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Recommended Citation

Alan Berkowitz. (1994). "Topos And Entelechy In The Ethos Of Reclusion In China". *Journal Of The American Oriental Society*. Volume 114, Issue 4. 632-638.
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Source: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 114, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1994), pp. 632-638

Published by: American Oriental Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/606169>

Accessed: 13-10-2017 13:43 UTC

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Topos and Entelechy in the Ethos of Reclusion in China

While the topos of reclusion was ubiquitous in the scholar-official culture of traditional China, there was already in medieval sources a discernible differentiation between essentiality and semblance, between *bona fide* men in reclusion and men who took office, between reclusion *per se* and its synthetic translation into the political, intellectual, and literary repertoire of the scholar-official. Men recognized as having practiced reclusion as a way of life categorically eschewed official appointments. Many scholar-officials espoused precepts ordinarily associated with reclusion, but on an occasional or purely noetic basis; their conduct, rationale, and writings evince the entrenchment of topoi of reclusion within the scholar-official ethos, but do not evince the ethos of reclusion.

In traditional “Confucian” China, the customary path to achievement was through service to the state. Yet at least since Confucius certain individuals have been acclaimed for doing just the opposite, for eschewing or withdrawing from appointments in the state bureaucracy. Men who chose to live outside of the traditional path for worldly success were said to be in reclusion (*yin* 隱, lit. hidden, or in hiding), hiding the jewel of their virtue from appropriation by their temporal rulers. They have been known throughout the history of traditional China as “men in reclusion” (*yinshi* 隱士), “men of lofty ideals” (*gaoshi* 高士), “disengaged persons” (*yimin* 逸民), “scholars-at-home” (*chushi* 處士), or the like, and for various euphemistic or euphuistic reasons sometimes were referred to as “men of the mountains and forests” (*shanlin zhi shi* 山林之士) or, as in the title of a recent book, “men of the cliffs and caves” (*yanxue zhi shi* 巖穴之士).¹

Students of traditional China generally will have gained some understanding of the nature of reclusion in China, of the various rationales for eschewing officialdom, and of the diverse conduct of men in reclusion. They also may have noticed that some officers of state seemingly went in and out of reclusion, or when in office rationalized that they were in reclusion within the court, while a great number of literati wrote thematically in the persona of the man-in-reclusion. Students of early medieval China probably will also be aware that certain individuals, especially during the Southern Dynasties, found a certain utility in their status as “lofty gentlemen.” Scholarship is not wanting in

these areas,² yet there still is need for disambiguating the nature of reclusion and its role in the scholar-official ethos and literati culture of imperial China, especially early medieval China.

Reclusion as a phenomenon, it would seem, is multifaceted; and various topoi of reclusion have been woven into the fabric of traditional Chinese culture. But this is reclusion in the broadest sense of the word, and might best be qualified as nominal reclusion or reclusion in the abstract. More circumspect is the actual practice of reclusion, the actualization into a way of life by a rather limited group of individuals; this might be termed substantive reclusion. The problem is one of definition: when discussing reclusion in China, we need to distinguish between reclusion *sensu stricto* and those aspects of withdrawal that generally informed the intellectual, political, literary, and artistic milieu of China’s ruling intelligentsia.

The division in its most basic terms is demarcated by the conduct of the individual. With few exceptions, substantive reclusion meant unremitting eschewal of an official career. Nominal or abstract reclusion is evinced in the withdrawal of scholar-officials on an occasional (that is, relating to a particular occasion) basis, as manifest in particular actions and/or adopted personae. While this division is not perfectly empirical or categorical, and may seem somewhat polemical and structuralist, the division is apparent, *ipso facto*, in sources about the lives of early medieval—and later—personalities. Even a cursory look at accounts of the lives of those who were considered by their contemporaries and by posterity as

¹ See my review of Aat Vervoorn’s *Men of the Cliffs and Caves* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1990), in *JAOS* 113 (1993): 575–84.

