“A Response to the Two Guo’s” (Three poems) 答二郭詩三首 by Xi Kang 嵇康

I

The common herd spread across this empire, 天下悠悠者

When they live outside the capital all want to scurry to it.¹

What the Two Guo’s harbor inside is unlike the crowd, 二郭懷不群

Transcending the rest, they travelled north. 超然來北征

Delighting in the Way, they entrust themselves to the grass hut, 樂道託萊廬

There is nothing that their pure intent seeks. 雅志無所營

At a fine time, our wishes were met, 良時遘其願

And we formed feelings of affection. 遂結歡愛情

For the gentleman, righteousness creates affinity, 君子義是親

Our mutual fondness shall remain steady in our lives. 恩好篤平生

My meager intelligence gives rise to calamity,²

And often creates much rift. 屢使眾釁成

Master Yu hid beside the bridge,³

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¹ I have adopted the variant *xia jing* 下京 (in Huang Shengzeng’s 黃省曾 Ming woodblock version) in place of *bu nen* 不能, which makes better sense in the context of the preceding and succeeding lines. See Xi Kang ji jiaozhu, ed. Dai Mingyang, 61.

² As Dai Mingyang noted, following the Wu Manuscript, it should be *智* rather than *志*.

³ Yu Rang 豫讓 is one of the five subjects featured in Sima Qian’s “Biographies of Assassin-Retainers” in the *Historical Records*. When the earl of Zhi was killed by Lord Xiang of Zhao, Yu Rang pledged to avenge the earl since he believed that “a liegeman will die for the lord who appreciated him (*zhiji* 知己).” Yu Rang’s many attempts at Lord Xiang’s life involved hiding out in a latrine, and concealing his identity
Nie Zheng altered his appearance.  
Considering this, I harbor worry and fear,  
My concern is how I may procure serenity.  
Now I shall consign myself to a foreign region,  
I prepare my carriage and will not stop.  
My original plan was to enjoy our amity until the end,  
But now that’s changed, and we can no longer be together.  
You two, sirs, presented me with fine poems,  
Whose savor is like the fragrance of hidden thoroughwort.  
I shall yearn for my land, think of those dear to me,  
Can I help but feel fervor to the brim?  

II  
Formerly I received the blessing of my father and brother,  
In my youth I was kept from shouldering burdens.  
Due to my lax upbringing, I became lazy,  
by pouring lacquer on his body and swallowing ashes to alter his voice. His final attempt came as he hid under a bridge waiting to ambush Lord Xiang, but was detected by the lord’s horse. Lord Xiang, moved by Yu Rang’s loyalty to his former master, allowed him to take revenge by stabbing the lord’s coat and then to commit suicide. See Shiji, 86.2519-21.  
Nie Zheng is also commemorated in the “Biographies of Assassin-Retainers” for exemplifying the code of honor upheld by retainers. He undertook an assassination assignment from Yan Zhongzi on the latter’s mortal enemy, the minister of Han 韓, Xia Lei 侠累, because he wanted to be of use to the man who appreciates him (zhiji 知己). After Nie Zheng succeeded in killing Xia Lei, he disfigured himself and committed suicide on the spot. See Shiji, 86.2522-24.  
As Dai Mingyang noted, it should be two 二, not three 三, before sirs 子.  
I have followed the Wu Manuscript, Lu Xun, and Lu Qinli in taking the variant neng bu 能不 instead of bu zhi 不知.
And concealed my tracks in the bends on the northern mountain.

I only wish to nourish my life,

To the end of my life, there is no other desire.

A good era is not what I encountered,

In my prime, I met an efflorescence of chaos.

Afflicted and frustrated, I followed orthodox teachings,

Constantly I feared getting entangled in nets.

Fu Xi and Shennong—so remote and long gone,

I beat my breast and alone heave a sigh.

Dongfang Shuo admonished his son to esteem self-preservation,

The old fisherman was fond of beating up the waves.

Though it is easy detachment, it would indeed be hard for me,

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7 This alludes to the title of the fourth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, “Yangsheng zhu” (The essentials for nourishing life). How to nourish (and care for) life is a main and persistent concern for Xi Kang, who devoted two essays to this topic, “Yangsheng lun” (Essay on nourishing life) and “Da Nan Yangsheng lun” (An answer to [Xiang Xiu’s] refutation of my essay to nourishing life).

8 This term also appears in the “Nine Disputations” 九辯 in the *Lyrics of Chu*: “Afflicted and frustrated (kanlin 坎廩/凜), the impoverished gentleman has lost his office and his ambition had no smooth course.”

