produced an innovative and artistically convincing aesthetic effect: a *haofang* 豪放 (“heroic”) topic

clearly wishes to outdo his predecessor by adding a wildly irregular meter to the already difficult rhyme scheme.

³³ *Ouyang ji*, p. 42.

³⁴ Lines 20–22 of poem, in *Ouyang ji*, p. 42. The second sentence is arguably a single line of 24 syllables, since the rhyme comes on “mist” (*yan* 煙), and this section of the poem has a rhyme on every line. At the very least, it is a single syntactic unit divided into two long lines, 15 and 9 syllables respectively, with the line break coming on “attain” (*dao* 到).

³⁵ For Su’s poem see Feng Yingliu and Wang Wengao, eds., *Su Shi shi ji* 蘇軾詩集 (Taipei: Xuehai chubanshe, 1982), pp. 277–78. Fuller has translated Su’s poem and part of Ouyang’s in *Road to East Slope*, pp. 129–31. He notes that irregular meters are uncommon in Su’s poetry. Stephen Owen also translates both these poems in *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, pp. 679–80.

treated in a suitably heroic form. Hence, with their lighthearted games, northern Song literati found an excuse for experimenting with new poetic techniques or for reviving unfashionable old ones. They could claim to be merely playing, when in fact they were engaged in transforming the writing style of their time.

As the following group of games based on imagery will indicate, for at least some northern Song poets, the central aim of these apparently trivial exercises was to throw off the frothy accretions of the Chinese poetic tradition, and to return to the simpler, more direct, and human poetic language of the ancients.

PLAYING WITH ABSENCE: IMAGERY GAMES

In 1050, Ouyang Xiu composed a poem entitled “Snow”:³⁶

The forces of *yang* are still weak, spring buds
 just breaking through,
 When the guest *jin* uses its strength to elbow its way back in.
 The morning chill is biting, and none can oppose the wind,
 Evening snow, in bits and pieces, stops,
 then falls once more. 4
 Driven at a gallop, clouds before the wind are pale
 and drab at first,
 Dazzling and sparkling, mountains and rivers begin
 to reveal their forms;
 Their bright radiance is charming in the rising sun’s reflection,
 But warm air will soon make the melting moisture shine. 8
 The fair lady in her lofty hall rises startled in the morning,
 A hidden recluse, through open windows, hears it falling
 in the silence.
 Before the wineshop a path has formed; bottles and
 wine jars pile high,
 Hunters ride out seeking footprints, and bag a fox
 or raccoon dog. 12
 Tracks swept away by dragons and snakes come to a halt,
 then continue,
 Gnashing tigers, formed from snowballs, bare
 their teeth and claws.

³⁶ In *Ouyang ji*, p. 370–71.

We all look forward to harvesttime: we'll gorge ourselves
 with barley,
 Why should we pity the hungry birds within
 the empty forest? 16
 On Sandy Dyke at morning celebrations, one loses
 his ivory seal,
 In rural fields, singing as she walks, another has
 her grass sandals buried.
 Thus I know that whenever it snows,
 ten thousand people rejoice,
 Yet look at me, not able to drink:
 what can make me happy? 20
 After I see Heaven and Earth cleared of atmospheric dust,
 It makes my insides feel as if they've been washed utterly clean,
 I escape and leave behind words of the past—
 laugh at their dusty confusion,
 Search and explore ten thousand phenomena,
 gazing at boundless infinity. 24
 Even if Ying[zhou] is a backward place, there are plenty
 of literary types,
 One by one they wield huge brushes as if brandishing
 spears or halberds.
 But had I not helped them get this [pastime] going
 in the beginning,
 Our frozen mouths would have no excuse for opening up
 and grinning! 28

雪

新陽力微初破萼，客陰用壯猶相薄，朝寒稜稜風莫犯，暮雪綉綉止還作，
 驅馳風雲初慘淡，炫晃山川漸開廓，光芒可愛初日照，潤澤終爲和氣爍，
 美人高堂晨起驚，幽士虛窗靜聞落，酒壚成徑集瓶罌，獵騎尋蹤得狐貉，
 龍蛇掃處斷復續，猊虎團成呀且攫，共貪終歲飽麩麥，豈恤空林飢鳥雀，
 沙墀朝賀迷象笏，桑野行歌沒芒屨，乃知一雪萬人喜，顧我不飲胡爲樂，
 坐看天地絕氛埃，使我胸襟如洗滌，脫遺前言笑塵雜，搜索萬象窺冥漠，
 穎雖陋邦文士眾，巨筆人人把矛槩，自非我爲發其端，凍口何由開一噓。

