

Reading/Not Reading Wang Wei

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Abstract:

In this paper I address the question of reading and translating the poetry of Wang Wei. To discuss the issue of translation, my premise is an experiment by Eliot Weinberger and Octavio Paz to collect nineteen translations of Wang Wei's "Lu Zhai," to show that when we translate a Chinese poem it becomes a Western poem. With a discussion of other poems by Wang Wei, I argue that a translation of "Lu Zhai" does not become an English poem but only a poorly translated one since the translation depends on our interpretation of the poet and the poem. In Wang Wei's case, it is a question of whether we believe he is a Buddhist or a nature poet, or just a poet.

Keywords: Wang Wei, Weinberger, Octavio Paz, David Hinton, Pauline Yu, Marsha L. Wagner.

Wang Wei, together with Du Fu and Li Po, is one of the three great poets of the High Tang lyric tradition. If Du Fu is thought to be China's greatest poet and Li Po the Immortal one, Wang Wei is the pure poet. His reputation as a painter created a landscape poetry that equals the perfection of his paintings where the hand of the poet is invisible and the reader is face to face with nature itself. If his poetry is transparent, this is not the case with how we interpret his poems or translate them. Critics distinguish between Wang Wei the nature poet and Wang Wei the Buddhist poet, which makes it difficult to decide where to place emphasis when we translate his poems. Is the notion of "empty" a Buddhist concept or simply a reference to an "empty" landscape? There are critics who believe that regardless of how we interpret his poems, when we translate them we Westernize them. In this paper I would like to address these two issues: the issue of interpreting and of translating Wang Wei.

The issue of translating Wang Wei was addressed by Eliot Weinberger who in *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, lists nineteen different translations of "Lu Zhai"

to show that it is not only impossible to translate the poem but that, in so doing, it becomes a Western poem.¹ The main problem is Chinese prosody, which is largely concerned with the number of characters per line, and the arrangement of tones, which are both untranslatable. The mistake translators often make, according to Weinberger, is to attempt to render Chinese rhyme patterns in the target language, whether English, French or Spanish, which is not only difficult but also “hostile”: “the hostile environment of a Western Language” (W 5).

Weinberger’s experiment is useful not only for how a Chinese poem is translated but for how it should not be, although it would appear that to translate a Chinese poem is a daunting, if not an impossible task for a Westerner. Although the author starts out optimistically by defining poetry as “that which is worth translating,” he demonstrates that the task, although worthwhile, is doomed from the start. He tells us that Wang Wei’s “Lu Zhai” is a four-line poem about the setting sun illuminating a patch of moss, a 1200 years old “scrap of literary Chinese” (W 1) in a language that none speaks anymore. We can barely make out its main features: a mountain, a forest, the setting sun that illuminates a patch of moss; a few strokes of the pen that evoke a mood, an image, which translators will never be able to capture. When and if they do, it will no longer be the same Chinese poem but an English poem. This is essentially what Weinberger sets out to show.

We are first given a transliteration of “Lu Zhai” and a character by character translation. We discover that a single character may be a noun, verb, and adjective, and it may even have contradictory meanings. The character *jing*, for example, the word for brightness, can also mean its opposite, *ying*, shadow. As Weinberger never tires to tell us, context is all. Chinese verbs have no tenses, similarly nouns have no number. But the major characteristic of Chinese poetry, in contrast to Western poetry, is the absence of the first person singular that rarely appears in Chinese poetry because the experience is meant to be universal and immediate. The title of the poem “Lu Zhai,” which he translates as “Deer Enclosure,” refers to a site along the Wang River, and is part of the Wang River Collection, a famous group of poems that Wang Wei wrote in the company of his friend Pei Di. Weinberger speculates that the name comes from Sarnath, the place where Gautama Buddha preached his first sermon. (W 7)

The poem itself presents little challenge. The first two lines, we are told, are fairly straightforward, only the second presents us with a few possible readings, “all of them “correct,” adds Weinberger. (W 7) Weinberger provides a comment to

1 See Eliot Weinberger and Octavio Paz, *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei. How a Chinese poem is translated*. Quoted as W and page number.