9 Fu Xi and Shennong (Divine Farmer) were legendary rulers in high antiquity, whose era represents primitive goodness and simple rule.

10 This is a reworking of a line from Ban Gu’s Appraisal of Dongfang Shuo, which describes an admonition to his son to value self-preservation. See *Han shu*, 65.2874. Ban Gu’s Appraisal resonates with Xi Kang’s insofar as both seemed to have found the man fascinating and necessary to explain. Ban Gu attributes Dongfang Shuo’s appeal and success to “his wide-reaching wit and his many devices,” resulting in “a reputation that is not based on one type of behavior alone.” My translation is based on Burton Watson’s in *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han* by Pan Ku (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 105-6. Indeed, Dongfang Shuo resorted to no shortage of ploys that might seem undignified by others (e.g. humor, irony, game-playing, bravado) in order to gain the ear of the Han Emperor Wu. For an overview of Dongfang Shuo’s life, see Gong Kechang, “Dongfang Shuo,” trans. Su Jui-lung, in *Studies on the Han* Fu (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1997), 163-70. For a translation of his biography in *Han shu* 65, see Burton Watson, *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China*, 79-106.

11 This refers to the old fisherman from the *Lyrics of Chu*. 
It is not what my heart likes.

How can it compare with soaring beyond the realm,

Supping on jade, rinsing your mouth with morning clouds?

Leave behind mundane things and abandon vulgar toils,

And wander free and easy in the Primal Harmony.

Friends I’ve made I gather on the numinous marchmount,

I pluck my zither and raise a pure song.

As long as there are those who can follow me,

How would the ancients be worth praising?

III

Looking closely at the disarray of the world’s affairs,

Piles of danger, there is much grief and fright.

Bestowal and recompense exchange as in a marketplace,

The Great Way is concealed and will not unfold.

Even along a leveled road, one meets thorns and brambles,

For a safe stroll, where is one to go?

The tactical and strategic vie with one another,

Fame and position cannot be maintained.

The simurgh avoids the ensnaring net,

Consigning itself afar to a mound on Kunlun.
Zhuang Zhou mourned the numinous tortoise,\textsuperscript{12} 莊周悼靈龜

Prince Sou of Yue feared the royal palanquin.\textsuperscript{13} 越稷畏王輿

The Perfected Man first has it in himself,\textsuperscript{14} 至人存諸己

Leaning on the uncarved block, delighting in the mysterious void.\textsuperscript{15} 隱璞樂玄虛

How are deeds and fame worth dying for? 功名何足殉

Just so that one’s name is listed in bamboo volumes? 乃欲列簡書

What I fancy is really like this, 所好亮若茲

Mister Yang sighed over the forks in the thoroughfare.\textsuperscript{16} 楊氏歎交衢

I am leaving, leaving! I shall pursue my own will, 去去從所志

I dare say that my way is not the same as yours.\textsuperscript{17} 敢謝道不俱

\textsuperscript{12} An allusion to a story in the \textit{Zhuangzi}.

\textsuperscript{13} Following Wang Shizhen’s \textit{Gushi jian 古詩箋}, as quoted in Dai Mingyang, I read Sou 搜 instead of Ji 稷. \textit{Xi Kang ji jiaozhu}, 64. Prince Sou of Yue appears in a story in the \textit{Zhuangzi}. Also, I have taken the variant \textit{wei} 畏 (to fear) in place of \textit{jie} 慫 (to sigh over).

\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{Zhuangzi} 4, “Ren jian shi” (In the world of men), Confucius tells Yan Hui that “the Perfected Man first had it (i.e. the Dao) in himself before trying to give it to others.” \textit{ZZJS}, 1:134.

\textsuperscript{15} Lu Xun changed \textit{璞} (uncut jade) to \textit{樸} (uncarved block, the unwrought), which makes more sense given the context. The uncarved block is akin to the mysterious void, that is, the Dao, and figures in numerous passages in the \textit{Laozi} and \textit{Zhuangzi}. See, for instance, \textit{Laozi} 19, 28, 32, and 37; and \textit{Zhuangzi} 13, “Tian dao” (Way of heaven), where it is paired with \textit{su} 素 to mean “unwrought simplicity.” \textit{ZZJS}, 2:458.

\textsuperscript{16} This alludes to a story in the \textit{Liezi}.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Xi Kang ji jiaozhu}, ed. Dai Mingyang, 61-5. I have consulted the texts in Lu Xun’s \textit{Xi Kang ji} (Hong Kong: Xinyi chubanshe, 1967), 26-7; and Lu Qinli’s \textit{XS}, 1:486-87.