² For a basic bibliography, see my “Reclusion in Traditional China: A Selected List of References,” *Monumenta Serica* 40 (1992): 33–46.

having *practiced* reclusion will reveal the quiddity of reclusion.³ With noticeably few exceptions, these men eschewed office throughout their lives; the exceptions are a very few men who served briefly in the central administration before withdrawing into reclusion. Countless others espoused the rationale and conduct characteristic of reclusion on an occasional basis; the lives of these sometime-hiders, sometime-scholar-officials, however, invariably will not be found recounted in compilations devoted to men in reclusion. Medieval sources articulate the differentia of substantive reclusion; when translated into political, intellectual, literary, and artistic topoi, however, men in reclusion and scholar-officials share some common ground.

Practitioners of reclusion practiced it for life. The famous composer of threnodies, Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133–92), wrote, in a tomb inscription for the Later Han scholar-at-home Juan Dian 圈典 (95–169), who could not be humbled into accepting the eminent positions offered him,

He was summoned as an Erudite, and recommended as filial *par excellence*. But he was mortified at the thought of going forth, once having decided to remain at home—which would be like leaving unfinished something begun.⁴

Fan Teng 汜滕 (d. 301) later minced no words in his response to a summons in 301: “Once the gate is closed,

³ Such accounts are found most readily in special sections of many of the dynastic histories from the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 on, and in separate compilations devoted to accounts of lofty gentlemen, scholars-at-home, men of hidden virtue, etc. These compilations contain *only* accounts of individuals perceived as having practiced reclusion as their way of life. Any exceptions are the occasional brief appended notices of siblings or progeny, or—in one case—of a friend.

⁴ “Chushi Juan Shuze ming” 處士圈 (read: 圈) 叔則銘, in *Cai Zhonglang ji* 蔡中郎集 (Sbby), 2.18a. The inscription is excerpted in Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641), ed., *Yiwen lei ju* 藝文類聚 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 37.658, where it is titled “Chushi Juan Dian bei” 處士圈典碑 (that excerpt does not include the passage quoted here). Juan 圈 was the name of a number of persons from Chenliu 陳留 during the Han, including Sir Juan 圈公 (one of the “Four Hoaryheads” 四皓), Juan Cheng 稱 (compiler of the *Chenliu fengsu zhuan* 陳留風俗傳), and Juan Wensheng 文生 (an acquaintance of Guo Tai). Hun 圈 as a surname is anomalous (sources on surnames refer only to Cai Yong’s inscription), and seems likely to be an error.

can it be reopened?”⁵ And as put so succinctly centuries later by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1473–1529): “In the end, a man in reclusion doubtless does not emerge. Should one be said to be in reclusion, and yet emerge, then doubtless he was not a man in reclusion.”⁶ Practitioners of reclusion habitually eschewed official positions; those who seemingly went in and out of reclusion, wrote in the persona of the man in reclusion, or eristically co-opted some of the putative noetic aspects of reclusion were, by all practical accounting, officials.

Accounts of the lives of a great number of officials reveal that many of the rationales for reclusion, as well as the idealized vision of the man in reclusion, often played a marked role in their intellectual development, in their discretionary conduct, and in their writings. Countless officials are portrayed as having adopted at one time or another, often in the zealous idealism of youth, the conduct and rationale characteristic of practitioners of reclusion (most doubtless were sincere, some perhaps simply were seeking recognition through proven pathways). Or, they found withdrawal or retirement compelling at a particular juncture in their official career; some even speciously maintained that they were in reclusion while holding office. Some officials, too, while actively involved in the political flux of the age, found occasional diversion or solace in short-lived sojourns to a country estate, or in compositions about disengagement and its salutary release from the encumbrances and perturbations of the temporal world.

At the very least, this indicates the degree to which various topoi of reclusion had become a part of the culture of the scholar-official class; it also shows how “reclusion” could take on an occasional nature in the lives and/or personae of men who did not themselves practice reclusion as a way of life. The exigencies of holding office often occasioned withdrawal—temporary, permanent, or noetic, dictated or self-imposed—and, by and large, the most elegant and moving descriptions of reclusion actually were written by scholar-officials. When

⁵ Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (578–648) et al., comp., *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1974), 94.2438. The same story is found in the remnants of Wang Yin’s 王隱 (4th-c.) *Jin shu*; see Tang Qiu 唐球 (1804–81), comp., *Jiujia jiu Jin shu jiben* 九家舊晉書輯本 (*Congshu jicheng* ed.), 349.

