

Huaichuan Mou

REDISCOVERING

Wen

Tingyun

a historical key
to a poetic labyrinth

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SUNY series in
CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

Roger T. Ames, *editor*

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Huaichuan Mou

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In a time when Chinese culture is going to the world while the cultures of all the world are going to China, both in unprecedented scale, I am glad to see that Chinese classic poetry has also become a worldwide academic concern and interest. This is perhaps why this book can be published. Insignificant as it is, I would very much like to present it as a small gift to all those kind friends in whom I see the reflection of God.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CS—Yao Silian (姚思廉): *Chenshu* (陳書)
- DKJK—Xu Song (徐松): *Dengke Jikao* (登科記考)
- HHS—Fan Ye (范曄): *Hou Hanshu* (後漢書)
- HS—Ban Gu (班固): *Hanshu* (漢書)
- JS—Fang Xuanling (房玄齡): *Jinshu* (晉書)
- JTS—Liu Xu (劉煦) et al.: *Jiutangshu* (舊唐書)
- Liji—Liji Zhengyi* (禮記)
- LS—Yao Silian: *Liangshu* (梁書)
- Lunyu—Lunyu Zhengyi* (論語正義)
- Maoshi—Maoshi Zhengyi* (毛詩正義)
- Mengzi—Mengzi Zhengyi* (孟子正義)
- NQS—Xiao Zixian (蕭子顯): *Nanqishu* (南齊書)
- NATW—Richard. B. Mather, trans.: *A New Account of Tales of the World*
- NS—Li Yanshou (李延壽): *Nanshi* (南史)
- QTS—Hu Zhenheng (胡震亨) et al.: *Quantangshi* (全唐詩)
- QTW—Dong Gao (董誥): *Quantangwen* (全唐文)
- SGZ—Chen Shou (陳壽): *Sanguozhi* (三國志)
- Shangshu—Shangshu Zhengyi* (尚書正義)
- SS—Shen Yue (沈約): *Songshu* (宋書)
- TFZNB—Wu Tingxie (吳廷燮): *Tang Fangzhen Nianbiao* (唐方鎮年表)

WFQ—*Wen Feiqing Shiji Jianzhu* (溫飛卿詩集箋注)

XTS—Ouyang Xiu (歐陽修): *Xintangshu* (新唐書)

Zuozhuan—*Chunqiu Zuozhuan Zhengyi* (春秋左傳正義)

YFSJ—Guo Maoqian (郭茂倩): *Yuefu Shiji* (樂府詩集)

Zhouyi—*Zhouyi Zhengyi* (周易正義)

ZZhTJ—Sima Guang (司馬光): *Zizhi Tongjian* (資治通鑑)

INTRODUCTION

The Tang Dynasty is the golden age of Chinese poetry. The Late Tang is a harvest season of the golden age, an era prolific in great poets. Wen Tingyun (798–868?) was a great master of poetry of the Late Tang and the herald of a newly emerging poetic subgenre of his time, the *ci* poetry that became prevalent in the Song Dynasty and has captivated generations of Chinese readers up to modern times.

The aim of this book is to rediscover Wen Tingyun the man, so as to reevaluate Wen Tingyun the poet. We will find out what Wen writes about in his poetry and how he writes it. To this purpose, apart from exploring Wen's intricate life with an understanding of his unique poetic style, we will also use the uncovered historical events related to his life as a key to enter and travel through his poetic labyrinth. This book is thus titled *Rediscovering Wen Tingyun: A Historical Key to a Poetic Labyrinth*.

THE TIME OF WEN TINGYUN: RAMPANT EUNUCH POWER

For all its cultural exuberance and prosperity, the Late Tang was a time filled with troubles both internal and external. The eunuch usurpation of court power was its most conspicuous and serious political problem. As an outgrowth of the highly centralized imperial supremacy, this problem arose during the An-Shi Rebellion (755–763).¹ In the decades after the rebellion the emperors seem to have taken a wrong lesson from it, by lessening their confidence in the court officials, but entrusting increasing power to the eunuchs, their “safe” household slaves. Once this transfer of power was institutionalized and became a *fait accompli*, the eunuchs were no longer isolated palace slaves at the emperors' mercy. Not only did they take control of religious and economic affairs, but they also played a part in military manipulations and political decision making at the top level. They even became able to enthrone and dethrone the emperors, and had the lives of emperors at their disposal.² This eunuch infiltration of the power structure greatly accelerated and finally

precipitated the downfall of the dynasty. Controlling the emperors as an emblem of their supremacy, the eunuchs generally aggravated the dissension among the court officials and intensified factional strife. As a result of this situation, the “Southern Office” (court officials), vis-à-vis the “Northern Office” (the eunuchs), polarized into two factions, the Niu Faction and the Li Faction. Initially and essentially, the two factions stood for different political responses to the Yongzhen Reform (805), even though their later factional proclivities were often not easy to define. Faced with the factional struggles prevalent under eunuch power, any honest literary man would encounter great difficulties in establishing a successful political career for himself.

Out of a concern for their own vested interests, court officials in power from either faction often adopted a vacillating, if not ambiguous, attitude toward initiating strong measures to deal with the eunuchs. This vacillation can account in part for the failures of the “Southern Office” in both the Yongzhen Reform and the Sweet Dew Incident (836), the two events most representative of its efforts to curb the eunuchs. The Yongzhen Reform attempted to get rid of eunuch power, while the Sweet Dew Incident was aimed directly at the annihilation of the eunuchs themselves. In both cases, however, the court officials never closed ranks, but remained at odds with one another over the effectiveness of radical actions. Actually, the literati in general were willing, but not daring and firm enough, to oppose the eunuchs. As a result, the participants in the two events were politically too weak to be a match for the eunuchs, even though they succeeded in enlisting the support of the emperors. Most of the Yongzhen reformers were condemned to life-long banishment, and all the Sweet Dew Incident plotters suffered clan extermination. It was not until toward the end of the dynasty, 901, when absolution came in form of an “Amnesty,”³ that they were rehabilitated. Since the eunuch power existed in a kind of symbiosis with the Tang royal clan, some people preferred to join forces with them to guarantee a smoother official course of action, or a more favorable official position and career. In fact, anyone in office had to come to terms and cooperate with them in order not to invite failure. The so-called “Yuanhe Restoration” accomplished by Emperor Xianzong (r. 805–820) and Pei Du (765–839), and the Governance of Huichang effected by Li Deyu (787–850) and his followers, are two cases in point. In both cases the Tang court succeeded in recapturing territories occupied by semi-independent satraps, somewhat reanimating a body politic that was near collapse. In neither instance, however, was the eunuch problem addressed. Rather, it was because Pei and Li refrained from stirring up the “hornets’ nest” of the eunuchs that they were able to enjoy a measure of success in the military campaigns they led. Their military operations were, in fact, approved by the eunuchs, because, after all, the eunuchs’ parasitic benefits depended on a viable Tang state power. Actually, neither Pei nor Li could avoid the misfortunes the eunuchs inflicted. Adamant and ironhanded as Li Deyu was in rendering meritorious services to the empire, he was thrown out of the political arena as soon as the eunuchs set a successor, Emperor

