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Retelling Changqing:

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A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in East Asian Studies

by

Chumeng Yang

2025

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Retelling Changqing:

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by

Chumeng Yang

Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Huijun Mai, Chair

Abstract:

This thesis examines how the fraught Changqing reign (821–824) is remembered, reworked, and retold in later writings by Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831), Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), and their contemporaries, and how these narratives intersect with the poets' increasingly divergent life paths. By situating these poems within the political and social contexts of the 820s, it

traces how experiences at the Changqing court are reinterpreted in later recollections, producing multiple close yet not fully congruent Changqing narratives. These include the joint Changqing literary legend Yuan and Bai build in exchange poems and self-annotations, Bai's later self-reflection that turns the reign into a lesson in retreat, Yuan's Hanlin-centered political self-narration, and institutional or third-person retellings by contemporaries. Taken together, these retellings show that the work of shaping a shared story—what is stressed, omitted, or shifted elsewhere—brings into view deep differences in Yuan and Bai's political attitudes and ideals, rooted in their early careers yet sharpened by the crises of the 820s. Ultimately, the thesis uses Changqing as a lens to think about how a close yet innately different relationship works: how Yuan and Bai keep trying to hold together affection and distinction, a shared past and divergent aspirations, as their lives move farther apart.

The thesis of Chumeng Yang is approved.

Richard von Glahn

David C. Schaberg

Huijun Mai, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2025

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Finishing this thesis also marks, at least for now, a temporary departure from academia and a divergence from a path I have been struggling to follow for seven years. My feelings at this moment are complicated. Thus, this thesis is not only a serious academic paper (at least I hope it appears to be), but also a deeply personal project that feels strangely suitable at this point. Coming from China and facing a different academic environment and research focus in the US, I actually switched my research topic to something I had never imagined before—something that grew out of a long-lasting companionship with texts and individuals rather than out of a straightforward career plan—and I am grateful that I have been allowed to come this far.

Outside academia, I would also like to mention online fan communities and their fruitful discussions and fanfic. Although I never actually engaged because of social anxiety, I have been reading them for years, and they inevitably and gradually shaped my understanding of texts, people, and relationships in a good way. They offered perspectives different from and beyond the reach of academic work—less constrained by heteronormative assumptions, more open to other ways of reading and imagining, filling in blanks that can never be covered by historical proof. Without these experiences, I would not have had the idea or courage to ask questions that might not have been easy to pose in more formal settings.

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comments on earlier drafts, and her willingness to take my ideas seriously made it possible for this thesis to become a piece of serious research rather than a private obsession. Her feedback played a key role in my earlier decision to switch topics and choose this as my future research direction; although I have now changed my choice again, I will never regret what I have achieved. If I have any regret, it is that I did not communicate with her more often, work harder on my reading of both primary texts and secondary scholarship, and learn even more from her knowledge and insight.

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I first encountered these people and their works when I was very young and began to form a personal connection with them when I was sixteen. Although I admit I have not read enough, they have stayed with me for so long and have become the root of my enthusiasm for premodern China and even part of me: how I think, feel, and view this world. I am grateful that their words have come down to us, allowing me—across so many centuries—to think with them, argue with them, and sometimes feel unexpectedly close to them. Whatever direction I head in after this thesis, I will still have the opportunity and ability to read, understand, and relate to these works, and my opinions will continue to evolve as I experience more in my own life. The time I have spent with these texts will remain a part of who I am, and being able to go on engaging with them, forming a magical bond with a past world and with people long dead, is something sound and safe that I can hold on to for my whole life.

Introduction

The well-known mid-Tang poets and officials Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) and Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831) have long attracted scholarly attention for their lives, writings, political careers, and the legendary poetic exchanges between them.¹ In the anglophone world, however, studies of Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi remain relatively scarce and are mostly analyses of their literary works. Although some previous scholarship has attempted to reveal a political “function” in these works, especially the exchanged poems, such discussions have generally remained broad: they seldom combine specific historical, political, and interpersonal contexts, and usually concentrate on earlier periods of their lives and exchanges.² Their later years, when the political background became more prominent as both men and their peers rose to higher office, and when the period itself is often shaded by the prevailing dichotomous factional narratives, still deserve more careful examination.

¹ For a general review of earlier scholarship on Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, see Chen Caizhi 陳才智, *Yuan Bai shipai yanjiu* 元白詩派研究 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 9-44. For a review of English works about Bai Juyi, see William H. Nienhauser, Jr., “Po Chü-I Studies in English since 1916–1992,” *Asian Culture Quarterly* 1994.3: 37-50. For a review of Yuan Zhen, see Mei Ah Tan, “A Study of Yuan Zhen’s Life and Verse 809–810: Two Years that Shaped His Politics and Prosody,” PhD diss., (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008), 21-22. More recent and relevant scholarship includes Wang Ao, “The Fashioning of a Poetic Genius: Yuan Zhen and Mid-Tang Imperial Culture,” PhD diss., (Yale University, 2008) and Anna M. Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015).

² Wang Ao acknowledges the political bent of the Yuan–Bai poetic exchange and assumes that their literary works reflected political motives and impacts, though he does not elaborate on the specific actions they took in the political sphere (“The Fashioning of a Poetic Genius,” 110-50). Anna Shields observes the emerging interest in friendship in mid-Tang literature and highlights the practical use of friendship networks in gaining a reputation and career advancement, mainly focusing on the initial phases of their careers. She argues that Bai Juyi’s literary exchanges with Yuan Zhen after his demotion in 810 can be read as efforts to maintain Yuan’s reputation and facilitate his relocation, and she also discusses the political significance of collections of changhe 唱和 or lianju 聯句 verse (*One Who Knows Me*, 63-70, 82-95, 139-40, 174-199).

This thesis therefore centers on the later stage of their lives and relationship, namely the 820s, from Muzong's 穆宗 reign (820–824) up to Yuan Zhen's death in 831. This short reign, though not highly praised in the official histories,³ proved important in several contexts: it is often regarded as the starting point of the Niu–Li factional strife (Niu–Li dangzheng 牛李黨爭)⁴ that dominates many narratives of mid- and late Tang, and it became a turning point in the lives and careers of many figures, including Yuan and Bai. During Changqing 長慶 (821–824, Muzong's reign title), both men held high office: Yuan as Grand Councilor (*zaixiang* 宰相) and Bai as Secretariat Drafter (*Zhongshu sheren* 中書舍人). However, the political fallout of this period shaped their later careers in sharply different ways.

By reading their post-Changqing poems—primarily the poems exchanged between Yuan and Bai and with other contemporaries, together with one related standalone piece—in their historical and social contexts, this study explores the recollection, reflection, and even reconstruction of particular political experiences. It asks how these poetic dialogues (and occasional monologues) contribute to different modes of retelling shared or divergent Changqing encounters. These modes may serve different purposes in writing and

³ For example, see the “court historian comments” 史臣曰 in *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 16.504. “...Looking at such a feeble ruler, one can only feel deep sorrow. He did not understand how difficult it had been to found the dynasty, nor did he care about the sufferings of the common people. He imagined that, with power in his hands, he could by force subdue the myriad regions; he imagined that, so long as the crown was on his person, he could sit still while governing the nine domains. He never realized that when the realm is united he is the ruler of a country with ten thousand chariots, but once it scatters he is nothing but an isolated man, and that those who are his arms and legs in the morning may become his enemies by nightfall...” 觀夫孱主，可謂痛心，不知創業之艱難，不恤黎元之疾苦。謂威權在手，可以力制萬方；謂旒冕在躬，可以坐馳九有。曾不知聚則萬乘，散則獨夫，朝作股肱，暮為讎敵

⁴ “From then on, Deyu and Zongmin each gathered their own faction, dividing the court and attacking and undermining one another for nearly forty years.” 自是德裕、宗閔各分朋黨，更相傾軋，垂四十年 *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒 (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 1956), 241.7791.

transmission, and take shape through processes that may be subtly negotiated or tacitly agreed upon, ultimately producing plural Changqing narratives that situate this fleeting reign differently within each figure's life history and retrospective self-understanding. In this way, the thesis brings literary and historical narratives into the same frame.

It is worth mentioning that these accounts are not simply parallel stories that happen to coexist. From the set of selective Changqing scenes centered on only Yuan and Bai, to Bai Juyi's solitary retrospective self-reflection and Yuan Zhen's political self-presentation that builds on Li Deyu's 李德裕 (787–849) institutional memories—they press against one another and prompt mutual re-examination. It is within these plural—and at times subtly competing—Changqing narratives, and especially in the negotiated formation of the narrative co-authored by Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen, that the underlying differences between them come into view.

Thus, this thesis also carries a more personal yet universal concern. Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi were, from the beginning, very different people. Although they shared similar ambitions early in their careers—both engaging in political activism and paying the price for it—their personalities and expectations of political life diverged sharply. These contrasts were already visible in their early poetic exchanges and became fully pronounced during and after the Changqing years. They remained close, yet the subjects of their exchanged poems gradually shifted and the poetic dialogue at times became misaligned. Anna Shields has observed such incongruities in their earlier nostalgic poems.⁵ In examining the construction of their

⁵ Anna Shields, "Remembering When: The Uses of Nostalgia in the Poetry of Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 2006.2, 321-61.

Changqing narrative and other related poems, this thesis pays attention to what is answered and what is left unanswered in their exchanges, as well as what gets elaborated and what is dismissed in that narrative, especially compared to other exchanged or solo poems, as an attempt to explore how closely connected individuals confront, negotiate, and respond to their innate and acquired differences—in opinions, political attitudes, and future prospects.

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter I, “The Beginning of the Careers of Ambitious Men,” provides preliminary background, tracing the official careers of Bai and Yuan from 803 to 820, before the Changqing reign. Beginning from the most ideal career pathway, their trajectories soon diverged between 809 and 815 and eventually converged again when both were demoted to posts in the south. This chapter also includes a reading of one set of poems exchanged between them, which already reveals differences in their attitudes toward political careers in these early years.

Chapter II, “A Changqing Experienced and a Changqing Written,” reconstructs the political upheavals of the Changqing reign not through a fixed factional framework but from the perspective of interpersonal networks and contingent encounters, showing how circles of friends, patrons, and colleagues shaped Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi’s careers and responses to the 821 *jinshi* scandal and other court conflicts. It then reads the *Jiu Tang shu* biography of Yuan Zhen as both a shaped story and a record of concrete crises, tracing the rapid rise of his career, the consequent decline of his reputation, and his conflicts with Pei Du. On this basis, the chapter also reconsiders the assumption that Bai Juyi distanced himself from Yuan, instead showing how Bai’s appointments, poems, and memorial writing kept him publicly

aligned with Yuan even as he faced his own dilemmas. In the final section, the chapter turns to their later exchanged poems and self-annotations, arguing that these works collectively construct what this thesis calls a “Changqing narrative”: a retrospective, selectively told account that reframes the reign from the partly shared, partly divergent experiences of Yuan and Bai. Read together, these poems show how those uneven experiences and different focuses of the writers are reworked and negotiated into a shared story—one that privileges private understanding over public controversy, affection over conflict, and literary reputation over political setbacks, while still leaving traces of unease and disagreement just beneath the surface. The chapter thus emphasizes that this shared narrative is not automatic but produced through negotiation, compromise, and silence, and that the limits of agreement between Yuan and Bai become visible in what their poems omit or quietly reframe.