⁶ “Sihao lun” 四皓論 in Chen Menglei 陳夢雷 (1651–after Jan. 1723) et al., comp., *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成 (Shanghai: Zhonghua, 1934), ce 274 (“Xuexing dian,” j. 2), 10a. This essay, not included in Wang’s collected works, is also quoted by Takigawa Kamitarō 瀧川龜太郎 in *Shiki kaichū kōshō* 史記會注考證 (Taipei: Hongshi, 1977), 55.28.

he chose, felt constrained, or was resigned to do so, the scholar-official, or his persona, might demonstrate in action or espouse in writing precepts associated with reclusion; but he was, ultimately, a scholar-official and not a man in reclusion.

Rhetoric aside, true reclusion in traditional China was more than an occasional act or temporary expedient, or a state of mind; it was a way of life pursued by choice. There was a discernible cleft between those who discussed reclusion and those who, to paraphrase Confucius, put their ideals into practice.⁷ Practitioners of reclusion invariably took a stance, often but not universally moralistic, that precluded their participation in “officialdom.” And they lived, in one form or another, private lives: they insisted on living what we now might call their own existential truths. Theirs were the individual enactments of conscience and resolve that became models for imitation. Whatever their pursuits or life-styles might be, they disdained compromise. They were less concerned about reclusion *per se* (although they were forthright in their resolve to remain beyond the net of officialdom) than about the preservation of their integrity, the realization of their personal ethos, and the actualization of their ideals. Regardless of the attractions or dangers of service, and regardless of the motivations for avoiding it, they strove to maintain their autonomy and self-reliance. The distinction of these men was a particular strength of character that underlay their conduct; they maintained their resolve, their mettle, their integrity—their moral and/or philosophical values—in the face of adversity, threat, or temptation, and for this they received approbation.

Proof of the integrity and mettle of individuals devoted to a life of reclusion is manifest in their response to the inevitable calls to accept official position in the central administration. For their continuing refusal to serve in any official capacity, these individuals were singled out for praise by their contemporaries and by posterity. When viewed from the vantage-point of officialdom, men who let down their resolve and acceded to the call to service also might be commended within the prevailing scholar-official ethos, for they sometimes went on to prominent official careers. Yet when viewed in terms of reclusion, their conduct might be seen as lacking. Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–86), in a discussion of aspects of reclusion following his recounting of Fan Ying’s 樊英 (ca. 66–ca. 135) infamous compliance to a summons to court, commented: “Now if those were true Gentlemen, position is not what they

covet and punishments are not what they fear; in the end they could not be made to come forward. Those who can be made to come forward are all men who covet position and fear punishments; how can they be worthy of esteem?”⁸

Bona fide practitioners of reclusion could not be cowed by threats, nor could they be tempted by rewards. The *sine qua non* of substantive reclusion was abiding resolve manifested in the renunciation of the traditional path for worldly success, and the measure of magnanimous government was the sanctioning of worthy men in reclusion. Thus, the fundamental nature of reclusion was appreciated even by the most despotic rulers. In 419, shortly after Helian Bobo 赫連勃勃 (381–425) took Chang’an and declared himself emperor of the Xia, he summoned the eminent local Wei Xuan 韋玄 (d. 419, byname Zusi) to be the heir-designate’s mentor. Wei earlier had declined offers of high appointment made both by Yao Xing 姚興 (366–416), emperor of the Later Qin 後秦, and by Liu Yu 劉裕 (356–422), founder of the Song 宋, when each in turn had occupied Chang’an. We read that:

When Bobo returned to Chang’an he summoned the man-in-reclusion 隱士 Wei Zusi of Jingzhao. When Wei actually arrived he was reverential [to Bobo] and daunted by him far beyond what should have been proper. Bobo said in anger, “I have summoned you as befitting a scholar of the state; for what reason have you treated me as if I were something different [from a ruler]?”⁹ In the past you did not appear before Yao Xing; why do you appear only before me? At present I am still alive, yet you still do not consider me to be an imperial ruler. After I am dead, when your ilk takes up the writing brush, in what place will you put me?” He forthwith had him (i.e., Wei Xuan) killed.¹⁰

Another version of the story has Helian Bobo say: “In the past Lord Liu appointed you, but you did not go forward. Yet when I summon you, you come. Isn’t it your implication that ones like me do not understand

⁸ *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982), 51. 1649.