each translation and comments on their shortcomings : whether the translator feels he must explain and improve on the original poem (Fletcher) (W 9); when he is uncertain and tentative (Witter Bynner & Kiang Kang-hu) (W 11); “dull but fairly direct” (Jenyns) (W 13); generalizes (Margouliès) (W 15); when Chang & Walmsley attempt to improve on the poem, and the poet disappears altogether and one “hears only the translator speaking” (W 17); when the translator stretches the poem from four to eight lines (Chen and Bullock) (W 19), or even when the translation is most accurate but the translator takes liberties. (Liu) (W 21) In the hands of a poet such as Kenneth, Rexroth Wang’s poem becomes what he would have written had he been born a 20th century American poet (W 23). We get a fairly close translation by Burton Watson (W 25), but Wai-lim Yip’s translation while close is less successful (W 27). The one by G.W. Robinson is the most available but not the best (W 28); McNaughton translates the title but renders it “Li Ch’ai” (Deer Park) (W 35); when translated in French by F. Chang the poem is romanticized (W 37); and some translate only a few lines and make up the rest, “the poem is more Chang than Wang” (Chang) (W 41). Gary Snyder’s translation is perhaps one of the best but remains an American poem (W 43).

Weinberger does not give his own translation of the poem, but provides only the original text of “Lu Zhai,” and a character-by-character rendition. He provides a commentary to the translations which are arranged by year of translation. The translators are: W. J. Fletcher, 1919; Witter Bynner & Kiang Kang-hu, 1929; Soame Jenyns, 1944; G. Margouliès, 1948 (French); Chang Yin-nan & Lewis C. Walmsley, 1958; C. J. Chen & Michael Bullock, 1960; James J. Y. Liu, 1962; Kenneth Rexroth, 1970; Burton Watson, 1971; Wai-lim Yip, 1972; G. W. Robinson, 1973; Octavio Paz, 1974 (in Spanish); William McNaughton, 1974; François Cheng, 1977; H.C. Chang, 1977; Gary Snyder, 1978.

Weinberger wrote this study with the Mexican poet Octavio Paz whose translation in Spanish of Wang’s poem is also included in the study together with a note by Paz on the similarities and differences between Chinese and English prosody, and the difficulties of translating from one language to another. Paz’s translation tries to capture the impersonality of the poem and its spirituality, but what is absent in his translation, at least for Weinberger, is “the cyclical quality of the original,” the way the poem begins both lines with “to return,” and transforms a specific time of day into a cosmic event, that parallels the enlightenment of the individual (“satori”) which “in terms of the cosmos, is as ordinary as sunlight illuminating a patch of moss.” (W 33) The translations provided by Weinberger reflect how each translator understands what the poet is doing: an especially difficult task with a poem by

Wang Wei where the poet is doing very little. Just a few strokes of the brush and the poem is done.

“Lu Zhai” belongs to a series of poems that are known as the Wheel-Rim River, or Wheel River, or Wang River poems (depending on the translator), a location favored by Wang where he also built his home. The poem is the fifth of eighteen poems of the Wheel-Rim River poems as they appear in David Hinton’s *Wang Wei’s Selected Poems*, which are not included in Weinberger’s nineteen translations. The poem, translated as “Deer Park,” is as follows:²

Wang Wei: Deer Park

鹿寨

空山不见人，
但闻人语响。
返景入深林，
复照青苔上。

Lu Zhai

Kong shan bu jian ren
Dan wen ren yu xiang
Fan jing ru shen lin
Fu zhao qing tai shang

Deer Park

No one seen. Among empty mountains,
hints of drifting voice, faint, no more.
Entering these deep woods, late sunlight
flares on green moss again, and rises. (H 40)

The scenery is a mountain which is said to be “empty,” there are no people but only echoes of people. There is only bright sunlight which pierces the forest in late afternoon and which lights up the green moss.

Hinton describes the poem as “perhaps his [Wang Wei] most famous individual poem,” which, in his view, evokes “an immediate and deep experience” of the “emptiness of nonbeing.” (H xviii). Hinton reads the poem as an expression of

2 David Hinton. *The Selected Poems of Wang Wei*. Quoted as H and page number.

the poet's Buddhist beliefs and as "a pure expression of the Ch'an insight that is at the heart of all Wang's poetry" (H xxi). In his view, "Wang takes the poem beyond words on the page, as he returns consciousness to its most elemental and resounding dimensions of emptiness and landscape" (H xxi).