Chapter III, “Changqing in Plural Voices,” moves beyond the joint narrative that Yuan and Bai worked out together and reads the Changqing years through other, partly overlapping modes of retelling. It first turns to Bai Juyi’s later self-reflection, showing how he recasts his Changqing experiences as evidence of a temperament unsuited to court, using that period as a lesson in retreat rather than as a ground for renewed political hope. It then examines how figures in Yuan’s network—especially Li Deyu, who shares Hanlin memories with him, and Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842), who was not at the Changqing court but extends the Changqing story from afar—represent Changqing-era political experiences and images in poems that foreground institutional settings, political memory, and ongoing aspirations to return. Taken together, these texts (including the ones discussed in Chapter II) present “Changqing” not as a single settled story but as a small cluster of narratives around a brief reign—bureaucratic,

autobiographical, and aspirational—that revisit the same years, incidents, and appointments, remembering and reworking them in different ways, and sometimes putting them into quiet tension. Read alongside Chapter II, this chapter also makes clearer how Yuan and Bai’s paths gradually diverge by juxtaposing the joint Changqing narrative they once negotiated together with their separate reframings of the same experiences. By tracing how Yuan’s political concerns continue to surface in these later exchanges, and how friends respond to them differently, the chapter also highlights the limits of the Yuan-Bai Changqing narrative and the gradual shift in their own correspondence away from explicitly political projects toward other forms of attachment.

In the end, the Epilogue returns to the unresolved divergence between Yuan and Bai, leading to the distinct life paths of their later years that ultimately clash with the pact to retire together they had made in earlier days. By reading the one-sided, repeated invocation of that agreement and the eventual closure of their Changqing narrative—Yuan Zhen’s tomb epitaph written by Bai Juyi—the Epilogue traces what happened afterward and offers a narrative and emotional closure to the story.

I. The Beginning of Careers of Ambitious Men

Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen probably started to know one another before 802, proved by the earliest dated pair of their exchanged poems. Bai’s self-lament of his aging and Yuan’s consoling with “After all, a century is altogether like a dream” 畢竟百年同是夢 marks the

beginning of a poetic dialogue that lasted almost three decades.⁶ In 803, they passed the evaluation examination (*quanxuan* 銓選) together and were both appointed Editors in the Palace Library (*mishu sheng jiaoshu lang* 秘書省校書郎). Then they prepared for and passed the special examination (*zhiju* 制舉) in 806, which accelerated their advancement: Bai became the Defender of Zhouzhi (*Zhouzhi wei* 盩厔尉) and Yuan, for securing first place, was appointed the Left Reminder (*zuo shiyi* 左拾遺). Both posts were prestigious and promised future promotion,⁷ yet fortune did not always favor them.

That same year, Yuan Zhen was downgraded to the Defender of Henan (*Henan wei* 河南尉) and soon resigned upon his mother's death. In 809 he was appointed Investigating Censor (*jiancha yushi* 監察御史) and sent on a mission to present-day Sichuan. After impeaching a previous Military Commissioner (*jiedushi* 節度使) and correcting the unjust treatment of eighty-eight households, he provoked resentment and was reassigned to the Eastern Capital. The next year, after reporting the illegal deeds of the Administrator of Henan (*Henan yin* 河南尹), he received a salary cut and was recalled to Chang'an. On the journey back, the eunuch Liu Shiyuan 劉士元 (fl. 9th cent.) seized his quarters in the post station and insulted him, leading to Yuan's wrongful demotion as the Adjutant of Levied Service Section (*shicao canjun* 士曹參軍) in Jiangling 江陵.

By comparison, Bai Juyi was luckier. Though he initially disliked his position as the Defender of Zhouzhi, he was soon recalled to Chang'an and appointed Hanlin Academician

⁶ Xie Siwei 謝思煒, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu* 白居易詩集校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 1008-09. Yuan's response see Ji Qin 冀勤, *Yuan Zhen ji* 元稹集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 218.

⁷ Liu Houbin 劉後濱, "Huantu bajun: Zhongwan Tang jingying de shihuan rentong jiqi zhidu lujing" 宦途八俊: 中晚唐精英的仕宦認同及其制度路徑, *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 2019.6: 95.

(*hanlin xueshi* 翰林學士)—one of the most desirable posts for literati and close to central power. Yet after their shared patron, the esteemed statesman Pei Ji 裴玪 (765–811),⁸ died in 811, Bai’s prospects declined. His mother’s death in the same year led to a three-year mourning period, after which he received only the unimportant title of the Left Grand Master Admonisher of the Heir Apparent (*taizi zuo zanshan dafu* 太子左贊善大夫). Yuan Zhen remained in Jiangling until 815 but was soon banished as the Assistant of Tongzhou (*Tongzhou sima* 通州司馬) shortly after returning to the capital. That same year Bai Juyi—already disheartened and shocked by the assassination of Grand Councilor Wu Yuanheng 武元衡 (758–815)—submitted a memorial and was consequently demoted as the Assistant of Jiangzhou (*Jiangzhou sima* 江州司馬) for his outspokenness.

After years of hardship, disheartenment, and even illness,⁹ the political climate began to shift, leading to their transfer to better posts in the winter of 818. The following year, on their journeys to new appointments, Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen met by chance and spent three days together.¹⁰ In the winter of 819, Yuan was summoned back to Chang’an, and Bai followed in the summer of 820.

Unexpectedly, the Changqing reign (821–824) became a turning point for both their careers and their relationship. They reached the pinnacles of their official lives¹¹—Bai as the

⁸ Bian Xiaoxuan 卞孝萱, *Yuan Zhen nianpu* 元稹年譜 (Jinan: Qi Lu shushe, 1980), 64-65, 109. Pei Ji was the factual examiner in the placement exam of 803 and instructed Yuan when he was preparing for the special exam, see Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 134.

⁹ Yuan fell ill in 815 shortly after arriving in Tongzhou, see Zhou Xianglu 周相錄, *Yuan Zhen nianpu xinbian* 元稹年譜新編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004), 149.

¹⁰ See Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1428-29.

¹¹ When I use “pinnacle,” I refer not to the formal rank of these posts but to their significance. Although the importance of the Secretariat Drafter declined in the mid- and late Tang, see Lai Ruihe 賴瑞和, *Tangdai*

Secretariat Drafter and Yuan as the Grand Councilor—but were also entangled in court disputes during 821 and 822 and affected by long-lasting consequences of political turmoil. Yuan Zhen suffered direct attacks and a tarnished reputation, being forced to step down after only a few months; but he nevertheless kept feeling an obligation both to realize his political ideal and to repay the emperor. Bai Juyi, though less involved in the political chaos, still did not escape his own share of embarrassment and nearly abandoned his ambitions for further advancement.¹²

Before turning to the 820s, however, one pair of exchanged poems from 810 deserves attention, for they vividly reveal the distinction between Yuan and Bai. The original poem by Yuan Zhen was one of several written on his journey to Jiangling after his unjust demotion. Bai Juyi, admiring these works, responded to ten of them in the same year. According to Bai, he divided his replies into two categories: “those I agree are named ‘matching;’; those for which I hold different opinions are named ‘responding’.”¹³ 同者謂之和，異者謂之答 Bai’s response to this particular poem is titled “Responding,” marking the divergence in their attitudes.

The two poems probably fall into the category of “poems on history” (*yongshi shi* 詠史詩), commenting on the deeds and morality of four historical figures from the Qin and early Han dynasties—“the Four Hoary Heads of Mount Shang” (*Shangshan sihao* 商山四皓, also

gaoceng wenguan 唐代高層文官 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), 125-44, it still remained a well-recognized office and a potential pathway to higher positions, see Lu Yang 陸揚, “Gudu de Bai Juyi: Jiu shiji zhengzhi yu wenhua zhuanxing zhong de shiren” 孤獨的白居易：九世紀政治與文化轉型中的詩人, *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 2019.6: 117.

¹² Lu Yang, “Gudu de Bai Juyi,” 118-19.

¹³ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 211-12.

referred to as “the Four Elders” below). The earliest account of them appears in Zhang Liang’s 張良 (d. 186 BCE) biography in *Shiji* 史記, where they are portrayed simply as four old men unwilling to serve Liu Bang 劉邦 (Emperor Gaozu of Han 漢高祖, r. 202–195 BCE) and therefore retreating into the mountains. Yet Liu Bang still held them in high regard and could not recruit them. Thus, Zhang Liang suggested to Empress Lü that the heir apparent, the future Emperor Hui 惠帝 (195–188 BCE), should invite them as guests, thereby displaying his benevolence, popularity, and growing political strength. The story serves only to highlight Zhang Liang’s strategy.¹⁴

However, as the narrative evolved and shifted over time, the stories in both Yuan’s and Bai’s poems already differ greatly from the original *Shiji* account. The Elders’ historical merits and whether they indeed saved the Han empire will not be discussed here; what matters here is how Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi perceived and constructed the same tale from completely different perspectives, particularly regarding the choices between reclusion and service.

Yuan Zhen, in his “Temple of the Four Hoary Heads” 四皓廟, reverses the common praise that the Four Elders had long received:¹⁵

.....
四賢胡爲者？ What was it that these four worthies did?
千載名氛氳。 That for a thousand years their names waft fragrance.
顯晦有遺跡， Their withdrawal and reappearance both left traces,
前後疑不倫。 Yet (their choices) before and after lead one to suspect inconsistency.

¹⁴ *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 55.2045-47.

¹⁵ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 12-13. Yuan Zhen also mentioned this poem in the annotation to his “Poem in Response to Hanlin Academician Bai’s [Poem] in Place of a Letter in 100 Rhymes” 酬翰林白學士代書詩一百韻. See Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 134-35. But it is hard to tell if he wrote this poem earlier or he received Bai’s response earlier. For translation of the title see Anna M. Shields, *One Who Knows Me*, 185.

秦政虐天下，	The Qin tyranny ravaged the realm,
黷武窮生民。	Exhausting the people through endless wars.
諸侯戰必死，	Every battle among the lords led to death;
壯士眉亦顰。	Even brave men frowned in distress.
張良韓孺子，	Zhang Liang, the young man of Han,
椎碎屬車輪。	Smashed the wheel of the emperor's attendant carriage. ¹⁶
遂令英雄意，	Thus it roused the hearts of heroes,
日夜思報秦。	Who day and night thought only of avenging Qin.
先生相將去，	The four gentlemen (the four hoary heads) departed together,
不復嬰世塵。	No longer entangled with the worldly dust.
雲卷在孤岫，	Like clouds roll back around a solitary peak,
龍潛爲小鱗。	Like dragons lurk as small fishes.
秦皇轉無道，	The Qin Emperor grew lawless,
諫者鼎鑊親。	Those who remonstrated were boiled alive in cauldrons.
茅焦脫衣諫，	While Mao Jiao stripped off his clothing to remonstrate, ¹⁷
先生無一言。	The gentlemen did not utter a word.
趙高殺二世，	When Zhao Gao murdered the Second Emperor, ¹⁸
先生如不聞。	The gentlemen acted as if they had not heard.
劉項取天下，	When Liu Bang and Xiang Yu seized all under the heaven,
先生游白雲。	The gentlemen were wandering among white clouds.
海內八年戰，	During the eight years of warfare within the seas,
先生全一身。	The gentlemen preserved their own selves.
漢業日已定，	As the Han enterprise grew secure day by day,
先生名亦振。	Their fame too rose in renown.
不得爲濟世，	Unable to save the world,
宜哉爲隱淪。	It was fitting indeed to choose reclusion instead.
如何一朝起，	Yet how could they, rising overnight,
屈作儲貳賓？	Stoop to being the heir apparent's guests?

.....

¹⁶ Zhang Liang's grandfather and father had both served as prime ministers of the state of Han. After Qin annihilated Han, he sought assassins to avenge it. He found a mighty man and made an extremely heavy iron hammer. When the Emperor Shihuang of Qin 秦始皇 (r. 221–210 BCE) was traveling east and passed Bolangsha 博浪沙, Zhang Liang and this man attacked the emperor but only struck the attendant carriage. See *Shiji*, 55.2033-34.

¹⁷ Due to the affair between his mother and Lao'ai 嫪毐 (259–238 BCE) and Lao'ai's rebellion, Emperor Shi Huang sent the empress dowager away, forbade anyone to remonstrate with him regarding her, and executed twenty-seven people. Mao Jiao nevertheless remonstrated on this matter and took off his clothes when he finished, waiting for execution (the emperor intended to have him boiled in a cauldron). He finally persuaded Emperor Shi Huang to welcome the empress dowager back to Xianyang 咸陽. See Xiang Zonglu 向宗魯, *Shuoyuan jiaozheng* 說苑校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 215-17.