⁹ Another version reads: “Yao Xing and Lord Liu [Yu] summoned you to audience, but neither time did you make a move. In my case, I command and you arrive. It must be that you consider me in a different category, but I cannot understand why.” See Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), comp., *Song shu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1974), 95.2331.

¹⁰ *Jin shu* 130.3209; cf. also *Song shu* 95.2331.

⁷ See *Lun yu* 論語, 14.39–40.

[the meaning of] going forth or staying put?"¹¹ Thus, if we can believe the anecdote, under appropriate circumstances the principles of reclusion were considered sacrosanct even among the chieftains and warlords of the northern plains. When Helian Bobo sought to exact recognition as a legitimate ruler, he expected responses from men in reclusion characteristic of and appropriate to their status vis-à-vis temporal authority, and found unacceptable Wei Xuan's servile vacillations.¹²

In early medieval China, members of the scholar-official class were faced with unremitting tensions in the political realm, as well as with revolutionary vicissitudes in the intellectual and religious realms.¹³ Under these compelling circumstances, reclusion increasingly became a subject of close attention, in terms of individual conduct and in terms of the place of reclusion within society as a whole, as both a recourse and a resource. Quite apart from actual practitioners of reclusion, an astonishing number of accounts of the lives of

medieval personalities begin with formulaic recountings of lofty attitudes and singular conduct; such accounts then go on to relate the official careers of these men. Harkening back directly to Han "exemplary eremitism,"¹⁴ during the Six Dynasties the nomination of candidates whose forte was feigning the lofty conduct of a man-in-reclusion continued as a sort of mutated vestige of the earlier recommendatory system. And a sizeable number of aspiring officials did in fact gain recognition and suitable employment by means of a stint "in reclusion." For the sincere, withdrawal was a matter of maintaining one's personal integrity; for others, it often seemed a ruse.

The problem of insincerity was remarked on throughout the Han, occasioning the contemporary saying that "scholars-at-home are purely thieves with unwarranted reputation."¹⁵ During the centuries following, and especially during the Southern Dynasties, however, the phenomenon of reclusion as a marketable pose, adapted and adopted by attention-seeking profiteers or insincere freeloaders, becomes a recurrent topic of discussion. By far the most eloquent ridiculing of this behavior is the famous "Proclamation on North Mountain" 北山移文 of Kong Zhigui 孔稚珪 (447–501).¹⁶

One illustration of feigned withdrawal concerns Du Yan 杜淹 (d. 628) and his friend Wei Fusi 韋福嗣. During the Kaihuang period of the Sui (581–600), they sought a quick route to success:

Together they plotted: "The emperor likes to employ men who take pride in avoidance. Su Wei received a summons on account of being a 'remote one' 幽人, and won a place in a fine office." So they went together to Mount Taibai 太白 (south of Mei xian, Shaanxi, some 85 kilometers west of Chang'an). They bragged of being in reclusion, but in truth they sought to invite the praise of their day. Emperor Wen 文 of the Sui heard of

¹¹ See Xu Song 許嵩 (fl. 756), comp., *Jiankang shilu* 建康實錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1986), 12.306.

¹² Since Helian Bobo accuses Wei of not recognizing his "rightful" authority as emperor, David Knechtges suggests (personal communication) that Wei's excessive posturing might actually have been an indirect form of protest. Still, whether motivated by fear or motivated by righteous defiance, Wei's acquiescence to the summons of his ruler nevertheless constituted a relaxation of his resolve.