Xuanzong (r. 846–859), upon the throne. Li Deyu then died in exile, a victim of factional strife, or, more accurately, of eunuch politics. Pei was luckier than Li. However, effective as he was in his official duties, he also had to suffer demotions resulting from political pressures from the opposing factions, with the connivance, or at the instigation of the eunuchs. Another striking example was Liu Fen⁴ (fl. 832), who, for all his fearlessness in expressing the general indignation against the eunuchs, brought more disgrace than glory upon himself.

In the literary and ideological domain, there was a concerted effort to invigorate Confucianism, embodied by the Ancient Prose Movement and the New Music Bureau Movement, as a remedy for the maladies of the time. Many outstanding representatives of the literati, such as Han Yu (768–824),⁵ Liu Zongyuan (773–819),⁶ Liu Yuxi (772–842), and Li Ao (772–841),⁷ contributed to the revitalization of the Confucian doctrine and blazed a trail for the Song Neo-Confucianism, which then crystallized to become the dominant ideology for the next thousand years. But this in no sense offered a miraculous cure for the political disorders of the empire, and had no effect in curbing eunuch power. Disillusioned by the grim realities, the Late Tang literati adopted a pragmatic and worldly stance and resigned themselves to uncontrollable historical forces. Apart from the Confucianism they espoused in their official or political life, they showed more interest in religious philosophies, such as Buddhism⁸ and Taoism. On the other hand, in their private lives the Late Tang literati are well known for their hedonism. Even great statesmen or poets famous for their concern about the country's plight and the people's livelihoods were no exceptions. For example, Bai Juyi (772–846), the chief leader of the New Music Bureau Movement, now became a devout Buddhist layman, enjoying to the full his life of wealth and rank, having long since forgotten his dauntless remonstrance with Emperor Xianzong in his capacity as Attending Censor. One of the main participants in the Sweet Dew Incident, Wang Ya (765?–835), became notorious after his execution, when the great fortune he had amassed became known.

Living in a time with these pervasive general tendencies, Wen might have attempted to seek an official position to realize his political ideals, to look for a spiritual asylum in Buddhist philosophy in his frustration, or to enjoy life as much as he could. However, he was destined to be at odds with fate.

THE STUDY OF WEN TINGYUN: LASTING HISTORICAL PREJUDICES

That Wen's reputation suffered badly before and after his death stems from the eunuch problem. The major events of his life have been distorted or at least covered up, and not even Wen himself dared record the relevant events in clear terms. Consequently, Wen's poetry and personality have been misunderstood to a very serious degree and his true features have been enveloped in a twofold veil of historical prejudice and literary obscurity. Therefore, further research

concerning Wen Tingyun the man and thus the poet is a pressing academic necessity.

One of the main sources for later compilation of histories, official documents of the Late Tang, especially those closely concerned with the eunuchs' clandestine affairs, were drafted under the eunuchs' influence.⁹ Moreover, the original materials surviving the chaos prior to the Song Dynasty were subjected to the biased dispositions of the Song official historiographers. Thus, the two *Tang Histories* (JTS and XTS) written by them fail to give an acceptable account of the eunuch problems that bear closely upon Wen's life. One more adverse factor is that, although containing important information, Wen's poetry and prose are too obscure and difficult for the casual historiographer-readers to fathom, and hence to utilize.

In consequence of all the above, no Chinese scholars since the Song Dynasty have made a thorough study of Wen Tingyun, and many modern scholars generally accept the view that Wen was a libertine and a dandy, a poet of aestheticist originality, capable of every mischief but incapable of any concern for his country and people. It is generally believed that there is no great artistic value to be found in his works, whatever form they might assume; hence there is a tendency to devaluate Wen's works because of his problematic personality. It follows that many of his works have been misinterpreted or simply excluded from serious studies. However, these same works often make the case in one way or another that their author was a poet engagé. Readers of them can sense to some degree that there is a unique and profound beauty in his poetry that must have at its root some foundation in reality, compelling a serious reading. Recognition of this has given rise to another approach, by critics who sense the artistic beauty in many of Wen's poems and disregard former criticisms of all shades. They do not hesitate to praise Wen in the highest terms, likening him to Qu Yuan and Li Bai,¹⁰ poets of everlasting popularity in Chinese literary history. In the eyes of the orthodox critics, however, such a view overestimates Wen's poetic attainments. To mediate between the two extreme tendencies, there is a third approach that eschews the efforts to seek conformity between the personality of the poet and his poetry, and is interested only in passing judgment on Wen's individual works. This approach, however, while seeming justifiable, may lead to another kind of falsehood.

To judge which of these three tendencies is the more reasonable, a comprehensive study of Wen Tingyun is requisite, for which an exhaustive research of *Wen's Collected Poems* is indispensable. The *Annotations and Explanations of Wen Feiqing's Collected Poems* (WFQ), the only effort heretofore aimed at understanding all of Wen's extant poems, unfortunately fails to make any logical and chronological arrangement of Wen's poems and thus is unable to point out what each poem it annotates is about, leaving the reader in darkness to find his own way. In consequence, very few modern scholars in last century have bothered to take up this study, and few significant breakthroughs have appeared. Scholars have attached more importance to his *ci* than to *shi*

poetry, but have not yet reached a just and sound reevaluation of Wen Tingyun as a whole, thus conforming to the general tendency of studying his works without adequate knowledge of his life.