¹⁸ Upon the death of Emperor Shihuang, Zhao Gao (258–207 BCE) schemed to have Shihuang's younger son, Huhai 胡亥 (230–207 BCE), acclaimed as the Second Emperor. He then became very powerful. But after the rebellions in the east had expanded greatly, Zhao Gao, fearing the emperor's blame, enacted another scheme and forced Huhai to kill himself. See *Shiji*, 6. 264-74.

This is a decidedly sarcastic piece. By contrasting the sufferings of all kinds of people and the heroic figures' will and actions with the leisurely life the Four Elders enjoyed, as well as their ignorance of the outside chaos, Yuan Zhen implies a criticism of the Four Elders' self-interested deeds that lead to nothing but the preservation of themselves. The sarcasm is even strengthened by addressing them as “gentlemen” (*xiansheng* 先生), a respectful term. To Yuan, the morals and intentions of the Four Elders seemed very obscure (in his words: why were the gentlemen's Way so obscure? 先生道何屯). Bai Juyi, feeling the need to correct Yuan's “misunderstanding” or express his own opinion, wrote his response:¹⁹

<p>天下有道見， 無道卷懷之。 此乃聖人語， 吾聞諸仲尼。 矯矯四先生， 同稟希世資。 隨時有顯晦， 秉道無磷緇。 秦皇肆暴虐， 二世邁亂離。 先生相隨去， 商嶺采紫芝。 君看秦獄中， 戮辱者李斯。 劉項爭天下， 謀臣競悅隨。 先生如鸞鶴，</p>	<p>When the world follows the Way, one shows oneself; When the world loses it, one withdraws and keeps it within.²⁰ These are the words of the sage; I have heard them from Confucius. Lofty and outstanding, the four gentlemen, Were all endowed with talents rare in the world. Responding to the times they may serve or retreat, Yet in holding to the Way they remain intact and pure. The Emperor of Qin indulged in tyranny, And within two generations it fell into disorder and ruin. The gentlemen withdrew together, Gathering purple fungus in the Shang Mountains. Look, in the prison of Qin— The one executed and disgraced was Li Si.²¹ When Liu Bang and Xiang Yu contended for the empire, Strategists and advisers vied to follow. The gentlemen were like phoenixes and cranes,</p>
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¹⁹ “Responding to ‘Temple of the Four Hoary Heads’” 答四皓廟, Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 231-232.

²⁰ “When all beneath Heaven abides in the Way, make yourself known; and when the Way's lost, stay hidden.” (Analects 8/13) 天下有道則見，無道則隱 “How noble-minded Qu Boyu is! When the country abides in the Way, he takes office. And when the country ignores the Way, he hides himself away and embraces it alone.” (Analects 15/7) 君子哉蘧伯玉！邦有道，則仕；邦無道，則可卷而懷之 Translations refer to *The Analects / Confucius; Translated by David Hinton*, tr. David Hinton (Washington, D.C: Counterpoint, 1998).

²¹ Zhao Gao slandered Li Si (280–208 BCE) in front of the Second Emperor, Li Si was thus put into jail and interrogated by Zhao Gao. Zhao Gao tortured him to make him plead guilty. In the end, Li Si was executed. See *Shiji*, 87. 2559-62.

<p>去入冥冥飛。 君看齊鼎中， 焦爛者酈其。 子房得沛公， 自謂相遇遲。 八難掉舌樞， 三略役心機。 辛苦十數年， 晝夜形神疲。 竟雜霸者道，</p> <p>徒稱帝者師。 子房爾則能， 此非吾所宜。</p> <p>.....</p> <p>心不畫一計， 口不吐一詞。 暗定天下本， 遂安劉氏危。 子房吾則能， 此非爾所知。 先生道既光， 太子禮甚卑。 安車留不住， 功成棄如遺。</p>	<p>Departing to soar into the boundless clouds. Look, in the cauldron of Qi— The one burned and charred was Li Ji.²² Zifang (Zhang Liang), meeting Liu Bang, Lamented that their encounter came too late.²³ Through eight perils he shook the pivot of his tongue, And the <i>Three Strategies</i> exhausted his mind and schemes.²⁴ During over ten years of hardship, Day and night his body and spirit grew weary. The Han enterprise ultimately blended the ways of the true king and the hegemon;²⁵ Calling him “teacher of the emperor” was but an empty name.²⁶ Zifang, you could do that; But this is not what is appropriate for us (the Four Elders).</p> <p>Without drafting a single plan in their hearts, Or uttering a single word with their mouths They secretly settled the empire’s foundation And thus secured the Liu family’s peril. Zifang, this is what we (the Four Elders) are capable of, Which you do not understand. The gentlemen’s principles shone forth, While the heir apparent’s courtesies were exceedingly humble. Even the comfortable carriage could not detain them; Having accomplished their merits, they discarded official titles as if forgetting them entirely.</p>
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²² Li Yiji 酈食其 (268–204 BCE), Liu Bang’s strategist, went to persuade the King of Qi to become a vassal state to Han. The negotiations were successful, but Han Xin 韓信 (d.196 BCE) still attacked Qi. The King of Qi was very angry and asked Li Yiji to have the Han army retreat. Li Yiji refused and was boiled to death. See *Shiji*, 97. 2693-96.

²³ When Zhang Liang first met Liu Bang, Liu Bang appreciated him and often adopted his strategies, while other people did not take his advice, which made Zhang Liang say that Liu Bang was probably a man bestowed on him by Heaven. See *Shiji*, 55. 2036.

²⁴ “Eight perils” are the eight reasons Zhang Liang used to persuade Liu Bang not to acclaim the descendants of the six states. See *Shiji*, 55. 2040-41. *Three Strategies* refers to the military tactics Zhang Liang learned from Master Yellow Stone (*huangshi gong* 黃石公), Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 234.

²⁵ Emperor Xuan (r. 74–48 BCE) changed his face and said: “The Han family has its own way of governing, which was originally a mixture of hegemon’s way and the way of the true king. Why should we only adopt moral education and use the governing of Zhou?” 宣帝作色曰：“漢家自有制度，本以霸王道雜之，奈何純[任]德教，用周政乎？” *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 9.277.

²⁶ “The Duke of Liu (Zhang Liang) thus claimed: ‘...Now I use my three-inch tongue to become the teacher of the emperor, being enfeoffed ten thousand households and gaining the status as a marquis. This is the extreme that a plain man can reach, with which I am content.’ 今以三寸舌為帝者師，封萬戶，位列侯，此布衣之極，於良足矣 See *Shiji*, 55. 2048.

如彼旱天雲，
一雨百穀滋。
澤則在天下，
雲復歸希夷。

Like clouds in the parched sky,
One rain nourishes a hundred grains.
Their deeds benefited the whole empire,
Yet the clouds returned to the realm of stillness and void.

.....

Many details in this poem directly or indirectly echo Yuan's original wording (for example, Bai emphasizes the heir apparent's great courtesies as a reply to Yuan's sarcasm, "Yet how could they, rising overnight, stoop to being the heir apparent's guests?"), and the word "gentlemen" is inherited but used in its ordinary, respectful sense. Bai Juyi clarifies the "Way" of the Four Elders by opening with Confucius' saying, claiming that their deeds conform to the teachings of the sage. He also uses comparison, but compares the miserable, boomeranging, and exhausting outcomes of other figures with the freedom and safety the Four Elders enjoyed, and the ease with which they stabilized the heir apparent's status.

Putting the two poems together, it is intriguing to discover that the fundamental difference arises from the writers' distinct evaluative standards. Yuan Zhen views the Four Elders in relation to their external circumstances, in other words, by what they contributed to the world. When the situation was severe and dangerous, they did not come forward to help the realm and its people; only when the war ended and the environment became safer did they enter service and gain long-lasting fame, which to Yuan seems like pure political opportunism. His poem ends with a self-conscious claim not included in the translation above: "In service or in withdrawal, one must be clear and consistent—thus I write these words today" 出處貴明白，故吾今有云。 Thus, his personal insistence on a political career is detectable: he preferred those who remained consistent. That is, one should adhere to a single path: if one prefers reclusion, they should not enter service no matter how tempting it

appears; and if one chooses service, they should strive for it no matter what obstacles they may face.

While Yuan emphasizes that the Four Elders did no good to the state but only preserved their own lives and reputations, Bai exaggerates their irreplaceability and influence, highlighting a distinction between the Four Elders and Zhang Liang—each had different capabilities and thus made different contributions (Bai considers the Four Elders to be more successful). In Bai's version of the story, with a clear understanding of their times (whether the world follows the Way or loses the Way 有道/無道), the men made wise decisions and achieved unmatched personal success: they avoided the dangers of warfare, lived freely, once helped to stabilize the Han empire, and later discarded wealth and titles—thus obtaining physical safety, realizing personal and social values, and maintaining inner morality and freedom. His attitude towards a political career is also clear: “Why must one forever hide their traces, or forever serve the times?” 何必長隱逸（跡），何必長濟時？ One should be able to adjust one's choices as circumstances change. For Yuan Zhen, the Four Elders were definitely not the kind of people needed to save the state; however, for Bai, they were the perfect model of what an ideal political career should be.

At this stage of their lives, such divergence did not create a barrier between them but only added intriguing tension to their poetic exchanges. Yet these two poems almost read like an early prophecy, foreshadowing the divergence of their later paths. Their differing judgments of the Four Elders would later echo in their own experiences: Yuan's continuous pursuit of political ideals and Bai's gradual detachment from them.

II. A Changqing Experienced and A Changqing Written

1. The Collapse of Earlier Friend Circle

The political upheavals of the Changqing reign (821–824)—especially the scandal surrounding the *jinshi* examination of 821—have long been regarded as the starting point of the Niu–Li factional strife.²⁷ While studies have begun to question this rigid framework, this chapter approaches the period from the perspective of interpersonal relationships, seeking to illuminate the occasionality and unpredictability of these events. By tracing the social networks and experiences of Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi—Yuan deeply entangled in the political conflicts, and Bai more embedded in the bureaucratic circles of Chang’an—it examines how personal connections and circumstantial encounters shaped their careers and literary responses.

As Anna Shields has observed, the examination process and subsequent appointments played a decisive role in forming friendships and social circles.²⁸ Having passed two examinations together and shared a common patron, Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi naturally built networks with substantial overlap. Their early writings record a close circle of friends who frequently socialized and exchanged poems, including Li Jian 李建 (764–821), Li Fuli 李復禮 (fl. 9th cent.), Yu Jingxiu 庾敬休 (d. 835), and Li Shen 李紳 (772–846).

²⁷ For events and analysis, see *The Cambridge History of China, vol.3: Sui and T'ang China: 589-906, Part I*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), 640-42. Scholars have pointed out that Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–849) was not involved. See Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮, *Li Deyu nianpu* 李德裕年譜 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 108-113. Michael Höckelmann argues that the examination scandal reveals nepotism rather than continuous factionalism in his recent study regarding the Niu-Li factional strife and how its traditional and modern narratives were formed. Michael Höckelmann, “The Niu-Li factional Strife: The Origins of a Historiographical Fiction,” *Journal of Chinese History* 2025: 9. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2024.12>

²⁸ Anna M. Shields, *One Who Knows Me*, 117.