¹³ There are two important Western-language introductions to relevant developments in the intellectual climate of early medieval China: Richard B. Mather's "The Controversy Over Conformity and Naturalness During the Six Dynasties," *History of Religions* 9.2–3 (1969–70): 160–80; and Étienne Balázs, "Entre révolte nihiliste et évasion mystique: Les courants intellectuels en Chine au III^{ème} siècle de notre ère," *Etudes Asiatiques* 2 (1948): 27–55, trans. H. M. Wright, as "Nihilistic Revolt or Mystical Escapism: Currents of Thought in China During the Third Century A.D.," in *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy*, ed. A. Wright (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), 226–54. See also Yu Yingshi's 余英時 "Ming jiao sixiang yu Wei Jin shifeng de yanbian" 名教思想與魏晉士風的演變, rpt. in his *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua* 士與中國文化 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin, 1987), 401–40; Fan Ning's 範寧 perceptible analysis, "Lun Wei Jin shidai zhishi-fenzi de sixiang fenhua ji qi shehui genyuan" 論魏晉時代知識分子的思想分化及其社會根源, *Lishi yanjiu* 1955.4: 113–31; and Li Fengmao's 李豐懋 meticulous study, "Wei Jin Nanbeichao wenshi yu dao jiao zhi guanxi" 魏晉南北朝文士與道教之關係 (Ph.D. diss. [Taiwan] Guoli Zhengzhi Daxue, 1978).

¹⁴ On "exemplary eremitism," see Vervoorn, *Men of the Cliffs and Caves*, 116–25, 139, 233. See note 1.

¹⁵ See Fan Ye 范曄 (398–446), comp., *Hou Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1963), 61.2032; also 82A.2724–25.

¹⁶ The "Proclamation" is found in Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–31), comp., *Wen xuan* 文選 (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1971), 43.25b–28b, and is translated by J. R. Hightower in "Some Characteristics of Parallel Prose," rpt. in *Studies in Chinese Literature*, ed. J. L. Bishop (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), 118–22. This translation is reprinted without notes in *Anthology of Chinese Literature, From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century*, ed. C. Birch (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 169–73.

this and reviled them, banishing them to a garrison south of the [Yangzi] River.¹⁷

The banishment of Du Yan was brief and in no way hurt his subsequent career, but the point of the matter is that his act reflected the common sentiment that recognition through reclusion might bring great rewards. This sentiment later was voiced in the expression, “Zhongnan Mountain is but a shortcut to officialdom” 終南仕宦捷徑, alluding to a story concerning Lu Cangyong 盧臧弄 (d. 713 at over fifty). Lu was called a “gentleman in reclusion who followed after the emperor’s carriage,” gaining a position in the central administration after a brief period “in reclusion,” following his failure to do so through the examination system.¹⁸

With the publicization of the private life of exemplary men-in-reclusion came the popularization of various outward aspects of reclusion and the integration of reclusion into society as a genteel option, as well as a means to secure recognition. Conduct that originally was an individual’s response to a particular combination of external circumstances and personal ideals was de-personalized into an open set of postures that could be assumed by others temporarily when expedient, with or without the resolve that had characterized the precedent. The phenomenon of idealized, abstract, nominal reclusion—reclusion abstracted from its most fundamental realization—pervaded the Six Dynasties. It played a role in virtually every facet of life: in divergent developing philosophical trends and organized religions; in

the theory and practice of government; in literature; in art; in social relations; in the appreciation of the natural world; etc. And in contradistinction to the individuals found noteworthy by their contemporaries and by posterity for embracing reclusion as a way of life, a far greater number of persons came to extol the private life, while either seeking entry into officialdom, lamenting being employed therein, or finding self-justification for a temporary setback. A gentrified, diffuse—often *de rigueur*—nominal reclusion was fashioned, which obversely tended to render more distinct the conviction that characterized reclusion as a way of life.