This work is entertaining, especially with its vivid sketches of children's snow sculptures (line 14), and peoples' joyful reactions to the

sudden whiteness of the landscape (lines 11–12, 17–19). But toward the end of the poem, Ouyang seems to digress. He talks of “escaping and leaving behind the words of the past”; and “laughing at their dusty confusion” (line 23). He claims to have invented some pastime to share with his friends in Yingzhou, a pastime that will give them joy in the freezing winter weather (lines 27–28). To explain this sudden transition, we need the help of Ouyang’s preface, which states: “I requested that words such as jade, the moon, pear and apricot [blossoms], silk, catkins, white, dancing, geese, cranes, and silver should not be used [in our poems on snow].”³⁷ In other words, all images typically associated with snow in the Chinese poetic tradition were forbidden.

This poem is truly a case of words being louder in their absence. Mei Yaochen, in a famous phrase quoted by Ouyang Xiu in his *Shihua* 詩話 (*Remarks on Poetry*), declared that poets should “evoke boundless meaning, revealed beyond the words.”³⁸ According to Ouyang, Mei was referring to the brief, evocative couplets of Tang regulated verses, whose images trigger feelings that are not openly expressed in the poem. But the *omission* of expected images, just like the highlighting of rhyme schemes and meter, is also a powerful method to reveal a meaning beyond the words of the poem.

References to similar games avoiding certain images appear elsewhere in northern Song texts. In his *Remarks on Poetry*, Ouyang Xiu relates an anecdote about the Nine Monks—Buddhist poets of the early northern Song. A local good-for-nothing named Xu Dong 許洞 wished to show that these monks lacked creativity and imagination. So he invited them all together and asked them each to write a poem *avoiding* references to “mountains, water, wind, clouds, bamboo, rocks, flowers, plants, snow, frost, stars, the moon, birds, and the like.” At this, the Nine Monks all put away their writing brushes.³⁹ Since these topics and their associated images were the staples of the Chinese poetic tradition, it is hardly surprising that the monk poets failed to rise to this challenge.

Another, less tightly structured example appears in a poem preface by Mei Yaochen. In 1055, Ouyang Xiu wrote a verse about

³⁷ *Ouyang ji*, p. 370.

³⁸ Attributed to Mei in *Ouyang ji*, p. 1037.

³⁹ *Ouyang ji*, pp. 1036–37.

his pet white rabbit and requested that his friends match his rhymes.⁴⁰ When he received their responses, writes Mei, Ouyang “said that all our compositions used Chang’e and the Moon Palace to explain [the creature’s origins], whereas he really hoped we would each write another poem with a different context. In this way, we might rise above the common herd.”⁴¹ Ouyang, in his own subsequent poems on the rabbit, overturned the traditional habit of associating the rabbit’s whiteness with the moon, cold, snow, and the force of *yin*: he pointed out that his other pet, a white parrot, was much more at home in the fiery latitudes of the tropics, where seas boil over and the force of *yang* reigns supreme.⁴²

These episodes show that Ouyang and his circle were preoccupied with creating new images, breaking free from the platitudes of their contemporaries, and setting up a method (or game) to encourage experimentation. Nevertheless, their stated aim in doing this was not to be innovative, but to emulate the directness of ancient writers. In a well-known eulogy to Mei Yaochen’s poetic style, Ouyang’s choice of epithets illustrates this point: “His recent poems are especially *ancient* and tough: / I chew, but they’re extremely hard to swallow; / It’s just like when I try to eat olives: / Their true flavor only deepens over time. / . . . Mei is poor, and I alone understand him: / *Ancient* goods are hard to sell at present.” (近詩尤古硬, 咀嚼苦難喂, 初如食橄欖, 真味久愈在, . . . 梅窮獨我知, 古貨今難賣).⁴³ Of course, by promoting the “ancient” these writers were also seeking to “rise above the common herd,” to distinguish themselves from competitors of their own generation. In the northern Song context, claiming to be ancient often went hand in hand with literary innovation and playfulness.

⁴⁰ This poem, entitled “Bai tu” 白兔, is in *Ouyang ji*, p. 371. For translations of this and Ouyang’s subsequent poems on white pets, see my “Fowl and Bestial,” pp. 126-47.