Pauline Yu translates "Lu Zhai" as "Deer Enclosure" and as part of the "Wang River Collection." Differently from Hinton she treats it as a nature poem though she makes allowances for "the appropriateness of a Buddhist reading," especially as suggested by the term, "*kong*," ("empty"), which she stresses in her translation:

Deer Enclosure

Empty mountain, no man is seen.
Only heard are echoes of man's talk.
Reflected light enters the deep wood
And shines again on blue-green moss.
(Yu 202, my italics)³

Although she provides the most likely interpretations for each line, she concludes that the poem demonstrates, "Wang Wei's typical reliance on ambiguity and avoidance of distinctions" (Yu 178). Unlike Hinton who gives a decidedly Buddhist reading, Yu's reading favors a reading of "empty" in "its concomitant implication of a general solitude amid nature" (Yu 167).

Marsha L. Wagner, in her account of the life and works of Wang Wei, in the *Twayne's* series, lists the poem among the Buddhist poems.⁴ Her reasons are that "Deer Park" is also the name of the place near Benares where the Buddha preached his first sermon after his enlightenment. That is why, she writes, "an alternate name for the Ch'ing-yuan Temple on Wang Wei's estate was Deer Park Temple." This is her translation:

Deer Park

Empty mountain, no one is seen,
Only the echo of human voices is heard.
Returning light enters the deep grove,
And again shines on the green moss.
(Wagner 148)

3 Pauline Yu. *The Poetry of Wang Wei: New Translations and Commentary*, 202. Quoted as Yu and page number.

4 Marsha L. Wagner. *Wang Wei*, 148. Quoted as Wagner and page number.

Wagner is alone among the translators to suggest that there may be a “deer” in the poem, but for her the lack of mention of a deer not caught in a trap is a conventional Buddhist symbol: “the deer which is not caught in a trap is a conventional Buddhist symbol for the recluse, further connecting the site on Wang Wei’s retreat with its Buddhists overtones” (Wagner 148). Finally, in her view, the image of the “empty mountain” “suggests a transcendent vision of the illusory material world” (Ibid.). It follows, then, that “Wang Wei’s paradoxical tone presents in the form of nature poetry a representation of Buddhist ideals.” (Ibid.)

David Hinton, Pauline Yu and Marsha L. Wagner do not figure among the translators chosen by Eliot Weinberger and Octavio Paz for their *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*. They are three more examples that we can add to the 19 and yet, if we were to say that David Hinton, Pauline Yu and Marsha L. Wagner read Wang Wei’s poem as a Western poem, I don’t think they would agree that the poem they translate in English is no longer Chinese but English, or is an English poem. Although they are Westerners, as translators and scholars of Wang Wei, they would disagree with Weinberger’s claim.

Weinberger’s experiment appears to be based on the belief that there is such a thing as an original text, a “pure language,” which can never be translated in another language and which, for this reason, would always make any translation not only impossible but radically removed from what the poet wrote. While one can agree that some translations illustrate this point of view and, indeed, are bad translations that deform the spirit of the poem, we cannot say the same for some of the others and, certainly not for those provided by some of his translators, or by Hinton, Yu and Wagner. While Renato Poggioli’s dictum that “traduttore is a traditore” (a translator is a traitor,) still stands, because translation is impossible, it does not follow that a Chinese poem translated in another language like English, French or Spanish (Weinberger’s examples) becomes, for this reason, an English, a French or a Spanish poem.

Weinberger’s claim, although partly true, is not entirely correct. Although Chinese may present certain structural difficulties that we don’t encounter in Western languages like English or Spanish, a good translator knows the original language sufficiently enough to translate the poem according to what the poem says to them. Where translators differ is in their interpretation which is subjective and determines the choice of terms and the emphasis they give the poem. The example of the translation of “Lu Zhai” is a case in point. For Hinton and Wagner, “Lu Zhai” is a Buddhist poem. Hinton, more than Wagner, believes that the poem expresses

the author's religious views, with its emphasis on nothingness and nonbeing. For Hinton, but also for Wagner, the last word "shang" (on/ascend), meaning "rises," suggests a movement that extends over time, "making it not a momentary state, but an abiding dwelling" (H xx). Wagner does not translate "shang" at all. For her, the poem expresses, sufficiently, the experience of finding piece of mind, "*sunyata*." "Wang Wei's paradoxical tone presents in the form of nature poetry a representation of Buddhist ideals" (Wagner 148). In her reading, there is no movement beyond but a joining of "the physical and the metaphysical, substance and emptiness, a keen visual perception and a vision of an invisible realm." (Wagner 149). Pauline Yu, as I have indicated, does not dismiss the Buddhist elements of the poem, but she opts for the alternate reading of a nature poem. She does not translate "*shang*" either but, for her, its meaning is contained in the "reflected light" that suggests the movement of ascending light.