During the Six Dynasties “reclusion” seemed no longer to be bounded by its practice. Literati writings during this time reveal the important and pervasive role of the topos of reclusion within the scholar-official culture, leading to the not uncommon stereotype of the Chinese intellectual as having a dualistic nature. Such writings reflect an enhanced view of reclusion. Quite often in excellent literary garb, they almost invariably appropriate the topic for didactic utility or personal complaint, although there also is a considerable amount of thematic composition or idyllic description. “Reclusion” appears as the focus of apologies, criticisms, eulogies, idealizations, and hypothetical dialogues, as well as some purely poetical pieces. Popular subjects were the great legendary recluses of antiquity, especially Xu You and Bo Yi, or homilies about life distant from the hubbub of the capital.¹⁹ By far the most widespread were confabulations, in which aspects of the topic of idealized, abstract “reclusion” are explored through the contrived palaver of exponents of opposing persuasions, as well as sundry compositions about generic so-called “recluses.”²⁰ With the exception of eulogies, however, these writings on reclusion invariably concern the topos of reclusion, not its practice. They provide a rich portrayal of reclusion in the abstract, something that greatly occupied the attentions of the scholar-official class throughout imperial China.

Another form of disengagement the scholar-official might espouse was purely noetic. Some scholar-officials of early medieval China wished to expand the limits of

¹⁷ See Liu Xu 劉詢 (887–946), comp., *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1985), 66.2470; also Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–72) et al., comp., *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975), 96.3860–61. Su Wei 蘇威 had a distinguished service record, but was praised by the Sui emperor as having embodied the axiom, “given employ, take action; shunted aside, stow yourself away” (see *Lun yu* 7.10). The emperor also told his courtiers: “Should Su Wei come upon an age of disorder, then as with the Four Hoaryheads of the Southern Mountains, would it be easy to humble him?” See Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643), Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 (583–661) et al., comp., *Sui shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982), 41.1186.

¹⁸ See *Xin Tang shu* 123.4375 and Liu Su 劉肅 (fl. 807), comp., *Da Tang xinyu* 大唐新語 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1984), 10.157–58, which may have been the source of the *Xin Tang shu* account. The saying also was phrased as, “Zhongnan and Mt. Song’s Shao[-shih peak] are shortcuts on the road to officialdom” 終南嵩少為仕途捷徑, thus referring both to Lu Cangyong and his brother Zhengming; see *Xin Tang shu* 196.5594.

¹⁹ A number of representative examples can conveniently be found in *Yiwen leiju*, j. 36–37.

²⁰ In addition to many works having similar titles, literary compositions entitled “Recluses” (i.e., disengaged persons) 逸民 or “Remote Ones” 幽人 were written by Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303), Lu Yun 陸雲 (262–303), Yu Ai 庾敳 (262–311), Zao Ju 棗據 (d. ca. 311), Wang Yi 王廙 (early 4th c.), Jiang You 江迥 (mid 4th c.), Ge Hong 葛洪 (ca. 280–ca. 340), and Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433).

reclusion to encompass any and all conceivable situations, including even service, the antipode of reclusion, so long as the person remained aloof. The philosophical rationale for “hiding in the court” 朝隱 had been noted in the Han in the facetious jesting of Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (154–93 B.C.E.), and by renowned figures such as Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 B.C.E.–18 C.E.; Yang called it the ultimate in sophistry) and Wang Chong 王充 (27–ca. 100), but it gained great currency among the scholar-official class during the Jin and later. Cognoscenti of the *bon mot* (devotees of “abstruse learning” 玄學) grafted Zhuangzi’s philosophical Daoist detachment, and soon also Vimalakirti’s worldly Buddhism, onto the Confucian trunk of propagating the Way through service, thus cultivating a transcendence that proved to be more pragmatic than mystical, wherein one’s inner state was independent of one’s overt acts. A famous example of these views is found in Guo Xiang’s 郭象 (d. 312) commentary to Zhuangzi’s portrayal of the Immortal of Guye Mountain. In explanation of what he says is the metaphorical nature of the passage, Guo Xiang writes:

Though the Sage be found at the temples of state, his inner purpose nevertheless is no different than if he were amid the mountain forests. How could those of the world see him for what he is? They but see him exalt the [imperial] yellow baldachin and wear on his dress the royal jade signet, and then remark that these are sufficient to entangle his inner self. Or they see him traversing mountains and rivers, taking part in the affairs of common folk, and then remark that those are enough to wither his spirit. How could they know that perfect perfection cannot be diminished?²¹