⁴¹ Preface to Mei’s poem “Once Again Describing the White Rabbit” 重賦白兔, in *Mei Yaochen ji*, p. 900.

⁴² See Ouyang’s “Irregular Meter Poem Answering Shengyu’s ‘White Parrot’” 答聖俞白鸚鵡雜言, in *Ouyang ji*, p. 54.

⁴³ My emphasis. From the poem “Traveling at Night in Shuigu, Sent to Zimei and Shengyu” 水谷夜行寄子美聖俞 (dated 1044), in *Ouyang ji*, pp. 11-12. Ouyang later quoted his own lines as a fair representation of Mei’s poetry in his *Remarks on Poetry*, compiled in 1071. See *Ouyang ji*, pp. 1037-38.

CONCLUSION: JOYS OF THE ANCIENTS

The literary games played by northern Song poets are too numerous to discuss comprehensively here. Besides the more structured games with rhyme, imagery, and meter already mentioned, the poets engaged in numerous other playful literary practices that added wit and lightheartedness to their poems.⁴⁴ For example, northern Song literati were fond of creating eccentric personae—Ouyang’s Drunken Old Man 醉翁; Mei Yaochen’s Poet Elder 詩老; Su Shi’s Recluse of East Slope 東坡居士, among others—to serve as semi-comical protagonists in their poems. They also delighted in challenging each other to write on unusual and even slightly ridiculous topics, such as lice, mosquitoes, and other insects, “bulgy-headed” fish, a plate of clams, a wine cup shaped like a parrot, and so on.⁴⁵ And they liberally used incongruous juxtapositions and humorous hyperboles in their poems.

My purpose here, however, is not to survey these games exhaustively, but to view them in the broader context of reforming cultural practices. One could dismiss the poems resulting from these games as mere entertainment, and focus instead on more serious poetry of the period dealing with issues of obvious social concern. Yet such an approach is one-sided. It ignores the complexities of Song poetic style and, more crucially, it overlooks that the writers themselves frequently justified their game-playing inclinations in published prefaces.

⁴⁴ Compilers of literary anecdotes enjoyed spotting such games in the collections of their famous predecessors. For example, besides describing some of those I have mentioned here, Wei Qingzhi 魏慶之 in his *Shiren yuxie* 詩人玉屑 lists: a poem by Mei Yaochen in which every character is pronounced with an oblique tone (unlike the traditional balancing of level and oblique tones); a poem by Huang Tingjian where the rhyme changes every three lines (normally it would be at most every four lines); and a palindromic composition by Su Shi that can be read in either direction as a respectable poem. See *Shiren yuxie* (1959; rpt., Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1978), pp. 34–36.

⁴⁵ Chaves, *Mei Yao-chi'en*, pp. 178–99, gives many examples of Mei’s works on unusual topics, some doubtless resulting from poetry games. See, for instance, the poem entitled “[Xie] Shihou Said That from Ancient Times, No-one Had Ever Done a Poem about Lice, and Invited Me to Write One on the Subject” 師厚云虱古未有詩邀予賦之 (Chaves, p. 191; Chinese text in *Mei Yaochen ji*, p. 283). I have translated numerous poems by Ouyang Xiu on similarly odd topics in my “Competing with Creative Transformation”: see especially pp. 145 (bulgy-headed fish), 150 (clams), and 316 (parrot-shaped wine cup). These works resemble the game-poems described above in that they appear to have been composed at banquets or social gatherings and are lighthearted in tone.

One revealing preface dates from the very beginning of Mei Yaochen's and Ouyang Xiu's official careers. Both men served in the entourage of Qian Weiyan, the cultivated governor of Luoyang during the early 1030s. On an outing with friends to a nearby temple they created a game in which each participant composed five quatrains with rhymes based on the words of famous phrases of poetry.⁴⁶ After the game, Mei Yaochen composed his preface, describing the occasion and explaining why they decided to preserve their poems:⁴⁷

When I was about to return north to Heyang, my friend Ouyang Yongshu and two or three other gentlemen prepared wine and dishes, selected a historical site, and arranged for us to spend the whole day enjoying ourselves to the full as a means of bidding farewell to me. So we found Puming Temple and strained our wine in the bamboo grove there. Old and young sat in a circle, and we dispensed with the polite rituals of offering and passing around [the wine], yet superiors did not lose any dignity, and inferiors did not cause disorder. We whistled and sang harmoniously, and reached a state of transcendent freedom.