Since Wen was capable of writing with both simple and complex artistic expression, it is only logical that he adopted an ambiguous style when dealing with subtle political taboos, especially the eunuch problems. By exposing the eunuchs' ulterior activities, Wen's poetry fills in this historical gap, providing very precious pieces of information, which can enable us to view his time from a fresh perspective. Wen's ambiguity serves to keep his enigmas from being unraveled and to prevent him from being understood. But ambiguity was Wen's only option. He employed it to ensure that the concerns in the inmost recesses of his heart would not die with him and could wait for future understanding. It has been regrettable that some of his literary creations have misled the vast majority of his readers, exceeding and going counter to his expectation. To give him a relatively pertinent reappraisal, we must first try to clarify the major events of his life.

The key to clarifying Wen's life lies in maximum utilization of the limited sources available. To do this, we must make a painstaking study of his most ambiguous poems, those that are bound up with the most sensitive parts of history, and through this study break through to actual events in his life. For this breakthrough, we will depend on Wen's epistles for the underlying messages, and weave together all the narrative threads into a biography that can stand close scrutiny. To base our rewrite of the poet's life on solid arguments, we will use the information derived from the following poem as a foundation for our framework. The lengthy title of this poem reads:

“In the Autumn of the Fifth Year of Kaicheng, Because of Contracting a Kind of Disease Lying in Bed in the Suburban Wilds of the Capital, I Could not Go to the Princely Establishment in the Company of the Local Representative. I Was About to Betake Myself to a Far Place. Amidst Feelings of Self-pity in the Depths of the Winter, I Unbosomed Myself in One Hundred Rhymes and Sent Them to Palace Censor Xu [Shang], Investigating Censors Chen [Gu] and Li [Yuan], Attending Censor Su of Huizhong, and Defender of Hu County, Wei; And Also I Presented the Poem to Three Friends of Mine: Yuan Jiao, Miao Shen And Li Yi”¹¹

This autobiographical poem (“Hundred-Rhyme Poem” henceforward) includes important information concerning all the events of Wen's life up to the fifth year of Kaicheng (840) when Wen composed it; it even hints at many consequences Wen had to face after that year. With a view to adumbrating Wen's life, we use it as a time coordinate when we study the relevant events. Thus, many of its couplets, designated by the number of the rhymes in it, appear and reappear in the chapters to follow.

We will not agree with some old-type Chinese scholars who fill their annotations with specious statements quoted out of context, and seldom bother to give a line-to-line paraphrase of the poem itself. Nor will we follow some new-style critics who apply their general theory to a poem even before they really understand each of its lines. We will concentrate our efforts on finding out the major events reflected in the poem, which relate to Wen's life and affect his poetry. To do this, we will encounter difficulties, because, sardonically, it is not always safe to unlock the Sphinx imprisoned in Wen's poems.

Since it is a reflection of his life, it is only reasonable that Wen's poetry should be complex; to regard him either as one who played with words or as one who was unable to express himself clearly is equally wrong. Few other Chinese poets had as many ups and downs and twists and turns in their lives. In Wen's case, these were closely linked to the concurrent political situation and left imprints in his personality. Some of Wen's poems, regarded as inexplicable by tradition, are undoubtedly explicable, as we have to stress repeatedly. In writing about his life, Wen only followed the traditional path of belles lettres. Traveling farther along that path, however, he reached the summit—a summit that is at the same time a dead end. In Chinese poetic history, few poets have produced poetry as beautiful and elegant as his, which explains why we say that Wen has reached the summit of poetic beauty. On the other hand, few poets have resorted so heavily to erudition and literary artifice as he did, to the bewilderment of later readers, and thus the summit Wen reached is also a dead end.

I find it very interesting that Wen was, in one way or another, linked with many important figures of the time mentioned earlier. It is even more interesting that many favorable or unfavorable turns of his life and his poetry are so closely related to the major political events of his day. Wen did, after all, leave in his works all the key information that enables us to really know his life and feelings, and he did this quite deliberately. Facts can really be stranger than fiction. After long deliberation, I have discovered and wish to add to the life of a misunderstood Wen Tingyun the following details:¹²

1. Born in 798 into a family of imperial relatives, since his very childhood, Wen had carried on an inherited feud against the power-entrenched eunuchs.
2. Wen's marriage in Jianghuai region with a singer-prostitute (836) typifies the "misconduct" that was exploited by his enemies to block any political advance on his part.
3. Wen's professional teacher Li Cheng (768?–841) recommended him (837) to Emperor Wenzong as literary attendant to Li Yong (827–838), the Heir Apparent; thus Wen found an opportunity to directly serve his country and lord, even though deeply involved in a series of inner palace political conflicts.

4. In 839, after the Heir Apparent's tragic death, and with the aid of powerful recommendations, Wen changed his name to participate in the Metropolitan Prefecture Examination, on the first try achieving "Equivalent to Passing"; however, when the change of his name came to light, he "failed to pass" and was forced to run for his life (840).
5. During the Dazhong era (847–860), as a result of persistent attempts over many years, Wen *passed* the Presented Scholar Examination, and *passed* with a meaningful demotion (859).

Equipped with these clarified details concerning his life, we also come to a new understanding of Wen's poetic style, especially of his magnum opus, the series of the Fourteen Pusaman *ci* poems, whose explanation has long been a matter of vehement academic controversy in Chinese literary history. By taking into consideration the background against which the Pusaman series was composed, I have attempted to use Wen's own poetic techniques to fathom his poetry and conclude that this series is much more than merely a group of palace-style poems, as traditional critique represents them. For throughout the series we find messages that convey all of Wen's relevant experiences, although not explicitly and chronologically. Wen is not merely describing love, but is writing about political affairs under the guise of love. This series evidently has hidden motifs that require further exploration, and which will challenge any pedestrian reading.

IS WEN TINGYUN WRITING ANOTHER'S DREAM?

I will take a published book, Paul Rouzer's *Writing Another's Dream—The Poetry of Wen Tingyun*, as an example, to illustrate how Wen is understood and misunderstood and why we must know about Wen's life before we can appreciate his poetry.

Rouzer quotes Wang Fuzhi's (1619–1692) *Jiangzhai Shihua*:

"A monk knocks on a gate under the moon" is only a random guess or a false speculation, as though speaking of another's dream. Even if you make the description vivid, how could it ever affect the heart? Those who know this will know that brooding over the choices of "push" or "knock" is only speculating on the behalf of some other person.

Then he comments:

Wang's criticism here, though negative, summarizes precisely a major characteristic of Wen Tingyun's verse: an ability to stand outside of the self and to "speculate on the behalf of some other person."