As their careers diverged, their circles evolved as well. During his demotion to Jiangling, Yuan befriended Li Jingjian 李景儉 (fl. 9th cent.) and interacted with Liu Yuxi, Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), and Lü Wen 呂溫 (772–811), earlier participants in the failed Yongzhen Reform 永貞革新.²⁹ During Bai's appointment in the Hanlin Academy, he became close to his fellow Academicians Li Jiang 李絳 (764–830), Cui Qun 崔群 (772–832), and Qian Hui 錢徽 (755–829). Li Jiang and Cui Qun were also close to Pei Ji, and they joined Bai Juyi's petition against Yuan's demotion to Jiangling.³⁰

These overlapping yet distinct networks would later shape their political moves. Exiled from the capital for nearly a decade, Yuan relied on limited contacts and sought advancement through literary appeal, presenting writings to several influential officials.³¹ Bai, by contrast, remained mostly in the capital, cultivating ties with powerful Hanlin peers and, overall, a broader circle of associates—connections that would later place him in a difficult position when those same figures turned against one another.³²

²⁹ Zhou Xianglu, *Yuan Zhen nianpu xinbian*, 102-103, 112-113. Bai knew Li Jingjian later and mentioned him in poems written in Jiangzhou. Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1305. According to Bian Xiaoxuan, Yuan knew Liu Yuxi and Liu Zongyuan earlier through his father-in-law Wei Xiaqing 韋夏卿 (743–806), Bian Xiaoxuan, *Yuan Zhen nianpu*, 71-72.

³⁰ In 810, when Yuan Zhen was unjustly downgraded to Jiangling, Li Jiang, Cui Qun, and Bai Juyi all presented memorials to argue against Yuan's demotion, but their efforts were unsuccessful, see in Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu* 白居易文集校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 1244-45. It seems that Yuan Zhen was also acquainted to them, proved by his mentioning Qian Hui and Cui Qun in his poems matching Bai. See Zhou Xianglu, *Yuan Zhen nianpu xinbian*, 63, 84. Li Jiang and Cui Qun (and Yuan's and Bai's shared friend Li Jian) are also close to the Yong Zhen group. Still, Bai received Li Jiang's and Cui Qun's help more. Li Jiang saved Bai from the Emperor's dissatisfaction, see his biography in *Jiu Tang shu*. *JTS*, 164.4287. After Bai spent three years in Jiangzhou, he was promoted as the Prefect of Zhongzhou (*Zhongzhou cishi* 忠州刺史) due to Cui Qun's help. See Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1410.

³¹ Yuan offered his writings to Zheng Yuqing 鄭餘慶 (746–820), Quan Deyu 權德輿 (759–818), and Li Fengji 李逢吉 (758–835), and sent a letter to Pei Du 裴度 (765–839) after the pacification of Huaixi 淮西, Zhou Xianglu, *Yuan Zhen nianpu xinbian*, 157-59, 162-65.

³² For an example of his network, see Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1439. In this poem, Bai addresses fifteen officials serving in the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu sheng* 尚書省), suggesting that they were in frequent contact.

Upon the demise of Emperor Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 778–820) in the first month of 820, the political landscape of Chang’an underwent significant transformation, leading to the elevation of several friends to more prestigious positions.³³ Li Shen and Yu Jingxiu were appointed as Hanlin Academicians,³⁴ Li Zongmin 李宗閔 (d.846), Yuan’s early acquaintance, was appointed Secretariat Drafter,³⁵ and Niu Sengru 牛僧孺 (779–848), Bai’s friend, received the title of Participant in the Drafting of Proclamations (*zhi zhigao* 知制誥) and was transferred to Vice Censor-in-chief (*yushi zhongcheng* 御史中丞) in winter.³⁶ Yuan later mentioned that Duan Wenchang 段文昌 (773–835), one of the new Grand Councilors, recommended him for office, possibly facilitating his promotion.³⁷ Bai’s return to the capital that same year likely followed a similar pattern: surrounded by newly ascendant allies, his appointment as the Director of the Bureau for Receptions (*zhuke langzhong* 主客郎中) and Participant in the Drafting of Proclamations was due to Niu Sengru’s recommendation.³⁸

³³ Yuan’s returning in 819 was likely due to Linghu Chu’s 令狐楚 (766–837) help. Linghu Chu might be seeking political allies. Yuan Zhen’s poems were appreciated by Muzong, and he had poetic exchanges with Linghu’s friend Li Fengji. But their relationship later deteriorated. Zhou Xianglu, *Yuan Zhen nianpu xinbian*, 178-79, 181-82.

³⁴ *JTS*, 16.475-76.

³⁵ *JTS*, 16.481. Yuan knew Li Zongmin pretty early. See Zhou Xianglu, *Yuan Zhen nianpu xinbian*, 23. He mentioned Li Zongmin in his annotation of “Poem in Response to Hanlin Academician Bai’s [Poem] in Place of a Letter in 100 Rhymes,” recalling their interactions with Li Zongmin when preparing for the special exam. See in Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 133-34. Yuan probably introduced Li Zongmin to Bai.

³⁶ *JTS*, 172. 4469. Bai knew Niu Sengru when he was living in Huayang Temple 華陽觀 in 805 and 806, see Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 2795. Niu Sengru was Li Zongmin’s “tongnian” in the *jinshi* exam in 805. See Xu Song 徐松 (1781–1848), *Dengke ji kao buzheng* 登科記考補正, suppl. Meng Erdong 孟二冬 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2019), 590. It is uncertain if Niu Sengru knew Bai Juyi through Li Zongmin and Yuan Zhen, and Yuan seemed not to have interacted with Niu. But Niu was likely to belong to the same social network at that time. Bai sent poems and letters to Niu and his other friends when he was in Jiangzhou, see “Letter Written on Another’s Behalf” 代書 in Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 283-84; see also Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1439-40.

³⁷ *JTS*, 166.4338. Duan also recommended Niu Sengru.

³⁸ Lu Yang, “Gudu de Bai Juyi: Jiu shiji zhengzhi yu wenhua zhuanxing zhong de shiren,” 115-116. Bai also seemed to have good relationships with the Grand Councilors, and Gu Xuexie argued that it might be because of

That winter, while on a night duty with Yuan Zhen, Li Zongmin, and Wang Qi 王起 (760–847), Bai composed a poem lamenting how belated his advancement had been.³⁹

Against this background, the eruption of the *jinshi* examination dispute in 821 appeared sudden. Relatives of Li Zongmin and Yang Rushi 楊汝士 (b. 778) passed the exam supervised by examiner Qian Hui, while Duan Wenchang and Li Shen protested because their pre-selected candidates had failed—Yuan joined their objections. As a result, Bai Juyi and Wang Qi were appointed as re-examiners. Since only three of the original fourteen candidates passed the second exam, Qian Hui, Li Zongmin, and Yang Rushi were demoted.⁴⁰ Nearly everyone involved was an acquaintance or friend of Yuan and Bai, and Yang Rushi, the only figure not yet mentioned, was Bai’s affine (Bai had married his cousin). Bai had befriended his younger brother, Yang Yuqing 楊虞卿 (784–835), as early as 799.⁴¹ As the one with a wider network of friends and no wish to take sides, Bai found himself in a dilemma; he attempted to petition for leniency but failed nonetheless.⁴²

The two sides in the *jinshi* exam scandal gradually came to be seen as the prototypes of two opposing factions—Li Shen and Duan Wenchang represented the Li faction (with Li Deyu added later), and Li Zongmin and Yang Rushi belonged to the Niu faction (with Niu

Yuan Zhen’s assistance and the Councilors’ agreement. See Gu Xuexie 顧學頤, *Gu Xuexie wenxue lunji* 顧學頤文學論集 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1987), 107-08.

³⁹ “……Stay Overnight in the Secretariat with Three Drafters Who Are Wang Eleventh, Li Seventh, and Yuan Ninth, and Talk about Our Past, Being Moved” ……與王十一李七元九三舍人中書同宿話舊感懷, in Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1505. Wang Eleventh was Wang Qi 王起 (760–847), Li Seventh was Li Zongmin.

⁴⁰ *JTS*, 168.4383-84.

⁴¹ See “Letter to Yang Yuqing” 與楊虞卿書 in Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 292.

⁴² See “Memorial on Re-examining the *Jinshi* Candidates” 論重考試進士事宜狀 in Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 1290-91.

Sengru added later). The dispute thus seemed to shatter the interpersonal network that had once linked members of their generation, just as they were finally stepping onto the political stage and as the political climate around them was becoming increasingly volatile.

2. “Yuan-Bai” in Political Turbulence

In this new atmosphere of tension, another conflict broke out between Yuan Zhen and Pei Du 裴度 (765–839), a renowned official who had played a key role in the Yuanhe campaign against rebellious provinces.⁴³ This dispute may have had an even greater impact. Yuan’s career progression from 820 to 822 was exceptionally quick. In 820, he became a Participant in the Drafting of Proclamations. Then, in February 821, he was appointed Secretariat Drafter and the Hanlin Recipient-of-Edicts Academician (*hanlin chengzhi xueshi* 翰林承旨學士), a prominent position close to central power.⁴⁴ Although he was forced to leave the Hanlin Academy in October, he assumed the office of Grand Councilor in February 822. Pei Du and other critics attributed his success in this period to support from the eunuchs, and Yuan’s biography in *Jiu Tang shu* reflects this interpretation.

Soon [Yuan Zhen] was appointed as Director of the Bureau of Sacrifices and a Participant in the Drafting of Proclamations. Officials in the government despised him because the appointment order did not come from the Grand Councilors’ office. ... Not long after, he was summoned to join the Hanlin Academy and appointed as Secretariat Drafter and the Recipient of Edicts Academician. Because of the eunuch Cui Tanjun [who had recommended Yuan Zhen to the Emperor in text not translated here], other eunuchs eagerly associated with Yuan Zhen. The Administrator of Military Affairs Wei Hongjian had an especially close connection with Yuan Zhen, and Emperor Muzong revered him even more deeply. Pei Du, the Military Commissioner of Hedong, submitted memorials three times, saying that Yuan Zhen and Wei Hongjian were sworn friends who

⁴³ Pei Du was also promoted by Pei Ji, see *JTS*, 148. 3992.

⁴⁴ On the importance of Hanlin Academicians in the late Tang, see Lai Ruihe, *Tangdai gaoceng wenguan*, 194–96.

were conspiring to disrupt the stability of the government. His language was intense and straightforward. Taking into consideration the opinions of the inner and outer courts, Muzong removed Yuan Zhen from the Hanlin Academy and appointed him as the Vice Director of the Ministry of Works. The emperor's favor did not decline, and in the second year of Changqing (822), Yuan Zhen was appointed as Manager of Affairs [the late Tang title for Grand Councilors]. The day the edict was issued, there was no one in court or commons who did not scorn him.⁴⁵

即日轉祠部郎中、知制誥。朝廷以書命不由相府，甚鄙之，……居無何，召入翰林，為中書舍人、承旨學士。中人以潭峻之故，爭與稹交，而知樞密魏弘簡尤與稹相善，穆宗愈深知重。河東節度使裴度三上疏，言稹與弘簡為刎頸之交，謀亂朝政，言甚激訐。穆宗顧中外人情，乃罷稹內職，授工部侍郎。上恩顧未衰，長慶二年，拜平章事。詔下之日，朝野無不輕笑之。

While whether Yuan had allied himself with eunuchs is debatable,⁴⁶ it cannot be denied that his reputation suffered during that period, as shown by his works.⁴⁷ The dispute between him and Pei Du ended in failure for both sides. In February, Yuan Zhen gained the position of Grand Councilor, and in March, Pei Du was also appointed. Later, Yuan Zhen was falsely accused of plotting to assassinate Pei Du. Following an investigation, both Yuan and Pei were demoted in June. This consequence was likely a scheme orchestrated by Li Fengji 李逢吉 (758–835), who was an opponent of Pei Du.⁴⁸ Due to the complex dynamics of the political

⁴⁵ *JTS*, 166.4333-34. *Xin Tang shu* offers a shorter but largely similar narrative of the Changqing conflicts, see *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (Beijing: zhonghua shuju, 1975), 174. 5228-29. *Zizhi tongjian* adopts this negative attitude and combines other sources that further strengthen the criticism. It retains the account that Yuan was recommended by Cui Tancui and adds a story about Wu Ruheng's 武儒衡 (ca. 769–824) public insult of Yuan, originally found in Wu's biography in *JTS*, see *ZZTJ*, 241.7779–80; *JTS*, 158.4162–63. *Tongjian* also briefly records the conflict between Yuan and Pei and blames Yuan, portraying him as allying with the eunuchs and deliberately impeding Pei's military actions for self-interest, *ZZTJ*, 242.7801-02, 7810, 7817-18. For a general discussion of Song scholars' moral evaluations of Yuan, see Zhou Xianglu, *Lishi de daoying: Yuan Zhen chuanbo jieshou shi* 歷史的倒影：元稹傳播接受史 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2019), 28-44.