The issue in translating a Chinese poem is not that it becomes a Western poem but that it becomes the poem the translator believes it to be. Weinberger states that "translators tend to rush in where wise men never tread, and often may be seen attempting to nurture rhyme patterns in the hostile environment of a Western language" (W 5). Rhyme, however, is the least of the problems. Where translators seem to "rush in" is with their preconceived ideas of what the poem is about. This is particularly the case with a poet like Wang Wei who, as Marsha Wagner, makes clear in her Introduction, his work can be categorized under four different categories: Wang Wei the Court poet; Wang Wei the Nature Poet; Wang Wei the Buddhist Poet; Wang Wei the Painter. A translator has to decide which of these Wang Wei persona he/she is reading even before the poem is read.

Weinberger's claim obscures the fact that rather than a Western poem we find ourselves with an ideological reading dictated by the preconceived ideas of the translator, which may be correct but, most often, they are not. If we read only Pauline Yu we have a different idea of Wang Wei than when we only read David Hinton. And even when we read both, the reader does not know which translations is more faithful to the original.

All these translations, however, somewhat miss the point of the poem or poems, since, in the case of Wang Wei, the point is not what the poem is about – nature or Buddhism – but what it is, namely, a poem, an act of writing, and not at all the lyrical or religious landscapes they seem to be. In the case of "Lu Zhai," translators have connected the title of the poem – "Deer Enclosure" or "Deer Park," to a possible Buddhist holy ground. The specific reference to "deer," however, has been completely overlooked. Wagner, as I have indicated, is the only one who has point-

ed to the possible presence of “deer” in the poem but only to make the point that it is another possible Buddhist reference. Although Wang Wei most possibly chose the name “Deer Park” because of its Buddhist implications, he also meant to imply the “presence” of deer in the park. This poetic technique may not be so self-evident in this poem, so it may be best to give examples from similar poems by Wang Wei.

A similar pattern occurs in another well-known poem by Wang Wei, “Mt. Zhongnan,” which has been celebrated as a nature poem but has also received a Buddhist reading. The poem deals with a similar mountain and forest landscape but the main focus is a weary traveler who seeks shelter for the night and calls out to a wood-cutter. This is Pauline Yu’s translation:

Taiyi nears the celestial capital;
Continuous mountains arrive at the edge of the sea.
White clouds, as I turn and gaze, merge.
Azure mists, as I enter and look, disappear.
The whole expanse shifts at the central peak.
Shadow and light differ in every valley.
Wishing to seek lodging among men,
I cross the water to ask an old woodsman.
(Yu 170)

Yu’s translation makes it appear as if the old woodsman is on the other side of the river and that the wayfarer can see him. Since the wayfarer needs a place to spend the night, we assume that he will spend the night in the wood-cutter’s hut. This reading makes the poem intelligible and achieves closure. However, the poem does not actually state that the woodsman is there. Like the wayfarer, we presume he is there because we are in a wood, and in a wood there should be a woodsman or a woodcutter. The presence of the woodsman is only inferred, but his presence is never stated in the poem. In Edward C. Chang’s version, the presence of the wood-cutter is made more real: “I ask a woodcutter/ on the other side of the stream.”⁵ The reader is made to believe that the woodcutter is there, and it is just a question of asking him for a place to spend the night. In his version, which he translates as “Whole-South Mountains,” David Hinton resolves the issue altogether because his wayfarer has not decided yet if he needs company or a place to sleep: “if I wanted

5 Edward C. Chang. *How to Read a Chinese Poem. A Bilingual Anthology of Tang Poetry*, 128-29.

human company for the night,/ I'd cross water, visit a woodcutter, no more."⁶ Now we just have to wait for the wayfarer to decide what to do.

The poem has had also a Buddhist reading implied in the title "Mt. Zhongnan." Wagner translates the poem as "Chung-nan Mountain" and lists it in the category of "Wang Wei the Buddhist Poet." In her reading, the mountain is a "place where divinities dwell," thus, "the poet's view suggests a transcendence of the visual mundane world and a glimpse of the heavens" (Wagner 138). This is the wisdom that the poem brings back to earth and reveals to the woodsman. In her translation the last two lines read: "I will lodge for the night at someone's house:/ Across the river, I will ask the woodsman" (Wagner 137-38).