When we had drunk our fill of wine, Yongshu said: "Our joy today is certainly no less than that of the ancients: far from the dusty world we have found a beautiful site where we can open our mouths and express our true feelings. But, though we have attained such [joy], we have not yet set it down in writing." He told us to take paper, write out some famous poetic phrases of the past worthies, and place them by our seats.⁴⁸ Each of us would then select one phrase and make a rhyme from every character to record the beauties of this gathering.

Someone said: "Yongshu is correct. If we do not do this, people of future times will think we are merely madmen who guzzle meat and wine!"

In a short while, everyone presented his poem, and then we retrieved our wine cups, got completely drunk, and departed. The following day [Ouyang] delivered the collection of poems, and asked me to compose an account of all that had happened.

⁴⁶ Ouyang Xiu, for instance, picked the line, "On the pavilion mound, the leaves fall from the trees" (*ting gao mu ye xia* 亭皋木葉下), and his first poem, based on the rhyme *ting* 亭, translates: "Above the stream, again we recline on the rocks, / Happily we grow drunk and sober up together; / Sunset clouds linger on the mountains, not yet gathered in, / But the moon [reflected] in the pool comes towering up high" 臨水復欹石, 陶然同醉醒, 山霞坐未斂, 池月來亭亭. Ouyang reduplicates *ting* (meaning "pavilion") to produce his rhyme word *tingting* ("towering"). See his five quatrains in *Ouyang ji*, p. 348, and Mei's five quatrains with preface in *Mei Yaochen ji*, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁷ "Preface to Poems Composed at a Small Drinking Party Held Early Fall in the Bamboo Grove of Puming Temple" 新秋普明院竹林小飲詩序, in *Mei Yaochen ji*, p. 32.

⁴⁸ Following the modern scholar Xia Jingguan's 夏敬觀 emendation of Pu worthies (*pu xian* 普賢) to "past worthies" (*xi xian* 昔賢): cited by Zhu Dongrun in *Mei Yaochen ji*, p. 33.

By borrowing lines from famous poets as the basis for verses celebrating their present joy—a joy “no less than that of the ancients”—these young Song officials raised their farewell picnic to the status of a civilized cultural event, just as significant as any gathering of “worthies” in the past. In this connection, one might note the conscious echoing by Mei Yaochen of Wang Xizhi’s 王羲之 (c. 321–379) much more famous and, by Song times, certainly ancient “Lanting ji xu” 蘭亭集序 (“Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection”), which described a similar gathering of literati.⁴⁹

In addition, these poets desired to preserve this event for the future, to describe it in words so that later generations would know their transcendent happiness and outstanding talent, and realize that they were not a crude, hedonistic bunch of wine and meat-guzzling madmen. In short, they wished to define themselves as literati, to create a recognizable cultural group with its own civilized, free, and relaxed ethos inspired by the ancients. Part of that ethos was the ability to compose poetry spontaneously—to excel at literary games.

Despite its subtle allusions and exalted mood, Mei’s preface also has a touching and down-to-earth honesty, especially in the verbatim record of his friends’ comments. He is quite comfortable revealing their youthful pretensions and implicitly mocking their self-image of sophistication. The reader is left with an incongruous, yet convincing, portrait—a complex of high literary ideals, ancient aspirations, ambition, lighthearted playfulness, and earthy friendship—stylistically similar to the poems we have discussed.

A similar picture appears in an account Ouyang Xiu wrote some twenty-five years later, when he was reaching the peak of his political and literary powers.⁵⁰ Once again we see a gathering of literati.

⁴⁹ In *Han-Wei Liuchao baisan mingjia ji* 漢魏六朝百三名家集 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1979), 3:2376. For an English translation by Richard Strassberg, see Victor Mair, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 565–66. The Orchid Pavilion gathering also included a poetry composition game with wine forfeits, and the poems in the Orchid Pavilion Collection were apparently produced during this game. However, in Wang’s preface the initial happy mood soon turns to melancholy, as Wang recollects the transitory nature of existence. This contrasts with Mei Yaochen’s sustained optimism.

⁵⁰ See “Preface to Poems Composed and Answered in the Ministry of Rites” 禮部唱和詩序, in *Ouyang ji*, p. 299. Full English translation in my “Competing with Creative Transformation,” pp. 339–40.