⁴⁶ See Fu Xuancong, *Li Deyu nianpu*, 102. For a detailed argument against the *JTS* discourse, see Zhou Xianglu, *Lishi de daoying*, 1-25. However, Zhou Xianglu argues that Yuan Zhen was slandered by the Niu faction, which I find unconvincing and largely influenced by previous studies on factionalism.

⁴⁷ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 423-25, 441-43. These articles will be briefly discussed in the next section.

⁴⁸ Zhou Xianglu, *Yuan Zhen nianpu xinbian*, 219-22. For a general overview of this incident, see *The Cambridge History of China*, vol.3: *Sui and T'ang China: 589-906*, 644-45. *Tongjian kaoyi* appears skeptical about attributing it to Li Fengji. See *ZZTJ*, 242. 7817-18.

climate in Changqing and the negative judgments of Yuan Zhen's actions, some scholars think that their relationship was affected and Bai Juyi intentionally distanced himself from Yuan.⁴⁹ However, this conclusion may be somewhat arbitrary given the existing evidence, and a close connection between Bai and Yuan is still discernible.

Firstly, Bai's career path in the capital seemed to be connected with Yuan's. As mentioned before, Yuan Zhen's aid may have contributed to Bai's recall. In July 822, following Yuan's downfall, Bai was appointed as the Prefect of Hangzhou (*Hangzhou cishi* 杭州刺史). There has been controversy over whether he requested this assignment or was instead a demotion,⁵⁰ though in any case it was likely related to Yuan's shift in position.⁵¹ Secondly, Bai kept interacting with Yuan, writing poems that praised Yuan and expressed his affection. In Bai's poem "Waiting to Enter the Court at Dawn, I Write this Poem to Send to Academician and Cabinet Elder Yuan Ninth with Respect" 待漏入閣書事奉贈元九學士閣老, he lauded Yuan's political success and referred to him as both an "Academician" and a "cabinet elder [at Secretariat (*zhongshu sheng* 中書省) and Chancellery (*menxia sheng* 門下省)]," pointing to Yuan's recent appointments as the Hanlin Academician and Secretariat

⁴⁹ Jian Changchun 蹇長春, *Bai Juyi pingzhuan* 白居易評傳 (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2002), 192. Jian Changchun argues that Bai did not agree with Yuan's deeds so he only had a few poetic exchanges with Yuan, but had more with others. However, the decreased amount of poetic exchange might have been influenced by the tense political climate with Yuan Zhen at the center. Also, most of their exchanged poems were composed during times of separation.

⁵⁰ See Hiromichi Yoshimura 芳村弘道, *Tangdai de shiren yanjiu* 唐代的詩人研究, tr. Qin Lan 秦嵐 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), 236-42.

⁵¹ Yuan and Pei's adversary Li Fengji became the Grand Councilor and obstructed Yuan Zhen's friends at Hanlin Academy, Li Deyu and Li Shen. Reasonably, he could also hinder Yuan's close friend, Bai Juyi, who also spoke highly of Pei Du. See Hiromichi Yoshimura, *Tangdai de shiren yanjiu*, 241-42. Ma Minghao also points out that Bai's career from 820 to 822 was influenced by Yuan, see Ma Minghao 馬銘浩, *Tangdai shehui yu Yuan-Bai wenxue jituan guanxi zhi yanjiu* 唐代社會與元白文學集團關係之研究 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1991), 54.

Drafter.⁵² During the Cold Food Festival, Bai was on night duty in the Secretariat and wrote a poem when he missed Yuan Zhen.⁵³ The final couplet, “Having not spent a night with you throughout the spring, how is it any different from my time back in Zhongzhou” 經春不同宿，何異在忠州 captures the closeness of their relationship. Lu Yang points out that they expressed their excitement about collaborating as the main edict composers (*cichen* 詞臣) in both the inner and outer court, which might be written for broader audiences at court.⁵⁴ Even if they did not deliberately circulate their writings, poems composed during this period were more likely to be read by fellow bureaucrats due to their presence in Chang’an.⁵⁵ If the decline in Yuan Zhen’s reputation was real, Bai’s poetic interaction with him could indicate his supportive attitude. It is worth mentioning that in 822, a year lacking exchange poems possibly due to the political situation,⁵⁶ Bai nevertheless composed a memorial expressing gratitude (*xieguan biao* 謝官表) on Yuan’s behalf when Yuan was appointed the Grand

⁵² Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1513-15. [Officials from] the Secretariat and Chancellery addressed each other as “cabinet elder.” 兩省相呼為“閣老” See in Nie Qingfeng 聶清風, *Tang guoshi bu jiaozhu* 唐國史補校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021), 221.

⁵³ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1508.

⁵⁴ Lu Yang, “Gudu de Bai Juyi,” 116.

⁵⁵ After Bai gained a higher prestige title and was able to wear red later this year, he wrote another poem to Yuan Zhen. See Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1526. They also buried Li Jian together in May and composed the tomb epitaph and spirit path stele inscription (*shendao bei* 神道碑) for him.

⁵⁶ According to their extant collections, no exchanged poems can be definitively dated to this year, but possibly some works might have been excluded or lost. However, two poems written by Yuan Zhen and sent to Bai Juyi can be dated to 822, after Yuan’s demotion. See Yang Jun 楊軍, *Yuan Zhen ji biannian jianzhu (shige juan)* 元稹集編年箋注(詩歌卷) (Xi’an: San qin chubanshe, 2002), 861. While Zhou Xianglu dates them to 823, see Zhou Xianglu, *Yuan Zhen ji jiaozhu* 元稹集校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011), 643-44. There is no extant response from Bai. For a discussion of these two poems and their potential involvement in future exchanges, see Zhong Xiaofeng 鐘曉峰, “Shiyi de duihua yu yingxiang: Yuanhe shiren jiaowangshi yanjiu” 詩藝的對話與影響：元和詩人交往詩研究, PhD diss., (National Dong Hwa University, 2010), 86-89.

Councilor.⁵⁷ He wrote of how Yuan, “not being promoted by others” (*bu you ren jin* 不由人進), had been “consulted for confidential strategies [by the Emperor]” (*fang yi mimou* 訪以密謀) and had “received so much favor that it led to slanderous allegations” 恩獎過深，讒謗並至. The language is similar to that of Yuan’s later self-defense. The two joined in advocating for a change in the writing style for edicts, a proposal initiated by Yuan Zhen and seconded by Bai Juyi.⁵⁸ They also shared the same view regarding the December 821 demotion of their friend Li Jingjian, whom they attempted to help.⁵⁹

It cannot be definitively stated that they belonged to the same faction, since Bai did not actively participate in the conflicts involving Yuan, and it remains debatable whether a factional framework would be useful. Still, it appears that they were generally on the same side or perceived to be on the same side.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Bai’s emotional support proved insufficient to improve Yuan’s situation, and he may also have found himself in a dilemma

⁵⁷ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 1347-50. Notably, Bai himself added the annotation, “Writing for Weizhi” 為微之作. Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123-1202) criticized Bai and considered him to be whitewashing Yuan’s wrong deeds. See 1349-50.

⁵⁸ Lu Yang, “Gudu de Bai Juyi,” 116. There has been debate about the exact characteristics of the new style and the works that belong to this category, particularly Bai Juyi’s edicts. Nevertheless, Bai certainly supported Yuan’s efforts.

⁵⁹ In December, 821, Li Jingjian reproved the grand councilors when drunk and was therefore demoted with his fellow drinkers in the Historiography Institute (*shiguan* 史館). Li Jingjian was recommended by Yuan Zhen and Li Shen in 820, and when the case occurred Yuan had already left the Hanlin Academy and could not help. When the order to demote Dugu Lang 獨孤朗 (775–825) and the other three who drank with Li Jingjian was issued, Bai submitted a memorial to dispute and returned the order, carrying out his right as Secretariat Drafter. But Bai’s risky move did not succeed. In 822, when Yuan became the Grand Councilor, he called back Li Jingjian and Dugu Lang; the other three remained as local Prefects but were given higher-prestige titles. The proclamation of rewarding titles was also written by Bai Juyi, expressing his compassionate attitude. See Zhang Dazhi 張達志, “Cong shiguan dao Zhongshu: Zhongtang Li Jingjian an de zhengzhi kongjian” 從史館到中書——中唐李景儉案的政治空間, *Weijin Nanbeichao Suitang shi ziliao* 32 (2015), 123-29.

⁶⁰ Zhu Jincheng seems to indicate that Bai was standing alongside Yuan Zhen, while Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) was closer to Pei Du, so Bai inexplicitly ridiculed Han Yu. Bai’s appointment to Hangzhou was also related to Yuan Zhen’s demotion. See Zhu Jincheng 朱金城, *Bai Juyi nianpu* 白居易年譜 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), 133.

when Yuan clashed with their previous friends as well as Pei Du, whom Bai held in high regard. Their relationship continued to be close; however, the disturbing events of this period and the negative opinions surrounding Yuan's career could have influenced how they later reflected and wrote about these experiences.

As discussed above, during this short but complex period when they were both present at court, Yuan and Bai did share certain experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Yet, because of the different circumstances they encountered (or different kinds of embarrassment they faced), there were things that could not be shared, or perhaps not agreed upon. The next section will examine a few exchanged poems written afterward, which mention and likely reframe their Changqing experiences, and explore how they each tell these stories from their own perspective before finally combining them into a shared narrative through poetic communication. Although shared experiences can generate overlapping memories, they do not automatically produce a shared narrative. A narrative—how a story is told, where it begins and ends, and what it highlights or passes over—has to be worked out. For Yuan and Bai, this intriguing process seems to suggest negotiation, compromise, and intentional silence.

3. Remembering Changqing in Exchanged Poems

The political tensions at the court persisted with the departure of Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi from Chang'an and eventually became the "Niu-Li factional strife" familiar to modern readers. While both Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen were distant or forced to be distant from central power during this period, they continued to engage in frequent literary correspondence.

In June, 822, Yuan Zhen was demoted to be the Prefect of Tongzhou (*Tongzhou cishi* 同州刺史) and was transferred to Yuezhou as the Prefect and the Surveillance Commissioner of Zhedong (*Zhedong guanchashi* 浙東觀察使) in 823. During the period from 823 to 824, when Bai was governing Hangzhou and Yuan in Yuezhou, their poetic exchange reached a peak.⁶¹ Much of their poetry appears to have been lost, but based on two prefaces written in 828, we get a sense of the large number of poems they exchanged with one another.⁶² Also in 823 and 824, their collections were compiled, both were named *Changqing ji* 長慶集, and Yuan wrote the preface for Bai's.

Apart from their poems, Yuan directly brought up his political experiences in two prose pieces also written during this time. One is the “Memorial Expressing the Gratitude of the Prefect of Tongzhou to His Majesty” (*Tongzhou cishi xieshangbiao* 同州刺史謝上表) in 822, a customary practice of expressing gratitude for an appointment.⁶³ The other is the “Presented Self-Narration” (*Xuzou* 敘奏) in 823, likely written as he began compiling his works.⁶⁴ These pieces, along with the *xieguan biao* written by Bai, present Yuan's encounters in a similar way: the Changqing court was hazardous and irrational, while Yuan Zhen,

⁶¹ As Li Shen later recounted, “Weizhi and Letian were only separated by a river at this time, responding to and matching each other's poems almost every day,” 微之與樂天此時只隔江津，日有酬和相答 in Lu Yanping 盧燕平, *Li Shen ji jiaozhu* 李紳集校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 161.

⁶² See “Preface to Twenty-three Poems Matching Weizhi's” 和微之詩二十三首·序 in Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1721-22. See also “The Second Preface to *Yinji ji*” 因繼集重續 in Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 1891.