This is also Pauline Yu's reading. Asked by his friend Pei Di where is Mt. Zhongnan, Wang Wei replied that "Zhongnan lies somewhere 'beyond the white clouds': it cannot be localized within space, nor perhaps, within time, but there is no doubt about its existence" (Yu 131). For Yu this statement amounts to a certainty. The knowledge is intuitive rather than rational, since the poet's "heart" knows. (Yu 131) This suggests to her that Wang Wei is alluding to a kind of cognition which does not draw a distinction between knower and known, or between the wayfarer and the woodsman. (Yu 131) We can safely assume that the issue of the woodsman is resolved because he is at one with the wayfarer.

Mt. Zhongnan, however, is not only a place that is difficult to locate but one that does not even exist.⁷ Mt. Zhongnan exists only in the title of the poem, only as a written name, as a material inscription, and nowhere else. For this reason, the issue of whether the wayfarer is able to reach the wood-cutter or not is not unlike asking whether the sign can reach the meaning it refers to. It does not, as we know, since the sign is arbitrary. It promises meaning but it cannot deliver on the promise. The poem is an allegory of the impossibility of ever reaching the woodcutter, of ever finding rest in Mt. Zhongnan.

A similar example of Wang Wei's technique is the poem "Bird-singing Stream," which Wai-Lim Yip, compares to Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles

6 David Hinton. *The Selected Poems of Wang Wei*, 33.

7 As John Ferguson has stated in *Chinese Painting*, the "Wheel River," or "Wheel-Rim River" poems were not meant to be taken as simple literary descriptions of mundane scenery: "such a place as is depicted existed only in the realm of fancy. Wang Wei's imagination, helped by the genius of his two intimate friends, P'ei Ti and Mêng Hao-jan, clothed a barren hillside with beautiful rare trees, with spacious courtyards, and with a broad stream upon which boats plied and on whose banks stood a pretty fishing pavilion, with a deer park, with storks and birds—all of the delights of the eye and ear were brought together in this one lovely spot by the fancy of a brilliant genius." See John C. Ferguson. *Chinese Painting*,

above Tintern Abbey,”⁸ and finds it wanting. Yip states that despite his emphasis on nature and on landscape, “he [Wordsworth] posits the aesthetic object of his poem within the poet’s mind rather than within the landscape itself – in other words, in the mode of *noesis* rather than that of *noema*” (Yip 115). Wang Wei’s poem, instead, belongs to the realm of *noema*, phenomena, which Yip translates as follows:

Bird-singing Stream
Man at leisure. Cassia flowers fall.
Quiet night. Spring mountain is empty.
Moon rises. Startles — a mountain bird.
It sings at times in the spring stream.

Yip finds that the scenery in Wang Wei “*speaks and acts*,” but there is little or no subjective emotion or intellectuality to disturb the inner growth and change of the objects in front of the poet. The objects spontaneously emerge before the reader’s eyes, whereas in Wordsworth, “the concreteness of the objects gives way to abstraction through the poet’s analytical intervention” (Yip 104). Wordsworth’s approach is *noetic* and Wang Wei’s is *noematic*.

Undoubtedly there are differences between the two poets and possibly very much along the lines that Yip suggests. Yet, “Bird-singing Stream” does not seem to be unlike “Mt. Zhongnan,” or “Deer Park,” where the mountain is “empty” and action is reduced to a minimum. In “Bird-singing Stream,” there is a startled bird, but in this landscape, deep at night, how does the poet know that the mountain is empty and the bird is startled? What is the nature of this entity that “spontaneously emerges” in front of us, before our very eyes, as Yip claims? Don’t we have before us, rather, another rhetorical construct of short epithets, or “brush strokes,” which Wang Wei places before us and which have nothing to do with any “growth and object” in nature? Isn’t Wang Wei’s mind also at work, as in Wordsworth?

As in “Deer Enclosure,” the effect of an emerging and growing nature is based on the rhetoric of parallelism which as the moon emerges, the mountain bird is startled. As the Cassia flowers and the night falls, the Moon rises and the mountain bird is startled. We are told that the birds sing in the Spring but, of course, not now, now it is not spring. Now it is Fall, as the cassia flowers are flowering. May be the bird is startled by the rising moon but who is there to see it? Just as the wood-cutter in “Mt.

8 Yip, Wai-Lim Yip. “Aesthetic Consciousness of Landscape,” *Diffusion of Distances. Dialogues between Chinese and Western Poetics*, 104.