Espousing an intellectual stance that might be termed “pragmatic transcendence,” one might remain undefiled even while functioning entirely within the temporal world of politics. And at the same time that there was much verbal and literary debate on the abstract and metaphysical aspects of service-versus-reclusion, more than a few men in office sought to carry out these ideas in their own lives. For instance, after being denounced by his friends in reclusion for letting down his resolve and accepting an appointment, Deng Can 鄧粲 (fl. ca. 377) said:

You, my eminences, can be said to have a will toward reclusion yet not understand reclusion. As for what

constitutes the Way of reclusion, one can also be in reclusion in the court, and likewise one can be in reclusion in the marketplace. Reclusion is found first of all in oneself, not in external things.²²

At about the same time, Sun Chuo 孫綽 (fl. 330–365) wrote that, “For those who embody the Mystery and understand the Remote, public life or retirement amount to the same thing.”²³ Many doubtless were sincere in their reasoned reconciliation of inner and outer reality, but many also were jesting in the manner of Dongfang Shuo. A jocular poem by Wang Kangju 王康瑒 of the third century succinctly stated that:

Lesser hiders hide in the hills and marshes,
Greater hiders hide in the court and marketplace.²⁴

Wang Kangju exalts the pragmatic transcendence of “reclusion within the court,” but one can only agree with the critic Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 when, in only a sentence or two, he artfully exposes this type of stance as no more than seeking the best of two incompatible worlds.²⁵

In obfuscating any intellectual distinctions between private life and official employment, whatever action advocates of “reclusion in the court” took—they invariably chose official capacity—they were freed of the problematic ethos so apparent in the lives of those who actually opted for a life in reclusion. The logical paradox of “hiding within the court” was an intellectual imposture and a metaphysical sophism; it was both construed and promulgated by persons *other* than the “gentlemen of lofty mettle,” the practitioners of reclusion who declined office completely. “Hiding within the court” was an eristic rationalization, outside the realm of proper reclusion. Instead of finding his “withdrawal” within government office, the true man-in-reclusion might instead respond to the specious argument that equated service and withdrawal: “why then serve?” This was the response of Xin Mi 辛謐 (d. 350), who starved himself to death rather than serve.²⁶ Still, “reclusion within the court” was an ingenious and vital

²² *Jin shu* 82.2151.

²³ See Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–44), comp., *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, 4/91, commentary; Yang Yong 楊勇, ed., *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 校箋 (Taipei: Zhengwen, 1969), 1.145; trans. Richard B. Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1976), 139.

²⁴ “Fan zhaoyin shi” 反招隱詩, *Wen xuan* 22.4b.

²⁵ *Guanzhui bian* 管錐編 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1979), 3:913.

²⁶ See *Jin shu* 94.2447.

²¹ See Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–96), comp., *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1985), 1.28.

current, and a stupendous coup for governance; and it provided a venue for more than a few individuals faced with a great moral dilemma. Yet, "hiding within the court" is reclusion only in the eye of the casuist.

Despite attempts at appropriation and exploitation, reclusion was more than an abstract and mutable notion. It was more than an occasional act, more than mere rhetoric, more than insincere posturing, and more than a state of mind. Even while the utility of reclusion was being discussed at court, and while literati described in their writings an abstract view of reclusion as a kind of static, idyllic state of hermitage, and while pretenders endeavored to defraud actuality, still a number of individualistic "lofty gentlemen" put their ideals into practice and chose reclusion as their way of life. In truth, owing to the contrast between abstract and substantive reclusion during the Six Dynasties, their conduct was discernible in even greater measure.

The ramifications of reclusion are everywhere apparent in the Six Dynasties. The rudiments of reclusion, however, are circumscribed by its practice. In traditional China there was the practice of reclusion, as characterized by actual men-in-reclusion, and there was the phenomenon of reclusion in the abstract, as generally characterized in the attitudes, writings, and conduct of scholar-officials. This bifurcation perhaps became most distinguishable in early medieval China, when historical practitioners of reclusion first were identified categorically,²⁷ and it remained typical throughout imperial China.

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²⁷ See my *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice of Reclusion in Early Medieval China and its Portrayal* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, forthcoming).