For a later imperial reader, then, Wen's poetic vices could be summarized as twofold. First, when he wrote of morally dubious experiences, he brought into question the important role poetry was meant to play in society. Second, and more important, as a historical actor he was often "unreadable" for later generations. Frequently he left behind only the poem (a morally ambiguous aesthetic artifact) or, at most, an image of a sophisticated versifier manipulating language for pure entertainment.

Rouzer takes Wang's comment on one of Jia Dao's (779–843) couplets "as though speaking another's dream" as "a major characteristic of Wen Tingyun's verse." Thus, he uses it in the title of his book. Most learned readers would frown at this title, because it is based on a biased summary of Wen's poetry. The approach Rouzer assumes seems problematic, although there are many insightful points in his book.

Jia was pondering his couplet, hesitating as to whether he should use the verb "push" or "knock," when he came across the retinue of Han Yu, who expressed his preference for "knock." As any reader will know at first glance, the couplet, "The birds roost in trees by the pool / A monk knocks on a gate under the moon" (鳥棲池邊樹，僧敲月下門), in Jia's poem serves only as scenic description. It is common sense that any scenic couplet in a lyric poem does not necessarily reflect objective reality. Rather, it reflects the writer's subjective reality. It presents an empathic objective world, by combining fragmentary images of a poet's vision into meaningful pictures. Therefore, Wang's criticism that Jia's choice of terms is "only a random guess or a false speculation, as though speaking of another's dream" is not to the point. As to whether the whole poem "could ever affect the heart" or not, that is quite another matter. It is unreasonable to demand that Jia be faithful to what was really there, when writing a scenic description. Taking this comment as "a major characteristic of Wen's poetry" is too far from both Wang's criticisms and Wen's actual poetics alike, and also too far from the general response of Chinese scholars to Wen's poetry. In Wen's works, contrary to Rouzer's judgment, Wen's central concern is always his own affairs rather another's dream. The precision and vividness of his descriptions demonstrate his penetrating observation and subtle representation, indispensable in any major poet.

According to Rouzer, for the imperial reader, Wen's poetry never accomplishes "the important role poetry was meant to play in society"; moreover, as it is "unreadable" and was composed by "a sophisticated versifier manipulating language for pure entertainment," "it actually conceals the immoral mind that frames it. It is deceptive and fraudulent" (10). Fully aware that "this is judging Wen's works not by his own personal standards but by the calcified laws of composition that grew up after his death," Rouzer chooses to "look at Wen's work on its own terms" (10), a tendency I have pointed out. However, in his reevaluation of Wen's works, we can hardly see "a new appreciation of a neglected Tang master" as he promises. Rather, in more than one

case, Rouzer seems to identify himself with “the calcified laws” he disagrees with and joins in “the frequent choruses of disapproval” of Wen’s poetry and person, despite his intention to pass favorable comment on this poet.

Rouzer declares, “In spite of our difficulty in bridging language and cultural distances, we are comfortable with two concepts that might still seem strange to late classical Chinese: (1) that a poem can be read as a product of an age and a personality without relating it explicitly to events in the poet’s life; and (2) that a writer may still produce fine work despite his moral failings” (10). These plausible concepts may be applicable when there is no special difficulty—semantic, syntactic, or otherwise—in understanding the poetry, and when dealing with lyric poetry that may seem irrelevant to a specially designated event in the poet’s life. But when the poem is essentially narrative, and the reader does not even grasp the outline of the narration, as in so many cases in Wen’s work, how is the reader able to make any pertinent reevaluations or pass any valid judgments concerning it? As a result of knowing too little about Wen’s life, neither praise nor censure of him can be convincing. How can we say that Wen is “writing another’s dream” even though Wen has “an ability to stand outside of the self” (10)?

Rouzer might have grounded himself “in the few facts known about the poet’s life,” that is, unfortunately and naturally, “a few minor details in both *Tang Histories*” (11) and other unofficial histories. However, the unreliable information about Wen’s life provided in the two *Tang Histories* is not help, but hindrance for reevaluating him.

To illustrate how Wen’s poetry is deceptive and fraudulent, Rouzer cites Wen’s “Carefree Wandering” (j. 4, WFQ, 21–2 in his book). His reading of this poem leads him to comment that “We can see how Wen’s tendencies toward objectivity and lush descriptive language naturally move him toward a sort of voyeuristic eroticism, in which a woman is described in fetishistic detail from a seemingly dispassionate distance.” Our reading of this poem testifies to the contrary, that the woman described is none other than the singer-prostitute whom Wen fell in love with and married.

Since in the last couplet the poet declares, “You and I are just like mandarin ducks / So don’t [or I won’t] seek any other companion in the human world” (與君便是鴛鴦侶，休向人間覓往還), there is not much sense in Rouzer’s assertion that “Wen describes the woman from a seemingly dispassionate distance.” Here Rouzer’s translation is “With you I’m surely paired just like mandarin ducks / So don’t seek to go back and forth out there in the human world.” Even if he suggests that it was not the poet but the woman who speaks these remarks, where is the dispassionate distance he finds here?

To sum up, in the final analysis Wen Tingyun is understandable. To understand him, however, we have to overcome the historical obstacles, which create misunderstandings, the literary barriers, which frequently baffle, and long-standing misconstructions, which frustrate better understanding. It is time that our poet no longer be misunderstood and that we discover what led to the making of a unique Wen Tingyun.

Finally, a few remarks of apology for my translations and approaches. For many recondite and subtle poems, my translations fail to conjure up the beauty of the originals. Unfortunately, in translating poems, I can avail myself of little help from any polisher, but am obliged to cudgel my brains in my awkward English. I would be gratified if, with the help of the paraphrases and notes, these translations could retain generally the intrinsic meanings of, and would not add numerous detrimental elements to, their Chinese originals. As to my approaches, although only reasoning and inference can help in finding more about Wen's life, these approaches are not always rewarding. While blundering upon some hitherto unexposed events in Wen's life, I may have exposed faults or flaws that I have been unable to detect or overcome.

To conclude, allow me to use Chinese classic metaphors. Just like the legendary priceless pearl *Lizhu* under the neck of a ferocious dragon, the information concealed in Wen's works cannot be reached without some danger (of misconstruction). Or like the Jade of *Heshi* wrapped in hard stone, Wen's value as a poet can be exposed only at the price of the man who presents the jade. Wen has already paid the price for it. My greatest wish is that this study can help to pave the way to a comprehensive reevaluation of Wen Tingyun. I look forward thankfully to any comments and criticisms.