Mei Yaochen was present too, along with a new group of like-minded colleagues. Locked in the Ministry of Rites, grading the *jinshi* exams of 1057, they passed their evenings exchanging poems and playing literary games. Later Ouyang, the chief examiner and presumably chief gamester, brought out a collection of these poems with his own preface. He justified their lighthearted joking and playfulness by comparing their poems to the ancient *Shijing* (*Classic of Poetry*), in which, he opined, “There is nothing one cannot find.” In fact, he claimed, the “Superior Person” (*junzi* 君子) should draw inspiration from all aspects of life, including even the base, crude, humorous, and ridiculous—*especially* when composing poetry.⁵¹

Toward the end of his life, in 1071, Ouyang once more recalled this episode in glowing terms:⁵²

The six of us were delighted to find ourselves together, and spent every day in one another’s company creating long compositions with perilous rhymes, taking turns to treat every genre. The writing clerks wearied of copying them down, and the servants had to dash back and forth [taking poems between the examiners]. With humor and joking, expressing ourselves in satirical vein, we kept responding to each other, constantly breaking out into laughter. I’d say it was the most memorable event of that whole period: nothing like it had ever happened before!

Like Mei, but this time perhaps tongue-in-cheek, Ouyang attempted to raise a series of parties and poetic games to the status of a defining cultural moment—what he called “the most memorable event of that whole period”—and he claimed that the participants were, like the ancients who composed the *Classic of Poetry*, Superior Persons. Like Mei, he published the poems with accompanying preface, preserving the event for future generations. Yet what is most distinctive about these two accounts is their emphasis on joy, as if enjoyment itself is proof of these scholars’ affinity with the ancient sages and worthies.

The poetic games had what we might call social functions in the sense that the game could not be isolated from the civilized solidarity and companionship of the participants. In organizing such games, the group’s members demonstrated to outsiders that they were relaxed, witty, and appreciative of life’s pleasures—especially

⁵¹ *Ouyang ji*, p. 299.

⁵² From Ouyang’s collection of anecdotes entitled *Guitian lu* 歸田錄 (*Notes on Returning to the Fields*), in *Ouyang ji*, pp. 1030–31.

wine and exotic foods—while being literate and erudite, worthy transmitters of the Chinese cultural tradition.

Besides having this social function, the games had two other related functions that we should not overlook. The first is what we might term a political function, or in other words, using poetic games as a means of building political alliances. It is no coincidence that Ouyang and his colleagues chose the *jinshi* examination period to engage in their most public display of poetic gaming. After all, at that examination they were also awarding top grades to those young scholars like Su Shi, Zeng Gong 曾鞏 (1019–1083), and Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039–1112) who framed their answers in clear, plain ancient-style prose (*guwen* 古文), and failing those candidates who foolishly preferred the obscurities of current-style prose (*shiwén* 時文).⁵³ Hence, while promoting ancient-style prose in the examination, it appears that Ouyang and Mei were also using literary games as an indirect method to encourage their contemporaries and subordinates to compose ancient-style *poetry*.⁵⁴ Just as one's choice of prose style in the *jinshi* examination indicated whether or not one supported Ouyang Xiu's reform faction, with major repercussions for one's subsequent political career, so composing lighthearted verse at social gatherings with such political reformers, emulating their poetic style, was also a clear way to state one's political allegiances. Su Shi's whimsical

⁵³ For an excellent account of these stylistic distinctions, and the events surrounding the 1057 examinations, see Ronald Egan, *The Literary Works*, pp. 12–28. Further details on those who benefited from the exams, and those who failed, can be found in Chaves, *Mei Yao-ch'en*, pp. 35–38.