⁶³ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 441-43.

⁶⁴ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 423-25. According to *JTS*, Yuan Zhen wrote this article when he edited his previous drafts at the end of the Changqing reign. Zhou Xianglu dates it to 823, the same year as Yuan's first poem which will be discussed below. See Zhou Xianglu, *Yuan Zhen ji jiaozhu*, 887. Yang Jun dates it to 824, which might also be possible. Yang Jun, *Yuan Zhen ji biannian jianzhu (sanwen juan)* 元稹集編年箋注(散文卷) (Xi'an: San qin chubanshe, 2008), 911.

presented as an upright and loyal official, was slandered after gaining Emperor Muzong's special favor. As a self-defensive effort to clear Yuan's name, the depiction of the Changqing years in these works, though from an opposite standpoint, somewhat aligns with the accounts in the *Jiu Tang shu* and confirms the attacks on Yuan and his reputation. However, in a set of exchanged poems, a different representation of the past Changqing years gradually emerged.

In 823, Yuan Zhen reviewed his earlier poems and political memorials. He then composed a poem and sent it to Bai Juyi. Bai initially responded with a matching poem but followed up with another, indicating that he had further thoughts. Yuan then responded to this response. Below are the first two poems.

During a lull in work in the prefectural office, I had the opportunity to put in order and revise my earlier poetry; the sealed memorials tightly packed the cases and there were just over one hundred scrolls. At this I was inspired to compose a lament for myself and to send it to Letian (Bai Juyi).⁶⁵

郡務稍簡因得整比舊詩並連綴焚削封章繁委篋笥僅逾百軸偶成自歎因寄樂天

Yuan Zhen

近來章奏小年詩，	My recent memorials and my youthful poems—
一種成空盡可悲。	One and all amounting to nothing, they are entirely lamentable.
書得眼昏朱似碧，	My sight grows so bleary with writing that I can't tell red from blue;
用來心破髮如絲。	My heart has cracked with the effort and my hair is white as silk.
催身易老緣多事，	What has hastened my premature aging is the proliferation of business;
報主深恩在幾時？	When will I at last have requited our monarch's great bounty?
天遣兩家無嗣子，	Now that Heaven has sent us down as two families with no successors,
欲將文集與它誰？	To whom are we to entrust our literary collections?

Responding to Weizhi (Yuan Zhen)⁶⁶

酬微之

Weizhi's title says: "During a lull in work in the prefectural office, I had the opportunity to put in order and revise my earlier poetry. The sealed memorials and drafts of remonstrance

⁶⁵ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 284.

⁶⁶ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1800.

tightly packed the cases and were just over one hundred scrolls. At this I was inspired to compose a lament for myself and sent it to Letian.”

微之題云：“郡務稍簡，因得整集舊詩，并連綴刪削。封章諫草，繁委箱笥，僅踰百軸。偶成自歎，兼寄樂天。”

Bai Juyi

滿裘填箱唱和詩，
少年爲戲老成悲。
聲聲麗曲敲寒玉，

句句妍辭綴色絲。

吟玩獨當明月夜，
傷嗟同是白頭時。
由來才命相磨折，
天遣無兒欲怨誰？

The poems we've traded fill scrolls and cases—

What in our youth was a game in old age makes for gloom.

In every sound they were pieces as pretty as the tinkling of chilly jades;

In every line they were lyrics as lovely as if they were decorated in colored silk.

I chant and enjoy them alone on the moonlit night,

Lamenting that we've come to white-haired old age.

It's always been true that talent and fate grind away at each other—

Who do we have to blame for Heaven's not having sent us sons?

Weizhi's line says: "Now that Heaven has sent us down as two families with no successors, To whom are we to entrust our literary collections?" That is why I bring up the matter here.

微之句云：“天遣兩家無嗣子，欲將文字付誰人？”故以此舉之。

The first poem by Yuan covered several issues with a sentimental undertone that was evoked in his review of his previous poems and memorials. The realization that his efforts had been unrewarded, combined with his physical decline, gave rise to two anxieties: that he might never fulfill his political aspirations and that he would leave no male heir to inherit the literary legacy. It is noteworthy that Yuan's poem likely carried a political meaning, since he directly asked when he could repay the emperor, and the “recent memorials” he looked at were probably composed during his time in the Changqing court. However, interestingly, Bai Juyi, who was aware of the circumstances in which Yuan wrote the poem since he copied Yuan's explanatory title in his annotation, responds only to the literary dimension. His poem centers on their poetic exchanges and attempts to alleviate the misfortune of lacking heirs in the last couplet. Bai's responding poem is not inadequate, but it definitely leaves certain topics, namely the “recent memorials” in Yuan's original poem, unaddressed. Maybe he

found it intractable to deal with the implications of Yuan's Changqing experiences or just chose to focus on one topic. Nevertheless, Bai Juyi did not stop there, probably because he noticed the problem, and proceeded to compose another poem.

Six Rhymes Reflecting Further Thought and Again Sent to Weizhi⁶⁷

餘思未盡加爲六韻重寄微之

Bai Juyi

海內聲華併在身，
篋中文字絕無倫。

美微之也。

遙知獨對封章草，
忽憶同爲獻納臣。
走筆往來盈卷軸，
予與微之前後寄和
詩數百篇，近代無
如此多有也。

除官遞互掌絲綸。
予除中書舍人，微
之撰制。微之除翰
林學士，予撰制詞。
制從長慶辭高古，
微之長慶初知制誥，
文格高古，始變俗
體，繼者效之也。

詩到元和體變新。
衆稱元、白爲千字
律詩，或號元和格。
各有文姬才稚齒，
蔡邕無兒，有女琰，
字文姬。
俱無通子繼餘塵。
陶潛小男名通子。
琴書何必求王粲，

Nationwide fame and honor are yours;

Your poems and prose, collected in cases, remain unmatched.

*Praising Weizhi.*⁶⁸

From far away, I know you are facing memorials and drafts alone;
And I suddenly recall the time when we both served in court.

The verses we traded filled volumes and scrolls,

Weizhi and I have exchanged hundreds of poems, a number unmatched in recent times.

Upon our appointments, we composed proclamations for each other.

When I was appointed Secretariat Drafter, Weizhi wrote the edict, and when Weizhi was appointed Hanlin Academician, I wrote the edict.

Ever since Changqing, the wording of edicts has become elegant and classical;

Weizhi was a Participant in the Drafting of Proclamations at the beginning of the Changqing era. His elegant classical writing style changed the popular style and was followed by successors.

When it came to the Yuanhe era, the poetic style was refreshed.

People say that Yuan and Bai composed one-thousand-word metrical poems, sometimes called "Yuanhe style."

Each of us has a daughter like Wenji, though still in her childhood;

Cai Yong had no son but a daughter named Yan, whose style name was Wenji.

Yet neither has a son like Tongzi to be our heir.

Tao Qian's underage son was named Tongzi.

Why should we seek a Wang Can to preserve the lyre and books,⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1801.

⁶⁸ The parts in italics are the self-annotations added by the authors; for Chinese text, I use blue.

⁶⁹ Cai Yong had nearly ten thousand volumes of books; in his old age, he sent several cartloads of them to [Wang] Can. 蔡邕有書近萬卷，末年載數車與粲 *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 28. 796.

與女猶勝與外人。 When it is better to pass them down to daughters than to outsiders?

The title of this poem elucidates the motivation for its creation, that is, to say what has not been expressed. The first couplet compliments Yuan's fame and literary achievements. Bai Juyi then turns to what he omitted in the last poem. He admits that he knows what aroused Yuan's sentiment was not only the exchanged poems but also those memorials and documents composed when Yuan was responsible for drafting edicts. He directly brings up the past Changqing years as he recalls the time when they both served in court. The subsequent two couplets merge their literary compositions and personal relationship. Each couplet combines an old story with a new memory created in 821 and 822, incorporating the Changqing experiences into the discourse of their enduring bond and poetic exchange that began in the Yuanhe era. The third couplet juxtaposes the best representation of their relationship, the poetic exchange that lasted for years, with the composing of appointment proclamations for one another, suggesting that the latter was the continuation of the former. According to Bai's note, these proclamations referred to his appointment as Secretariat Drafter and Yuan's as Hanlin Academician.⁷⁰ In fact, as officials who were responsible for composing edicts, they might write for anyone, even adversaries. The deliberate juxtaposition of the two edicts likely implied the close connection of their composers, namely Bai and Yuan. The next couplet commences with another Changqing story, Yuan Zhen's reform of the style of edicts, which was followed by Bai Juyi.⁷¹ While not explicitly stated, it

⁷⁰ Bai's appointment proclamation seems more likely to be the one for Participants in the Drafting of Proclamations, in Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 565. It was actually composed in the last year of Yuanhe, but since Muzong had already succeeded, I would generally use "Changqing" to refer to years 820, 821, and 822 when they were both in Chang'an.

⁷¹ Lu Yang, "Gudu de Bai Juyi," 116.

was another shared accomplishment, just like the “Yuanhe style” established by their earlier poems.⁷² The last two couplets address the problem of having no son, suggesting that daughters are capable of preserving the cultural heritage of the family.

However, intriguingly, Bai Juyi evades a clear response to Yuan Zhen’s inquiry “When will I at last have requited our monarch’s great bounty?” He also remains silent about several things that occurred during those years, including the political controversy around Yuan’s advancement, which was probably the main reason for his frustration.

Given the historical context and the accounts in *Jiu Tang shu* and their other writings, it is evident that Bai deliberately selected which elements to include. He specifically focused on indisputable aspects such as Yuan’s edict reform and their shared reputation for literary exchange. Yuan’s appointment as Grand Councilor is not mentioned, and he appears instead as a successful and significant edict composer who enjoyed nationwide fame and was celebrated for his literary accomplishments. The Changqing years are no longer a period of disputes and plots, but a precious time for them to reunite and interact—a chance to continue the “Yuan-Bai” literary exchange and shared fame. Perhaps Bai sought to console Yuan while also suggesting that he had achieved enough and did not need to strive further,⁷³ but Yuan still had greater aspirations. Maybe it was a deliberate strategy to restore Yuan’s fame, or an

⁷² Though Bai’s self-annotation indicates that some of their poems were called “Yuanhe ge” 元和格, the concept of “Yuanhe ti” 元和體, a similar term regarding poetry in the Yuanhe era, is complex and ambiguous. See Anna M. Shields, “Gossip, Anecdote, and Literary History; Representations of the Yuanhe Era in Tang Anecdote Collections,” Jack W. Chen and David Schaberg eds., *Idle Talk: Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 111-12.

⁷³ Possibly, Bai would prefer Yuan to retire or acquire a sinecure with him. When their career just started, Bai had an agreement with Yuan that they would retire together in the future, which was called the “Green Mountain pact” 青山約 and often mentioned in their later works, which will be discussed in the Epilogue. I referred to the translation by Bret Hinsch who briefly mentions it in Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 81.

effort to address Bai's own unpleasant recollections. Nevertheless, in just a few lines, Bai reconstructs their political experiences at the Changqing court as a personal narrative—an alternative version that stands alongside, rather than replaces, the accounts preserved in *Jiu Tang shu* and other sources. In what follows, the term “Changqing narrative” is used not for a single continuous account, but for the narrative that gradually emerges when these exchanges are read together, as they selectively recount, reframe, and re-evaluate the Changqing years from Yuan and Bai's joint perspective. This narrative, though not immediately taken up by Yuan, would eventually be echoed in his own writing.