9. Pauline Yu. *The Poetry of Wang Wei: New Translations and Commentary*, .55.

Zhongnan,” is he really there? Just as we do not know if the wood-cutter is there, we don’t know whether the bird(s) are startled, or whether they sing in the valley or not. In fact, we don’t know if there are any birds at all in the poem.

The only singing birds are in the title, “Bird-singing stream,” but these are not birds. This is the name given to the river because birds, supposedly, sing there in the spring, but the birds are not really there. The “Bird-singing stream” is only a metaphor, a figure of speech, to indicate the multitude of birds that crowd by the river in Spring or, perhaps, because the sound of the stream is “like” the singing of birds, but there are no birds. The birds that may be startled by the rising of the moon, can only occur in Spring time, but does not occur in the poem. The only singing birds are written in the title, as a material inscription, and not as a phenomenal or *noematic* entity, as Yip believes. At this level, there is no difference between Wordsworth and Wang Wei. They are both not looking at nature but constructing the poem in abstraction through writing. Both their approaches are *noetic* or, to be more precise, rhetorical or allegorical.

The notion that “Bird-singing Stream,” like other poems by Wang Wei, are a direct representation of nature, or even of an ideal Buddhist landscape, is complicated by the hypothesis that most of these compositions are based on an existing painting. Readers may think they are looking at nature when in fact they are only looking at a painting, at images of nature, only reading words on a page that describe or refer to nature as depicted in a painting. However, even this hypothesis seems unlikely as it is clear from an early poem by Wang Wei, “An Inscription for a friend’s Mica Screen,” which Wang Wei wrote when he was fifteen. Even at a young age, Wang Wei was not deluded by the way a painter or a poet can imitate nature. In the poem, the poet relates how the friend’s mica screen is brought out in the yard and when it is opened mountains and streams are reflected in it.

The mica screen belonging to your family
Is carried out to the rustic yard and opened.
Naturally there are mountains and streams that enter,
Not produced by brightly colored paints.
(Yu 55)

The poem brings up the issue of imitation, of a “natural” representation of nature. The mica screen reflects, perfectly, the surrounding landscape as if “mountains and streams” just flew into it. The imitation is so perfect that one cannot tell if it is a work of art, “produced by brightly colored paints,” or one is looking at nature, un-

assisted by the artful brush stroke of the painter. However, the claim that the mica screen portrays nature as such, or even that the poem is a faithful imitation of nature, is contradicted by the title of the poem that it is an “inscription”: “An inscription for a Friend’s Mica Screen.” Although the poem may well provide the illusion of nature, the author makes clear in the title that the poem is only a piece of writing, only an “inscription. In short, the poem is not a lyric, a symbolic or lyrical composition, but only a prosaic or allegorical construct that place emphasis on language and on the linguistic illusion created by language. The hand of the author, or the “artful brush stroke” of the painter, may not be visible, but the inscription is there as a reminder that the poem is not a phenomenal but a material entity that cannot be erased by the illusion created by words.

The poem “Lu Zhai” follows a similar model as previous poems. The title “Deer Park,” or “Deer Enclosure,” is meant to suggest the presence of a “deer” in the park or in the enclosure, just as in other poems the “presence” of the woodcutter or woodsman, the startling of birds in spring, do not exist except in the title of the poems that suggest their presence. In the case of “Lu Zhai,” readers have ignored the possibility of “deer” in the poem and have looked for either “men” behind the voices, or for a Buddhist experience of nonbeing in the “empty” mountain. These readings are certainly correct to a certain extent, and understandable, because “men” are heard in one case and because we know that Wang Wei was a serious disciple of Buddhism. However, when we read a great poet like Wang Wei we do not really read him, because we already know so much about him that, inevitably, we gloss his poems with our knowledge.

To return to Weinberger’s claim that in translating the poem it becomes a Western poem, it is clear that “Lu Zhai” does not become so much a Western poem as it becomes whatever the translator wants it to become. If we believe with Pauline Yu that it is a nature poem we will translate it accordingly. If we believe with David Hinton or with Marsha Wagner that it is a Buddhist poem we will read it as a Buddhist poem. Similarly, if we limit ourselves to read one translator, or if we believe in one translator, Wang Wei will be either a nature poet or a Buddhist poet. However, Wang Wei was above all a poet. In some of his poems, as Wagner shows in the section on “Wang Wei the Buddhist poet” (Wagner 119-49), Wang Wei wrote overtly of his faith, but in these poems, which cannot be decided whether it is a natural or a spiritual landscape, Wang Wei is being a poet and the “true” nature of these poems is inscribed in the titles which attest to their prosaic and allegorical character. They are like paintings that bear the title on their frame, which tells us what they are about, or, which is the same, they are allegories that tell us what they are.