⁵⁴ As I noted above, the Ouyang Xiu circle saw no contradiction between promoting ancient literary ideals and playing literary games. Traditional accounts of Song poetry normally oppose Ouyang and Mei Yaochen's serious ancient-style verse to the flowery, ornamented, and empty regulated verse of the so-called Xikun 西崑 School, as represented by the early eleventh-century collection entitled *Xikun chouchang ji* 西崑酬唱集 (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1935). Critics often claim that Ouyang and Mei's group criticized the Xikun poets for ignoring the social function of poetry. For a summary of this view, see Egan, *The Literary Works*, pp. 78–84. While I would agree that the style of Ouyang and Mei's mature poetry is generally much plainer than that of the Xikun contributors, they also share several attributes, most notably an appreciation of the multiple meanings of words, an enthusiasm for creating witty poetic allusions, and a desire to be seen as part of a cultivated group of literati. Doubtless that is the reason Ouyang Xiu praised a number of the Xikun poets in his *Remarks on Poetry*. See my "Competing with Creative Transformation," pp. 370–73. Ouyang and Mei's first employer, Qian Weiyan, was one of the main contributors to the *Xikun chouchang ji*, and was apparently a keen literary gamester himself (for one example, see my section on games with meter above).

imitation of Ouyang Xiu's irregular poetic meters, mentioned earlier, well exemplifies this indirect method of building alliances, which succeeds without introducing any overt political content into the words of the poem.⁵⁵

Hence, the important aspect of these game-poems was not so much the superior quality or attractiveness of the finished products; rather, it was that they were produced by a civilized group of literati, reformist scholars who were bound by sincere friendship and mutual respect, and who did not seek to profit at the expense of others. They were what Ouyang Xiu, in his famous prose piece "Pengdang lun" 朋黨論 ("On Factions"), termed a faction of "Superior Persons" rather than of "petty people" (*xiaoren* 小人).⁵⁶ The test for the former was whether its members could manage to stay together, following the same path (*dao* 道) and basing their association not on profit or material benefit but on the virtues of sincerity, trustworthiness, and righteousness. By contrast, factions of petty people would soon fall apart due to mutual conflict and betrayal. Of course, having learned to distinguish superior from petty factions by their behavior, the "ruler" (*ren jun* 人君) should then employ the former for the good of the Empire.⁵⁷

What better way to display the disinterested nature of one's alliances than by playing literary games (and letting everyone know that one is doing so)? Why else would Ouyang Xiu, a prominent member of the Qingli 慶歷 reform group of the 1040s, have composed linked verses with his main political ally Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052) in 1043, just when he was writing "On Factions," if

⁵⁵ Ironically, the subsequent enthusiasm for literary games and poetry composition societies during the southern Song led to a revival of the shorter, regulated verse forms. See Yoshikawa, *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*, pp. 41–42, 169–73, 182–84. One deciding factor, as Yoshikawa notes, may have been that poetic composition in the southern Song was increasingly attracting less educated writers, who were happy to imitate rather than innovate. Fueled by this interest, numerous poetic composition manuals appeared, and these drew most of their examples from the shorter regulated forms of famous Tang poets. Nonetheless, scholars like J. D. Schmidt have pointed out that the regulated verses of the best southern Song poets did incorporate much of the wit, prosaic diction, and incongruous juxtaposition of northern Song ancient-style poetry. Hence, one could argue that northern Song ideals of reviving the ancient in poetry were not totally ignored by subsequent generations, but were selectively borrowed to revitalize the shorter verse forms. See Schmidt, *Stone Lake: The Poetry of Fan Chengda, 1126–1193* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 23–60.

⁵⁶ *Ouyang ji*, p. 124.

⁵⁷ *Ouyang ji*, pp. 124–25.

not to prove the natural closeness of their friendship and their suitability for working together to overcome corruption in the government.⁵⁸

Further evidence that northern Song poets used games to cement their political alliances comes from the extreme reaction of their conservative opponents to the poems of Ouyang and Fan Zhongyan's supporters. Suspicious of all this lighthearted literary camaraderie, the opponents were quick to discover what they called subversive tendencies in their poetry. Consequently, in 1044, after a wine and poetry party at which lines supposedly insulting to the Emperor had been composed, Ouyang's close friend Su Shunqin and several others were exiled.⁵⁹ The accounts make it clear that the offending verse was part of a typically lighthearted literary game. Although the conservatives were probably mistaken in their interpretation of the offending lines, since no poet would have intentionally demeaned the Emperor, they well understood that games between politicians are rarely as disinterested as they appear. As with Ouyang and Fan Zhongyan's linked verses, poetry exchanges served to display the mutual trust and support of the participants and, since those participants belonged to the reform faction in the government, the exchanges also offered an implicit challenge to insecure political opponents.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Two of the four surviving linked verses in Ouyang's collection were composed with Fan. See *Ouyang ji*, pp. 375-76. The first, entitled "Swords: Linked Verse" 劍聯句, begins with Fan's couplet, "The sages produced spiritual weapons, / With which they settled the troubles of the Empire" 聖人作神兵, 以定天下厄.