Responding to Letian's “Six Rhymes Reflecting Further Thought” Poem⁷⁴

酬樂天餘思不盡加爲六韻之作

Yuan Zhen

<p>律呂同聲我爾身， 文章君是一伶倫。 衆推賈誼爲才子， 帝喜相如作侍臣。 樂天先有《秦中吟》 及《百節判》，皆爲 書肆市賈題其卷云： “白才子文章。”又 樂天知制誥詞云： “覽其詞賦，喜與相 如並處一時。” 次韻千言曾報答， 樂天曾寄予千字律詩 數首，予皆次用本韻 酬和。後來遂以成風 耳。 直詞三道共經綸。</p> <p>樂天與予同應制科， 並求前輩切直詞策， 以盡經邦之術。其事 已具之字詩注中爾。</p>	<p>Like pitches and tones sharing their sounds in music are you and I; In literary composition you are the unique Ling Lun of our time. People recognize you in the brilliance of Jia Yi; The emperor rejoices in having you serve like Sima Xiangru. <i>Letian had “Chanting in the Qin Region” and “One Hundred Verdicts,”</i> <i>which in the booksellers’ stalls were marked as “prose and poetry written by</i> <i>Bai the talented.” Also, the edict appointing Letian as the Participant in the</i> <i>Drafting of Proclamations says: “Reading his literary writings makes me</i> <i>glad that I can be a contemporary with someone like Sima Xiangru.”</i></p> <p>I once repaid you with a thousand words in matching rhymes; <i>Letian once sent me several metrical poems of one thousand words, and I</i> <i>matched all of them using the same rhyme in the same order. Later on, it</i> <i>became popular.</i></p> <p>Together we prepared to address the three inquiries with candor, sharing our vision for governance.</p> <p><i>Letian and I took the special examination together and sought out previous</i> <i>examinees’ blunt answers to understand all strategies of governance. The</i> <i>story is already recorded in the annotation of that poem.</i></p>
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⁷⁴ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 284.

元詩駁雜真難辨，
後輩好偽作予詩，傳
流諸處。自到會稽已
有人寫《宮詞》百
篇，及《雜詩》兩
卷，皆云是予所撰，
及手勘驗，無一篇是
者。

Yuan's poems were mingled with forgeries and difficult to distinguish;
Younger generations like to create counterfeits of my poems, which have
circulated everywhere. Since I arrived in Kuaiji, someone has copied one
hundred "Palace Poems" and two volumes of "Miscellaneous Poems,"
claiming that all were composed by me. When I inspected them myself, it
turned out that none was real.

白樸流傳用轉新。
樂天於翰林中書，取
書詔批答詞等，撰為
程式，禁中號曰白
樸。每有新入學士求
訪，寶重過於六典
也。

Bai's format spread far and evolved with time.
When Letian was serving in Hanlin Academy and Secretariat, he compiled
edicts, replies, and other documents into specifications, referred to by the
inner court as "Bai's format." It was always sought out by newly arrived
Academicians and was valued more even than the "Six Codes."

蔡女圖書雖在口，
蔡琰口誦家書四百餘
篇。

Though Cai Yong's daughter could recite books from memory,
Cai Yan could recite more than four hundred pieces of family-preserved
books.

于公門戶豈生塵？
樂天常贈予詩云：“
其心如肺石，動必達
窮民。東川八十家，
冤憤一言申。”因感
無兒之歎，故予自有
此句。

How could an official like Yu Gong have no legacy?⁷⁵
Letian has sent me a poem that said: "His heart is like the stone that people
strike to voice grievance; every action will definitely reach and help the
powerless ones. There are eighty families in Dongchuan, whose grievances
and indignation were resolved when once they were put into words." Being
moved by the plaint of not having a son, I naturally wrote this sentence.

商瞿未老猶希冀，
莫把贏金便付人。

We are not too old and still have hope,
Do not just entrust the treasure to someone else.

Yuan starts by reaffirming their close relationship and mutual understanding then lauds

Bai's literary talents and accomplishments. In the second couplet, where in his own poem Bai

begins to reminisce, Yuan instead emphasizes Bai's fame, which was acknowledged by both

⁷⁵ "His (Yu Dingguo's) father Yu Gong was a Prison Clerk of the District, then worked in the Judicial Section of the Commandery. Every lawsuit he judged was fair, and even people punished by the law held no grudge against his judgment. ...Earlier, Yu Dingguo's father Yu Gong's alley gate had collapsed, and elders in the neighborhood were rebuilding it together. Yu Gong said: 'Let's make the alley gate a little taller and larger so that it can accommodate tall-canopy carriages pulled by four horses. The lawsuit I judged should accumulate a lot of merit for my posterity since no one has been wronged. There must be someone successful among my descendants.' When Dingguo became the Councilor-in-chief, and Yong (Yu Dingguo's son) became Censor-in-chief, they were given hereditary enfeoffment." 其父于公為縣獄史，郡決曹，決獄平，羅文法者于公所決皆不恨。.....始定國父于公，其間門壞，父老方共治之。于公謂曰：“少高大閭門，令容駟馬高蓋車。我治獄多陰德，未嘗有所冤，子孫必有興者。”至定國為丞相，永為御史大夫，封侯傳世云。Han shu, 71.3041, 3046.

the public and the emperor. In the first half of the third couplet, he mentions their poetic exchanges as well but primarily focuses on his long same-rhyme matching poems. In contrast to Bai, who brings up selected memories of Changqing, Yuan directs his attention to a much earlier period: the preparation for the *zhiju* exam at the start of the Yuanhe era. During this time, they resided in the Huayang temple 華陽觀, engaged in political discussions, and collaboratively composed *Celin* 策林. Matching Bai, Yuan also talks about their literary compositions in the fourth couplet, contrasting his poetry with Bai's document writing. The next two couplets of the poem strike a more optimistic tone on the prospect of successors, indicating that the possibility of having sons remains.

Moreover, Yuan's poem appears to include inexplicit political connotations. The slight self-deprecation in his suggestion that inferior forgeries were circulating under his name might imply dissatisfaction with his present achievements and reputation. Yu Gong's story suggests that if an official is just, he will surely have successful posterity. Yuan, therefore, indicates that as an upright official, he is likely to have male offspring in the future. But how can he tell if he has accumulated enough merit, as Yu Gong did? In the self-annotation, Yuan mentions the poem Bai had sent him before, praising the integrity with which he helped people resolve their grievances. However, given that the annotations were likely added later for a potentially broader audience,⁷⁶ we must wonder whether Bai understood the allusion when he first read it without explanation. Both possibilities are intriguing: If he could not, Yuan's line might serve as a hidden expression of his determination that he would strive to be

⁷⁶ Yu Zhiyue 俞芝悅, "Lun Zhong Tang shiren zizhu qishi tixian de duzhe yishi: yi Bai Juyi, Yuan Zhen deng shiren wei zhongxin" 論中唐詩人自注其詩體現的讀者意識——以白居易、元稹等詩人為中心, *Wenyi lilun yanjiu* 2016.1: 149-50. Though Bai probably did not need explanations to understand what Yuan referred to, in this case, the poem Yuan mentioned in the annotation had no direct connection to the "Yu Gong" story.

like Yu Gong. If he could, the poem written in 810,⁷⁷ along with the recollection of the *zhiju* exam, forms a reminiscence, reminding Bai of the time when they shared governing ideas and political aspirations and when Bai fully supported Yuan's official career. Thus, the impression of a euphemistic disagreement emerges. Yuan appreciated Bai's comforting words but remained unconvinced, proceeding to pursue greater political success, just as they had envisioned in their younger days.

In short, Yuan returns Bai's praise and continues to depict their bond. However, he does not directly respond to Bai's Changqing narrative, instead turning to earlier experiences before 815. Later, in 824, when Bai left Hangzhou for Luoyang, Yuan requested his literary works and personally compiled Bai's collection. While editing Bai's poems, Yuan composed a poem in which he recounted two stories: one from 815, the tenth year of Yuanhe, and the other from 821.

Editing the poetry collection for Letian, I think of one year when we were riding back from the southern city, drunk. On horseback, we took turns singing risqué verses,⁷⁸ continuing for several miles without interruption. At the beginning of the Changqing era, we both stayed in the Palace of Abstinence in the southern suburb as Participants in the Drafting of Proclamations. At night, we happened to be trading verses and chanted dozens of poems. The senior officials at the Secretariat and Chancellery and the Hanlin Academicians, more than thirty people in total, were all surprised and got up to listen. Even the minor officials were watching in crowds. Nobody went back to sleep until the next morning, Letian and I chanted without intermission as well. Therefore, I wrote down these stories at the end of Letian's collection. It was a cold winter night in Yuezhou, yet I remained unaware of the wind and rain. As dawn approached, the gates began to be unlocked. At this moment, I composed this poem.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ The poem in Yuan's annotation. Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 55-56.

⁷⁸ Anna Shields translates *yanshi* 艷詩 as "poetry of seductive allure." See "Defining Experience: The 'Poems of Seductive Allure' (Yanshi) of the Mid-Tang Poet Yuan Zhen (779-831)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122.1(2002): 61. I do not refer to this translation for the fluency of the citation.

⁷⁹ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 290.

爲樂天自勘詩集，因思頃年城南醉歸，馬上遞唱豔曲，十餘里不絕。長慶初，俱以制誥侍宿南郊齋宮，夜後偶吟數十篇。兩掖諸公泊翰林學士三十餘人驚起就聽，逮至卒吏，莫不衆觀。羣公直至侍從行禮之時，不復聚寐，予與樂天吟哦竟亦不絕。因書於樂天卷後。越中冬夜，風雨不覺。將曉，諸門互啓關鎖，即事成篇。

The first story was also mentioned in Bai Juyi's "Letter to Yuan Ninth" 與元九書. It took place when Yuan Zhen had returned to Chang'an after his five-year demotion in Jiangling, only to be promptly banished to Tongzhou once again. The date of the second episode can be verified in *Jiu Tang shu*: "On January the first of the first year of Changqing, the emperor offered the sacrifice in person at the Taiqing Palace and Imperial Ancestral Temple. The emperor's carriage set off for the southern suburb on that day"⁸⁰ 長慶元年正月己亥朔，上親薦獻太清宮、太廟。是日，法駕赴南郊. Yuan proudly recorded the significant interest their verse-trading aroused among high-ranking officials. The demonstration of their closeness and literary talent within the political sphere parallels the composing of each other's appointment edicts. Controversial voices surrounding Yuan's career are silenced, and other officials appear not as slanderers or enemies but as mere admirers of literary works. The juxtaposition of the two stories echoes Bai's "Further Thought" poem, particularly in how the poem integrates their experiences at the Changqing court into the earlier discourse of their relationship. Yuan further expands this discourse by concluding with the specific circumstance of spending an entire night immersed in Bai's poems in the year 824. Finally, Yuan Zhen joined Bai Juyi in crafting their own representation of the Changqing encounters. Drawing on their shared experiences, Bai and Yuan deliberately chose which aspects to highlight and which moments to stage. The political

⁸⁰ *JTS*, 16.484

disputes that undoubtedly occurred were disregarded, with more light shed on poetic interactions, literary reputation, and the bond between the two. By adding this anecdote of that dramatic night, Yuan enhances the overall appeal of the retelling of their past.

As part of their lifelong cultivation of a legendary poetic partnership, these poems would naturally focus on the literary dimension and shared experiences, making the omission of certain political occurrences understandable. Notably, Bai's "Further Thought" poem and Yuan's matching poem contain an unusually high number of self-annotations,⁸¹ given that they consist of only six rhymes. By contrast, some of their other poems, if designed for obscure themes, lack such annotations. Probably added in 823 and 824 when both Changqing ji were finalized, annotations in these poems specifically reveal that their poetic language was not merely literary expression but was based on real stories that happened between the two. The practice of adding self-annotations demonstrates the authors' consciousness of potential readership other than direct recipients who did not need explanations to understand. By informing their readers of background stories for almost every line, Bai and Yuan sought to ensure their poems could be "correctly" understood within the contexts they provided, reflecting efforts to control the interpretation of these poems. The envisioned audience likely extended beyond an immediate social circle and even the elite spheres, as suggested by the notes about well-known allusions like "Wenji," also encompassing posterity given Bai's and Yuan's concern for the preservation and circulation of their works after death.