In David Hinton's *The Selected Poems of Wang Wei*, the last poem is entitled, "Off-hand Poem," written "by the way," a kind of poetic confession from the author to the reader, in confidence.

Off-Hand Poem

I'm ancient, lazy about making poems.
There's no company here but old age.
I no doubt painted in some former life,
roamed the delusion of words in another,
and habits linger. Unable to get free,
I somehow became known in the world,
but my most fundamental name remains
this mind still here beyond all knowing.

(Hinton 100)

It is hard to know how faithful is Hinton's translation but in his admirable translation, it is clear that the poem is a confession of sorts, and this is how I understand it. The poem, of course, is not written either casually or off-hand. A great poet like Wang Wei never writes anything off-hand. The "Off-hand" refers, rather, to the confession that the poet is making, now, that he is old, "ancient," and, perhaps, tired, "lazy," of writing poems. He recalls his past as a painter, "I no doubt painted in some former life," and his other and present life as a poet, as well as the illusion or "delusion" of words, with which he has had to live. The same delusion he creates with his poems which continue to give his readers pleasure, but also delude them. Like painting, writing poems is an exercise in illusion, in deluding the viewer or the reader, but never himself. As we have seen with the poem on the "Mica Screen," in painting the illusion of standing before nature is great, but in poetry is even greater. Even at the young age of fifteen, Wang Wei was never deluded by what he saw and by what he wrote, knowing full well, even then, that he would never be free of language.

In Hinton's translation, painting is for Wang Wei an art form he performed in a former life, now, as a poet, he "roamed the delusion of words" in another [life]." In Marsha Wagner's translation, the delusion of words becomes a "mistake": "In this existence I was mistakenly a poet" (Wagner 163). Similarly for Pauline Yu who translates it: "In this age mistakenly a poet" (Yu 110). Wagner's and Yu's translation give the impression that he was a painter once, and now he is a poet by mistake. Hinton's translation, instead, refers more specifically to the poet's relationship to

words and to the illusion they create. The “mistake,” namely, the illusion that words create, is not meant for the poet, but for the readers who read him.

Although he became famous as an artist and as a poet, and he is known the world over, Wang Wei does not identify with either being an artist or a poet, or even with the name, Wang Wei. That is not his name. Wang Wei is the name the world knows him by, but that is not his “fundamental” name. His “most fundamental name” is what remains, what is left over, the name who speaks now, here, who writes here, his mind, beyond all knowing. The name that we readers can know is only the signature on his paintings or on his poems, or on book covers, the inscription: WANG WEI. Like the deer, the woodcutter, the birds or Nature, he is not there, that is not him, he is “beyond all knowing.”

David Hinton, in a note, explains the “fundamental name” as meaning that Wang Wei’s names (given names, Wei, and literary name, Mo-chieh) are the Chinese translation of Vimalakirti, the central figure in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, which is especially important in the Ch’an tradition” (Hinton 112). Hinton reads the line the way he reads “Lu Zhai,” as a Buddhist reference. From the way, he translates “Off-Hand,” however, this is not the reading one gets. The poet does not state that “my names together are fundamentally true.” He is saying that Wang Wei or Mo-chieh, by which he is known, are not his names, and that the other name that “remains,” the name which is left, which remains, is the name that exists “here” beyond all knowing, even beyond Hinton’s understanding of Wang Wei.

There is a line drawing portrait of Wang Wei at the beginning of Marsha Wagner’s book with a caption which reads: “with his face characteristically turned away from the viewer.” This is what Wang Wei meant by “Off-Hand,” away from the viewer, away from the reader, away from the name Wang Wei, beyond all-knowing, off-limits, Wang Wei the Buddhist.