CHAPTER ONE

FAMILY BACKGROUND

During Wen Tingyun's lifetime, the Tang Empire was steadily on the wane, while the aristocratic clans, a mainstay of its rule, were also in decline. Coming to the fore in the political arena were instead some forces in the ascendant: first, the eunuchs, who had in the main usurped state power and sapped it at its core; next, the military satraps, who maintained a semi-independent position, defying the imperial authority in the capital Chang'an; and then the factions with their incessant contention, rendering the decision-making process all the more inefficient. It was against the backdrop of this situation that the Wen clan experienced its own vicissitudes of life. A study of Wen's family background, therefore, will serve not only to initiate our efforts to uncover hitherto unnoticed events concerning his life, but will also present a particular case for understanding the Late Tang problem of the politically entrenched eunuchs.

The texts of "Biographies of Wen Tingyun" in the two *Tang Histories*¹ are too inadequate and misleading to be used to draw a clear picture of Wen's life. Hence, we will consult various sources, especially his own works, for more reliable information.

CLAN ORIGIN AND NATIVE PLACE

To begin with, we will study Wen Tingyun's clan origin and his native place, as a convenient start to unraveling his poetic puzzles and probing into his life.

As indicated in Wen's biography in XTS, Wen Yanbo (573–636), the great-grandfather of his grandfather, was a native of Qi County of Taiyuan. This corresponds fairly well with one of Wen's notes to the fifth rhyme in "Hundred-Rhyme Poem":

My forefathers were dukes and ministers of our state dynasty,
and after having helped effect the Heavenly Mandate in Jinyang,
they were enfeoffed in the commanderies of Bing and Fen
(余先祖國朝公相，晉陽佐命，食采于并汾也).

Jinyang was the locale of the administration of Taiyuan Commandery (太原府), where the first emperor of the Tang, Li Yuan (李淵, 566–625, r. 618–625), rose up in arms against the Sui Dynasty (589–618), and Wen's forefathers rose to power and position by dint of their meritorious services to the Tang. The Wen clansmen had lived in the Taiyuan area, especially in the so-called Qi County (祁縣), up to Wen's lifetime. Qi is an older name for the county called Qingyuan (清源) during the Tang times.²

Since the aristocratic clans still had influence at this time, a Tang literatus would not take the locale of his immediate family as his native place unless the family had lived there since the time of his preeminent ancestors. Instead, he would identify his origins with the place where the family's famous forefathers lived, however distant they might be. The Song historiographers, when dealing with Tang biographies, followed the same practice. Therefore, we ought to take Taiyuan or Qingyuan as nothing more than the place of Wen's clan origin. Indeed, an eminent clan with the surname Wen had lived in Qi County since the Han (206 B.C.–220 A.D.).³ During the Tang Dynasty, some of the Wens, including the branch to which Wen Tingyun belonged, had moved to the south, perhaps because of the An-Shi Rebellion. From Wen's extant works we can infer that Wen was a native of Wu or Yue, the present-day south of the Jiangsu or the Zhejiang province. To pinpoint Wen's "native place," we shall have to cite more of his works.

In his first of the two "Epistles Presented to Vice Minister Jiang" (上蔣侍郎啓二首之一), Wen mentions Qingyuan in a meaningful manner: "Therefore I left the 'Qingyuan' of the mainthreads in the southern country,⁴ and had a commoner's audience from the eastern plain" (遂揚南紀之清源，因效東皋之素謁). "Qingyuan," beside referring to the county under Taiyuan in the north, literally means "pure source" or pure origin (of the family), thus denotes here Wen's native place in the south, which became Wen's second homeland after his progenitors emigrated to the south.

In "Fifty-Rhyme Poem Inspired by the Bygone, for Pouring My Heart, Presented to Chancellor Li of Huainan" (感舊陳情五十韻獻淮南李僕射, j. 6, WFQ, henceforward "Fifty-Rhyme Poem"), a poem presented to Li Shen (李紳),⁵ Wen writes at the beginning:

When Ji Shao was a lad with hair streaming down	
his forehead,	嵇紹垂髻日，
It was the year Shan Tao began his official service. ⁶	山濤筮仕年。
Your lute and wine-pot were placed between the seats.	琴尊陳座上。
I, in silk and brocade, prostrated myself in front of	
your couch.	紈綺拜床前。

Li Shen was a Presented Scholar of the first year of Yuanhe (806) when he began his official career as lecturer at the State Son's University; but in the same year he returned to Jinling and became secretary for Li Qi (李錡),

the Surveillance Commissioner of Zhexi Circuit (浙西道) at the time.⁷ In his childhood Wen may have lived somewhere close to Jinling, where he would have had easy access to Li Shen. Wen's "Sent to Scholar Lu" (寄盧生, j. 9, WFQ) supports this inference, with its mention of a nearby estate that Wen had inherited:

Close to the ancient capital, my inherited estate	
laid waste.	遺業荒涼近故都，
In front of the gate, the dike road stretched across	
the lake.	門前堤路枕平湖。

The so-called ancient capital described here can only be Jinling, where Wen's late father had once lived and where Wen was born, but it is not the place to which Wen frequently refers with nostalgia. Related to this place, in his "Epistle Presented to Prime Minister Pei" (上裴相公啓)⁸ Wen says:

Since the days when my ancestors were bestowed imperial favor and conferred fiefs, our family had enjoyed everlasting glory, which was inscribed on the imperial tripod. Then I took my registered residence in Liaoxi, before I studied the classics in Jixia (自頃爰田錫寵，鏤鼎傳芳。占數遼西，橫經稷下).⁹

Wen mentions briefly the Wen clan's ancestral glory, the emigration of the clan branch to which he belonged, and his experience of being a student at a state-managed university. Since the last two sentences give information about his native place and early career by recourse to elegant historical allusions, we cannot take seriously that he lived in Liaoxi, the modern region covering a part of Hebei and Liaoning in the north; even less can we take for granted that he studied in Jixia, a state school in the capital of the Qi Kingdom of the Warring States (475–221 B.C.) in Shandong. "Taking up registered residence in Liaoxi" alludes verbatim to "Biography of Zhao Zhi"¹⁰ (趙至, fl. 310):

[Zhao] went to Luoyang at fourteen. . . . After the death of Zhang Sizong, he went to Liaoxi to take registered residence (年十四，詣洛陽 嗣宗卒，乃向遼西而占戶焉).