⁵⁹ For this episode, see James T.C. Liu, *Ou-yang Hsiu* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), pp. 49-50. Apparently trouble began when a colleague was excluded from joining the party and then accused the in-group of various improprieties. As Liu notes, an imperial edict was issued, declaring that the subsequent punishments were a warning to "all those who formed factions, promoted their own fame, conducted themselves in an unconventional manner, held strange opinions, and behaved disrespectfully toward the Emperor" (p. 50).

⁶⁰ That poetic games had political overtones is further suggested by an event following the 1057 examinations: a disgruntled group of unsuccessful candidates tried to mob Ouyang Xiu, the chief examiner, in the streets of Kaifeng, claiming that he had not announced his stylistic criteria for grading, and hence had unfairly failed the students of his conservative opponents. When Ouyang published his anthology of lighthearted poems by the examiners, many candidates complained that the examiners had spent all their time having fun and neglected their job of properly grading the examinations. They were particularly incensed by two poems that compared the busily writing candidates with ants and silkworms. Their demands for a re-mark were ignored, however. See *Shiren yuxie*, 29: 204-205. Translation in Chaves, *Mei Yao-ch'en*, p. 37.

Both the social and political functions of literary games were directed outward toward other groups in society. The game thus became part of a broader agenda, and ceased to be purely playful and spontaneous. At the same time, however, these games served a more personal function for the participants, spurring them on to greater creativity, helping them transcend difficult circumstances through flights of fancy, and preserving a record of memorable friendships. Mei Yaochen and Ouyang Xiu, for instance, sustained a remarkable poetic partnership over some thirty years. Whenever they met, they would play their games with meter, imagery, rhyme, and personae; and even when posted to different places, they would match each other's rhymes from a distance. In terms of their literary merits alone, some of the poems resulting from their exchanges may not seem worth preserving, but to ignore them is to miss the profound value that these lesser poems had as reminders of friendship. As usual, Ouyang Xiu expressed the point most clearly and movingly toward the end of his life, when justifying his preservation of the slightly ridiculous "Chant of the Drunken Old Man": "[In 1056] I composed this poem with Shengyu. Five years later Shengyu died. It is now fifteen years since we composed the poem, and ten years since Shengyu passed away. Reading his words now, I immediately begin to weep. This is why I am mounting it on a scroll and keeping it."⁶¹

This study of northern Song poetic games has three broad conclusions. First, placing such lighthearted poems alongside the familiar plain and serious compositions of northern Song literati gives us a more complex, rounded, and nuanced sense of their humanity.

Second, that these game-poems were written during a period of growing factionalism meant that even the most lighthearted exchange of compositions might conceal a complex set of political

⁶¹ "Ba Zuiweng yin" 跋醉翁吟, in *Ouyang ji*, p. 540. Composed in 1070, two years before Ouyang's death. See also his inscription "Written at the End of Three Quatrains" 書三絕句後, which states: "In the first poem, Mei Shengyu describes the bamboo partridge; in the next poem, Su Zimei [i.e. Shunqin] describes the oriole; and in the final poem, I describe the song thrush. Our three compositions were produced by coincidence, and at first none of us knew of the other [two]. But when we brought them together, [we found that] their ideas were completely alike. How can one deny that this fortuitous harmony was due to our shared spiritual empathy? Since these two masters have died, from now on I'm afraid I too will have to lay down my brush" (*Ouyang ji*, p. 535)

alliances beyond the words of the poems, and could provide evidence for their opponents that the writers were harboring disrespectful thoughts toward the Emperor. True, these opponents often read too much into such games, but we should not go to the other extreme by completely neglecting the social and political significance of their literary activities.

Finally, in the prefaces defending their game-poems, these writers constantly referred to the ancients, and more specifically to the joy of the ancients. This conception seems to challenge a widely held modern idea that what is ancient and revered in China, particularly by mainstream scholars, must also necessarily be sober, moralistic, and serious. By contrast, northern Song literati in the circle of Ouyang Xiu were adamant that their transcendent joy in one another's company clearly demonstrated their affinity with the ancient worthies, including the writers of the Confucian classics. And their game-poems should be treated as evidence of this joy—proof that they were not merely “wine and meat guzzling madmen.”