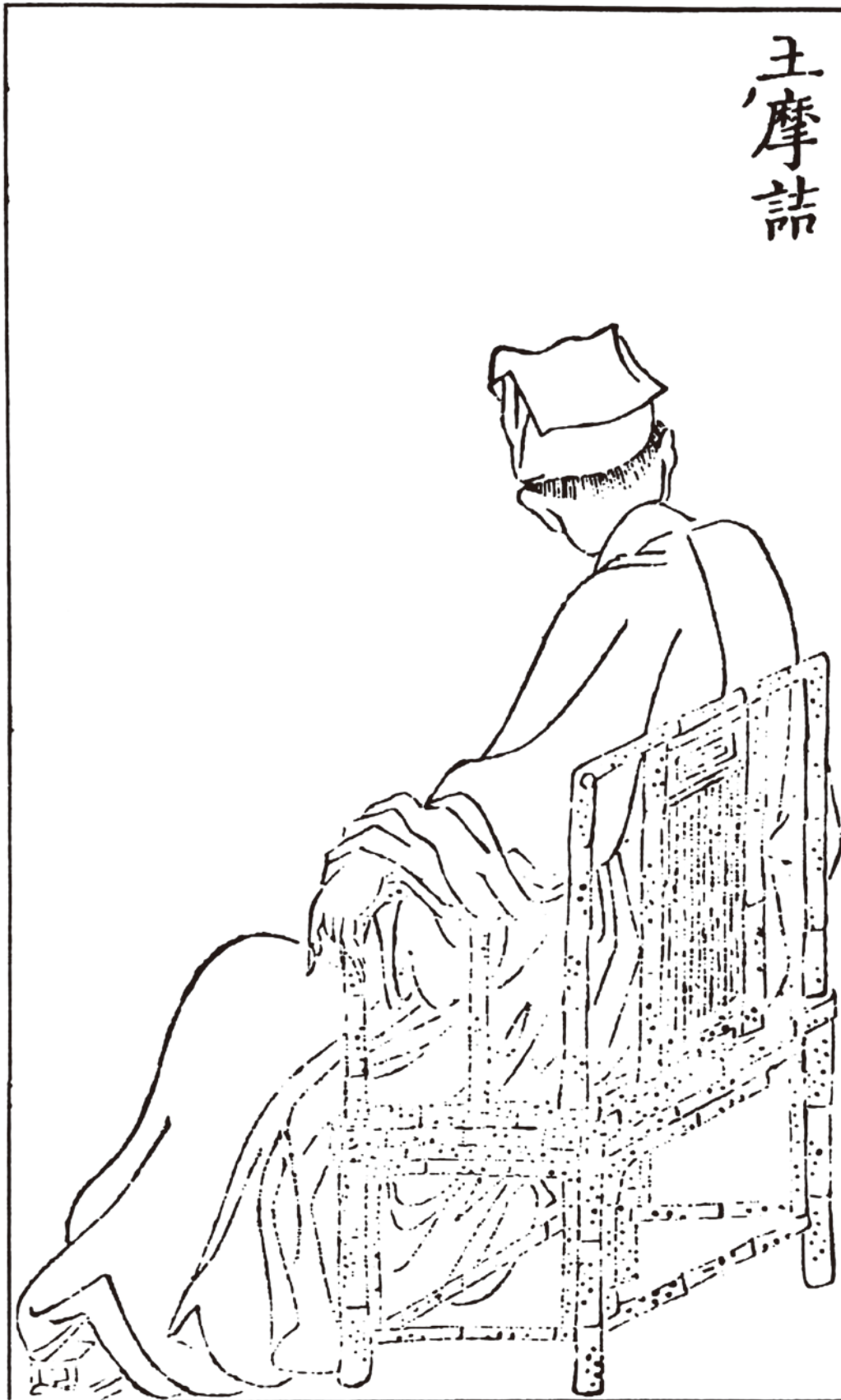
There is no difference between reading a Chinese poem by a Chinese or by a Westerner. They are both subject to the same rules of reading poetry and they both fail. They both fail because they are both seduced and deceived by the illusion of the poetic word. There are no essential differences between East and West at this level of reading. Any such claim is subjective and self-serving and a matter of convenience. If we truly wish to read poets “differently,” both Chinese and Western, we have to make an effort to read them not for the meaning we believe they convey but for how these meanings are produced. We have to be like Wang Wei in the line drawing portrait, we have to turn our back to the poet, to the delusion of words, just like the poet does, and read.

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Massimo Verdicchio is Emeritus Professor of Italian and Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. He has written books on Dante and Benedetto Croce and has many articles on Western literature. Because of his interest in Tang Poetry, he has published on the poetry of Tao Yuanming, Du Fu and Li Shangyin and, now Wang Wei. At present, he is working on the poetry of Li Bai.



A traditional line drawing portrait of Wang Wei, with his face characteristically turned away from the viewer.