We do not know the exact reason why Wen uses the allusion to Zhao Zhi to speak of his own residence, but there might be similarities in their early experiences. Anyway, the so-called "Liaoxi" should be somewhere close to Yuezhou, where Wen lived for most of his early years, as can be inferred from the following evidence:

1. Throughout Wen's literary works we have some twenty poems and essays showing that Wen cherished a special feeling toward the Yuezhou district.¹¹

For example, lines such as “Filling your room is the moonlight of my home mountain” (一室故山月) and “A former lecturer in Lanting” (蘭亭舊都講) in “Presented to the Yue Monk Yue Yun” (贈越僧岳雲, j. 7, WFQ), must imply something. The place “Lanting,” which Wen considered as his “home mountain” was in Yuezhou, the present Shaoxing.

2. In Wen’s “Epistle Presented to Grand Master Cui” (上崔大夫啓)¹² we read:

I, your humble servant, feel like I am seeing the spirited and charming Mount Ji, and the lucid and bright Lake Mirror, when looking upward to its [your] august loftiness, which stands firm and awe-inspiring. Secluded in my poor abode, I stay home while listening to stringed and wind instruments played; as a transferred immortal, you travel about, having banners and flags flying (伏想嵇山靈爽，鏡水澄明，仰止尊高，居然勝絕，隱貧居而坐聞絲管，調仙家而行有旌旗).

Mount Ji and Lake Mirror are in Shaoxing; therefore without a further investigation of the epistle, we know that Tingyun’s place of reclusion was not far from Yuezhou.

3. In his poem “Li Yu the Recluse Sends Me His Newly Brewed Wine, I Playfully Thank Him with an Impromptu Verse” (李羽處士寄新醞，走筆戲酬, j. 4, WFQ), Wen likened himself to “Xie the Guest” (謝客)—an appellation for Xie Lingyun (謝靈運, 385–433), who, an orphan since infancy, had been entrusted to a relative in the Yue district. This further suggests that Wen might have taken his registered residence in Yue by relying on a certain relative, as had Xie Lingyun.¹³
4. In *Yanlingji* (嚴陵集)¹⁴ by the Southern Song Dynasty writer Dong Fen (董夔) we have one lost poem written by Wen Tingyun:

“YEARNING FOR MY OLD ABODE IN TONGLU, I SEE OFF THE
NOBLE MONK JIAN” 思桐廬舊居便送鑒上人

Don't you say the southeast is not far away,	莫道東南路不賒，
A mere step is a great distance in my nostalgia.	思歸一步是天涯。
The forest of night, the two terraces, in the moonlight,	林中夜來雙臺月， ¹⁵
Spring in its prime, the blossoms on the Nine Li Isle.	池上春深九里花。 ¹⁶
Soaked in a fine drizzle, round the village are the green trees,	綠樹繞村含細雨，

Rolling the level sand, against the city wall is a cold tide.	寒潮背郭卷平沙。
Knowing that you, my master, are going into the hills,	聞師卻到山中去，
For me and to the tavern owner, please earnestly apologize.	為我殷勤謝酒家。

This poem, one of Wen's representative works, presents the transparent aspect of his poetic personae. Its third couplet was also taken as an exquisite sample for its "picturesqueness" (入畫).¹⁷ *Yanlingji* contains only the compositions of poets from the vicinity of Mount Yanling and Torrent Yanling, both named in memory of the famous recluse of the Eastern Han, Yan Guang (嚴光, 37 B.C.–43 A.D.). This strengthens the authentication of this poem as written by Wen.¹⁸ Since Wen had an old residence in Tonglu to which he was eager to return, he must have lived there long enough to call the place his homeland. Hence, "Liaoxi" in his allusion probably means Tonglu County of Mu Zhou (睦州), which was adjacent to Yuezhou.

REMAINING PRESTIGE OF AN ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY

Wen was descended from Wen Yanbo, Prime Minister of Emperor Taizong (r. 627–649). During the next two hundred years, the Wen clan's social position had been downgraded considerably. It inescapably shared in the general disintegration of all aristocratic clans. Contrasting finely with this, the following statement in "Biography of Wen Yanbo" gives a clear idea of the role the Wen clan played in its glorious days:¹⁹

The Yans and the Wens were once the most illustrious surnames during the Sui Dynasty. Now Yan Silu and Wen Daya both served in the Eastern Palace, while Yan Minchu and Wen Yanbo both served in the Secretariat, and Yan Youqin and Wen Dayou served in the Palace Library as proofreader. In the Tang Dynasty the Yan clan distinguished itself by its academic achievements, and the Wen clan by its official rank (初，顏氏溫氏在隋最盛。思魯與大雅俱事東宮，愨楚彥博同直內書省，游秦大有典校秘閣。顏以學業優，而溫以職位顯于唐云)。

Apart from its ancestral glory in early seventh century, the clan had produced other famous figures. From *Yuanhe Xingcuan* by the Tang genealogist Lin Bao (fl. 812–840) and "Genealogical List of the Prime Ministers,"²⁰ we find reference from the time of Wen Yanbo's father, Wen Junyou of the Sui Dynasty, to the seventh year of Yuanhe (812), to the following seven generations of preeminent Wen clansmen:

WEN JUNYOU'S (溫君攸) SEVEN-GENERATION
DESCENDANTS

1 Wen Daya	溫大雅	*Wen Yanbo	溫彥博
2 Wen Wuyin	溫無隱	*Wen Ting	溫挺
3 Wen Kerang	溫克讓	Wen Weng'gui	溫翁歸
4 Wen Jingqian	溫景倩	Wen Mian	溫緬
5 Wen Jie	溫佶	*WenXi	溫曦
6 Wen Zao	溫造	*Wen Xihua	溫西華
7 Wen Zhang	溫璋	Wen Yang	溫陽

In this table we list the name of only one clansman for each generation, representing each of the two main branches of the Wen clan, one of which Wen Tingyun claimed as his own. Many of these names bear high official titles, though not as exalted as those of Wen Yanbo. By Wen Tingyun's time, the Wens seem to have produced very few distinguished clansmen, especially in Wen Yanbo's line. No wonder that Wen spoke of his ancestral glory in "Hundred-Rhyme Poem" not without dismay:

- 5 The [ancestral] enfeoffment in the forlorn wild
is left waste, 采地荒遺野，
And our fief by the old capital has long been
divested. 爰田失故都。

From Wen's already quoted note to this couplet, it is evident that the later Wens failed to equal the distinction of their forefathers. Though we know little about the Wen clan's history before Wen's day, we have in our possession important information that helps to identify Wen's genealogical status: the Wen clan had for generations made marriages with the imperial family. There are three Wen clansmen who married imperial princesses and became imperial sons-in-law, with the special official title Commander of the Reserved Horses (駙馬都尉).²¹ All three were descendants of Wen Yanbo, as was Wen Tingyun: Wen Ting (Wen Yanbo's son) married Princess An ding (安定公主), daughter of Emperor Gaozu (r. 618–626); Wen Xi (a great-grandson of Wen Yanbo) married Princess Liang'guo (梁國公主), daughter of Emperor Ruizong (r. 711–712), and Wen Xihua (Wen Xi's son) married Princess Song'guo (宋國公主),²² daughter of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756). These marriages indicate that Wen Yanbo's descendants had kept the imperial favor to a remarkable degree. In addition, we have some internal evidence in Wen's poems proving that Wen was an imperial relative. In "Western Pool of the Heir Apparent" (太子西池二首, j. 3, WFQ), we have the following allusion, referring to Wen himself:

- Do not believe that Prince Zhang,
Will cancel his secret rendez-vous in front of the
window. 莫信張公子，
窗間斷暗期。

And in “Ode to a Night Feast” (夜宴謠, j. 1, WFQ), we find the same allusion:

The Prince of Zhang family at night heard the	
rain fall,	張家公子夜聞雨，
And at night, thought of the Chu dance in the	
Orchid Hall.	夜向蘭堂思楚舞。 ²³

“Prince Zhang” alludes to the Fuping Marquis, Zhang Fang (富平侯張放),²⁴ a well-known imperial relative of Emperor Yuan of Han (漢元帝, r. 48–33 B.C.). Another example, from “Sent to Chuwang on the Cold Food Festival” (寒食節寄楚望, j. 9, WFQ), reads:

Only the Marquis of Royal Blessing,	獨有恩澤侯。
Returns to watch the Chu dance.	歸來看楚舞，

Wen calls himself “the Marquis of Royal Blessing,” which was an appellation used exclusively for imperial relatives.²⁵ Considering that Wen Xi and Wen Xihua had been imperial sons-in-law, if Wen were not a near kinsman of Wen Xi or Wen Xihua, how else would it be possible for him to call himself an imperial relative?

Although little is known about Wen’s father, we can attempt to find out Wen’s genealogical position by tracing his relations with Wen Zao²⁶ (溫造, 765–835), Tingyun’s clan uncle and foster father. Wen’s “Epistle Presented to the Prime-Minister-Duke of the Honor Seat” (上首座相公啓),²⁷ as I shall prove, was addressed to Wen Zao. Since Wen Zao once told Emperor Dezong, “Your subject’s fifth generation ancestor is Wen Daya,”²⁸ we can say with certainty that Tingyun, as Wen Zao’s nephew, was the sixth generation offspring of Wen Daya’s brother, Wen Yanbo. Thus, Tingyun was probably a nephew of Wen Xihua, if not his son, and there is no doubt that he was the grandson of Wen Xi. In our later discussions, I will present more evidence supporting this.

The Wens played an important role in helping the first two Tang emperors found and consolidate the dynasty’s state power, by rendering both civil and military service to them. As can be seen from “Biography of Wen Daya,” the three Wen brothers all reached very high official rank, in one case the position of Prime Minister, and were enfeoffed as dukes. Wen Yanbo on his death was even honored with burial in the imperial tomb, Zhaoling. In acknowledgment of the meritorious service of the Wen clan, Emperor Gaozu once said to Wen Daya: “It was by the support of all your clan that I could rise up in arms in Jinyang “ (吾起兵晉陽，為卿一門耳).²⁹ This is no overstatement. It was because of this blood connection that Wen Tingyun took the prosperity and decline of the Tang Empire as his own affair and made every endeavor to bring about a restoration of the dynasty’s past grandeur.

In addition to being important ministers, both Wen Daya and Wen Yanbo were well-known writers, as can be seen from “Records of Literary Works” (藝文志) of XTS (j. 58). Wen Daya’s works are *A Record of the Present Emperor’s Imperial Enterprise* (今上王業記, 1467), *The Imperial Diary of the Great Tang in Its*

Founding (大唐創業起居錄, 1471), and *The Subordinate Officials of the Grand Prime Minister, The Prince of Tang* (大唐丞相唐王官屬記, 1477); Wen Yanbo's works are *Anthology of Imperial Edicts of All Times, Thirty Juan* (古今詔令集三十卷, 1473).

Wen Tingyun often refers to his family with a feeling of mingled pride and anxiety: he is proud of his ancestors' past glory, and he is anxious to restore his family's position by distinguishing himself. In "Hundred-Rhyme Poem," the following lines extol the Wen clan's distinguished stock:

- | | |
|---|--------|
| 7 For generations the Wens partook of the Zhou
emoluments, | 奕世參周祿， |
| As family tradition, we used to emulate the Lu
Confucians. | 承家學魯儒。 |
| 8 Witness of our family feats: the remaining swords
and court boots, | 功庸留劍舄， |
| Inscribed on imperial plates and basins: our
ancestors' admonitions. | 銘誡在盤盂。 |

Here we see that the Wens rendered remarkable services to the Empire for generations by adhering to the Confucian principles. In Wen's grandiloquent language, Wen's forefathers won the highest imperial favor: they were privileged to attend the court with a special sword and courtly boots and their admonitions of the emperors were inscribed on the vessels the emperor used. Tingyun himself, however, was born too late. The family past, of which he often boasted, obliged him to *restore* its glory, by reanimating the Confucian tradition. In other words, he desired to devote himself to the restoration of the country and to the simultaneous reglorification of his family, which, at this time, was somehow in a state of political disgrace. In his "Epistle Presented to Prime Minister Pei,"³⁰ Wen tells us: "I was thinking of sewing up the broken drapery³¹ of the Confucian House, and restoring the magnificence and grandeur of the Constant Norm," that is, reviving declining Confucianism and restoring imperial supremacy. What happened to Wen's forefathers that caused them to lose their hereditary honors and titles? In "Hundred-Rhyme Poem" we find the following hint:

- | | |
|--|------------------|
| 6 Having lost the sheep, I still toss the dice,
Letting go the horse, I weary of shouting for stakes. | 亡羊猶博塞，
放馬倦呼盧。 |
|--|------------------|

This couplet has rather complex implications and requires explanation. The first line alludes to the following fable:³² "Zang and Gu fed the sheep together, but they both lost their sheep," because "Zang had brought a book to study; Gu had been idling away the time tossing dice." So it implies that even though Wen's ancestors had somehow lost their official positions, Wen refused to change, adhering to the old way of his forefathers (the so-called "tossing the dice"). In the second line, "Letting loose the horse,"³³ in antithesis to "having lost the sheep," might be a reference to a political behavior; it

might be an extended use of its source in *Shangshu*: “[The King] hushed all the movements of war and proceeded to cultivate the arts of peace. He sent back his horses to the south of Mount Hua and let loose the oxen in the open country of the Peach Woods.”³⁴ Thus, it suggests retreat from politics. The reason for the retreat is that Wen “wearied of shouting for stake,”³⁵ which conveys that Wen, at the time, was no longer inclined to “play” the political game. This metaphorical usage can be found in another of Wen’s poems.³⁶ Briefly put, because of his adherence to family tradition, Wen was frustrated and showed a tendency to give up his political efforts. Now we must ask: what is the family tradition to which Wen always adhered, despite repeated rebuffs?

After a thorough reading of Wen’s works, we infer that it must be *the straight way* (直道), that is, straightforwardness, a dauntless spirit daring to speak against any social injustice, as Confucian doctrine advocates. It was *because of* this moral principle that Wen’s forefathers had lost their official positions, and it was *with* this principle that Wen confronted his troubled life filled with twists and setbacks. Another example that underscores this point is found in Wen’s “Epistle Presented to Bureau Director Han of the Ministry of Personnel” (上吏部韓郎中啓):

My wisdom is different from comprehensive mastery; my ability lacks a proficiency in any particular line. Fortunately I took over the august instruction [of my forefathers], so as not to lose the pure fragrance [of our clan]

(某識異旁通，才無上技。幸傳丕訓，免墮清芬)。

“Comprehensive mastery” alludes to a remark in Ji Kang’s “Letter for Breaking Off Relations with Shan Juyuan” (與山巨源絕交書):³⁷ “Your Excellency is a talent of comprehensive mastery, hence in most cases you say ‘yes’ and seldom show discontent” (足下旁通，多可而少怪). Since the Bureau Director Han was one of Wen’s father’s friends whom Wen compared to Shan Tao, Wen’s father was very possibly not a man of “comprehensive mastery,” but he must, instead, have been a man of strict principles and strong eccentricity, like Ji Kang. It was from his father that Wen inherited a character that made himself a worthy scion of the Wens. Such is the family tradition and reputation. As he says in “Hundred-Rhyme Poem”:

7	Among my compeers I was honored as a good	
	friend,	時輩推良友，
	Of my pedigree, I have carried on an honest	
	fame.	家聲繼令圖。

Judging from the extant writings of Wen’s contemporaries such as Li Shangyin, Zhang Hu (張祐, 805–860?), Ji Tangfu (紀唐夫, fl. 860), Duan Chengshi (段成式, 805–864), and Pei Tingyu (裴庭裕, fl. 820–860),³⁸ all famous poets

or writers of the Late Tang times, the self-evaluation in this couplet is no exaggeration.

Here, Wen's allusions to Ji Kang merit particular study. We can find nothing about Wen's father in all Tang and Song Dynasty sources. But Wen mentions his father in a way that is suggestive enough to enable us to infer what kind of person he was, or at least how he died. Wen seldom mentioned his father explicitly, but when he did refer to him elusively in his writings, he alluded to Wang Zun (王尊, fl.20 B.C.), Lu Ji (陸績, 187–219), and Xie Lingyun, all of whom were, perhaps by unhappy accident, orphans in their childhood,³⁹ as was Wen himself, "a distant scion and orphan of Wen Yanbo" (彥博裔孤).⁴⁰ Most noteworthy is that he repeatedly alludes to the trio of Ji Kang-Shan Tao-Ji Shao in such a way that, by likening himself to Ji Shao, who sought help from Shan Tao, he metaphorically likens his late father to Ji Kang. Ji Kang entrusted his son Ji Shao to Shan Tao before he was executed by the Jin Dynasty ruler. Wen's repeated use of the allusion no doubt tells us something about his father. Therefore, this allusion should not be allowed to slip by carelessly but must be rechecked. In addition to the couplet I have quoted: "When Ji Shao was a lad with hairs streaming down his forehead / It was the year Shan Tao began his official service"; which suggests that when Wen was a mere child like Ji Shao, his late father's friend Chancellor Li of Huainan had just begun his official service, like Shan Tao. We have the following four examples, all referring to different aspects of the same allusion, and all likening his late father to Ji Kang. I will examine each of them.

1. In "Epistle Presented to Prime Minister Linghu" (上令狐相公啓) Wen writes: "The boy of the Ji clan, eight years of age, is under the protection of an old friend" (稽氏則男兒八歲，保在故人), alluding to Ji Kang's remark in his "Letter for Breaking Off Relations with Shan Juyuan": "My daughter is thirteen and my son is eight years of age" (女年十三，男年八歲). If Ji Kang entrusted his orphans to Shan Tao, here "the boy of the Ji clan, eight years of age" must refer to Wen, and the "old friend" to a friend of his late father, expected to fill the role of Shan Tao in his relation with Wen Tingyun.
2. In Wen's "Fifty-Rhyme Poem" we find the following lines:

Whom shall I, a helpless man, seek asylum from?	有客將誰托？
Without a mediator, I inwardly have pity on myself.	無媒竊自憐。
Falling and rising is the melody of the Palace Leisure,	抑揚中散曲，
Drifting and wandering is the ship of Filialty and	
Incorruption.	飄泊孝廉船。

In the first couplet Wen is unburdening himself to Chancellor Li of his grievances, saying that in his frustration, what he needs most is the recommendation of a powerful mediator; and, to his dismay, no such recom-