⁸¹ On self-annotations in Bai and Yuan's works, see Zha Zhengxian 查正賢, "Lun zizhu suoshi Bai Juyi shige chuanguo de ruogan tezheng yu yiyi" 論自注所示白居易詩歌創作的若干特征與意義, *Wenxue yichan* 2015.2: 85-93. Also Yu Zhiyue, "Lun Zhong Tang shiren zizhu qi shi ti xian de du zhe yi sh," 148-56.

The Changqing narrative they constructed was eventually realized through the incorporation of self-annotations, which served not only as contextual notes but also as instruments for guiding how the poems would be read, highlighting the political and literary accomplishments they wished to emphasize. Although both were aware of the accusations surrounding Yuan's career, which were later reflected in *Jiu Tang shu*, it remains uncertain whether they intended to counter such accounts directly. Nevertheless, these exchanged poems, written in awareness of contemporary and future readers, reveal a shared concern for shaping public and posthumous perceptions. Through such concern, they ultimately crafted an alternative perspective on Yuan Zhen's reputation and their experiences during the Changqing period, one centered on private understanding rather than public controversy.

This Changqing narrative ultimately favored good reputation over bad, affection over conflict, and writing over political action. More importantly, it privileged the stories shared between the two of them over a collective account, in other words, exclusiveness over collectiveness. Such selectivity was reasonable, reflecting both the actual circumstances of their lives and the distinct focus of each writer. Yet emotionally, it also may be read as the creation of a private poetic space, one where intimacy and constancy could be imagined against the instability of real life. In the face of long separation, diverging political attitudes, and the anxieties of aging and failure, this literary world may have been their true consolation: a world deliberately constructed, but one in which they could always remain together, untroubled by disagreement or loss.

At the same time, the poems reveal traces of unease. Yuan's tactful objection, together with the question he poses in the original poem but that Bai leaves unanswered in his

matching response, hint at underlying incongruities rather than perfect harmony. Their shared narrative of Changqing was achieved through communication and negotiation, which was not a complete resolution. When they were young and ambitious—or later, when both were exiled and yearned for return—their differences in temperament and ideals could be overlooked. After the events of the Changqing court, however, these contrasts could no longer be hidden. The poems discussed above thus mark their attempt to manage, not erase, that difference. In the following section, this paper turns to how their political experiences and images were represented from other perspectives—both their own and those of their contemporaries.

III. Changqing in Plural Voices

The previous chapter examined how Yuan and Bai themselves jointly reshaped their Changqing experiences through exchanged poems and self-annotations, a process initiated by Bai and eventually echoed by Yuan. This chapter turns to other perspectives on the same period. First, it looks at Bai Juyi's later self-reflections, in which he reconsiders his political past. It then examines how other contemporaries, including Li Deyu and Liu Yuxi, represented political experiences in the Changqing court, as well as political images and careers, in exchange poems with Yuan Zhen. Together, these texts show how the Changqing years and their aftermath were remembered and reassessed from perspectives that do not fully align with the Changqing narrative constructed by Yuan and Bai.

1. Bai Juyi's Reflection and Retreat

In July 822, Bai Juyi set off from Chang'an again—this time with a stronger social network, a more respectable political résumé, greater literary fame, and a far better appointment than the last time. In a poem written on his journey to his new post in Hangzhou, he briefly recalled his experiences of the previous years.⁸²

太原一男子，	(I am) just a man from Taiyuan,
自顧庸且鄙。	Looked upon myself as mediocre and vulgar.
老逢不次恩，	In old age, I unexpectedly received exceptional grace,
洗拔出泥滓。	Fifted and cleansed from the mud and mire.
既居可言地，	Once placed in a post where I could speak,
願助朝廷理。	I wished to assist the court in its governance.
伏閣三上章，	Bowing beneath the palace gate, I submitted three memorials,
戇愚不稱旨。	Yet my bluntness and folly failed to accord with the imperial will.
聖人存大體，	The sagely ruler upheld the greater principle,
優貸容不死。	Granting leniency and sparing me from death.
鳳詔停舍人，	A phoenix edict suspended my position as Secretariat Drafter,
魚書除刺史。	While the fish letter appointed me Prefect.
置懷齊寵辱，	Within my heart, I weigh honor and disgrace as one,
委順隨行止。	Yielding and following wherever fate may lead.
……	
是行頗爲愜，	This journey has been quite pleasant;
所歷良可紀。	The experiences are well worth recording.
策馬度藍溪，	Spurring my horse across the Blue Stream,
勝遊從此始。	From here begins a most delightful excursion.

Bai's *Jiu Tang shu* biography records the event succinctly: "Juyi submitted memorials multiple times to discuss this issue (the rebellion in Heshuo 河朔), but the emperor could not adopt his advice; thus, he requested a post away from Chang'an"⁸³ 居易累上疏論其事，天子不能用，乃求外任 Yet in this poem and in his tomb epitaph written by Li Shangyin 李

⁸² Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 653

⁸³ *JTS*, 116.4353.

商隱 (813–858), it is clearly implied that this was a demotion. According to Bai’s own account, it seems to have been another trouble incurred by his speech and writing.⁸⁴ The exact incident, however, remains uncertain. Bai alluded to the process several times and hinted at its severity,⁸⁵ but maintained deliberate silence, choosing vague language and offering no annotation that might clarify the situation.

Still, the coherence of the poem’s narrative does not rely on specifying the event, for the cause has already been ascribed to Bai’s own “blunt and foolish” temperament. This mode of self-reflection recurs throughout his works ever since his early days. For instance, in a poem on his self-portrait written while serving as Hanlin Academician, he adopts a surprisingly pessimistic tone.⁸⁶

蒲柳質易朽，	My nature is like catkin willow—quick to wither;
麋鹿心難馴。	My heart like elk and deer—hard to tame.
何事赤墀上，	Why was I, then, on the crimson steps,
五年爲侍臣？	Serving as a court minister for five long years？
況多剛狷性，	Moreover, with such a rigid and unbending temper,
難與世同塵。	It is hard to mingle with the dust of the world.
不惟非貴相，	Not only am I without an appearance to become the noble—
但恐生禍因。	I also fear that disaster may arise from it.
宜當早罷去，	It would be best to resign early,
收取雲泉身。	And reclaim a life among clouds and springs.

⁸⁴ During Bai’s service in the Hanlin Academy, he once incurred Emperor Xianzong’s displeasure, but escaped punishment thanks to Li Jiang’s explanation on his behalf. See *ZZTJ*, 238.7676-77. He later attributed his demotion to Jiangzhou to the resentment provoked by his poems and memorials. See “Letter to Yang Yuqing” in Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 292; “Letter to Yuan Ninth” in *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 324. For his political actions during his appointment as Hanlin Academician, see Fu Xuancong, *Tang Hanlin xueshi zhuan lun* 唐翰林學士傳論 (Shenyang: Liaohai chubanshe, 2005), 437-49.

⁸⁵ For examples, see Hiromichi Yoshimura, *Tangdai de shiren yanjiu*, 240-241.

⁸⁶ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 519

This realization—that his temperament was unsuited to official life and would likely lead, or had already led to misfortune—frames Bai’s recollection of his experiences at the Changqing court. Those years became, in his poetry, another lesson in self-knowledge, persuading him that he was unfit for political life and should abandon his ambitions for advancement. It might be read as a political gesture, yet it is understandable that one might be truly reluctant to depart for work at four in the morning.⁸⁷ Enthusiasm for political discussion and satirical poetry is also quite different from the bureaucratic reality of routine, repetitive administrative labor.

Having witnessed turmoil at court and ultimately drawn into it, Bai turned the upheavals of the Changqing years into reflection—a sign that he should withdraw before further troubles arose. Continuing his journey, he arrived in Hangzhou in October, enjoying its scenery, the autonomy of local governance, and the relative leisure that followed. Except for a brief return to Chang’an in 827 and 828,⁸⁸ he deliberately kept his distance from the political center and eventually received a sinecure in Luoyang. However, Bai’s self-positioning already hints at a certain distance from the Changqing court and from Yuan’s political aspirations, which could possibly explain some of his motives in the response to Yuan’s poems from the last chapter. The following section will explore what happens when other figures take up Changqing as a ground for expressing political concerns and hopes.

⁸⁷ For the time when Chang’an officials set out for court, see Zhao Zhen 趙貞, “Tangdai Chang’an cheng jiegu kao” 唐代長安城街鼓考, *Journal of Shanghai Normal University (Philosophy & Social Sciences Edition)* 2006.3, 97. Bai Juyi frequently remarked on his dislike of attending the early-morning court audience (*zaochao* 早朝) and his pleasure at being spared from it. For examples, see Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 714, 747, 1504, 2683.

⁸⁸ This appointment was likely due to Wei Chuhou’s 韋處厚 (773–829) and Pei Du’s assistance. See Zhu Jincheng, *Bai Juyi yanjiu* 白居易研究 (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1987), 151–52.

2. Those Who Aspired to Return

When Yuan Zhen served in the Hanlin Academy in 821, he also became very close to—and almost formed an alliance with—his fellow Academicians: Li Shen, his old friend, and Li Deyu, who later became one of the most influential politicians of the late Tang.⁸⁹ Therefore, when Li Fengji targeted Yuan Zhen, he likely intended to move against Li Shen and Li Deyu as well. After Yuan stepped down from the position of Grand Councilor in 822, Li Deyu was transferred from Vice Censor-in-chief to Prefect of Runzhou (*Runzhou cishi* 潤州刺史) and Surveillance Commissioner of Zhexi (*Zhexi guanchashi* 浙西觀察使).⁹⁰ Li Fengji also manufactured conflicts between Li Shen and Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), attempting to drive Li Shen out, but failed that time.⁹¹ He eventually succeeded, engineering Li Shen’s demotion to the Assistant of Duanzhou (*Duanzhou sima* 端州司馬) in 824, after Emperor Jingzong 敬宗 (r. 824–827) acceded.⁹²

Both Yuan Zhen and Li Deyu remained in prestigious provincial posts while turbulence at court intensified. Unwilling to let his career end there, Yuan Zhen sent a set of poems to Li Deyu, looking back on their shared past in the Hanlin Academy and forward to the future.

Four Poems Sent to Grand Master Li of Zhexi⁹³

Yuan Zhen

柳眼梅心漸欲春， Willow eyes and plum hearts stir toward spring;
白頭西望憶何人？ White-haired, westward I gaze—whom do I recall?

⁸⁹ Yuan Zhen, Li Shen, and Li Deyu were referred to as the “Three Talents” 三俊 together, see *JTS*, 173. 4497.

⁹⁰ Fu Xuancong, *Li Deyu nianpu*, 104-06, 115-118.

⁹¹ *JTS*, 173.4497-98.

⁹² *JTS*, 173.4498-99; Fu Xuancong, *Li Deyu nianpu*, 127-28.

⁹³ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 288-289. Yuan Zhen addressed Li Deyu as “Grand Master Li” 李大夫 because Li held the title of the Grand Master of Censors (*yushi dafu* 御史大夫) at the time.

金陵太守曾相伴，
共踏銀臺一路塵。

The Prefect of Jinling once rode beside me,
Together we trod the dusty path to the Silver Terrace Gate.

蕊珠深處少人知，
網索西臨太液池。
浴殿曉聞天語後，
步廊騎馬笑相隨。
網索在太液池上，
學士候對，敬於
此。

Deep within the Ruizhu Palace, few people knew of it,
Where the Net Cord hung west of the Taiye Pool.
After hearing the Imperial words at dawn in the Bathing Hall,
We rode side by side along the corridor, laughing.
*The Net Cord was hung over the Taiye Pool, where Academicians
waited to be summoned.*

禁林同直話交情，
無夜無曾不到明。
最憶西樓人靜後，
玉晨鐘磬兩三聲。

Serving night duty in the Hanlin Academy, we spoke of
companionship;
There was never a night we did not talk until dawn.
I remember best the quietness after midnight at Western Tower—
Only two or three chimes of the bell from the Jade-Morning
Temple.

玉晨觀，在紫宸殿
後面也。

The Jade-Morning Temple stands behind the Purple Palace.

由來鵬化便圖南，
浙右雖雄我未甘。
早渡西江好歸去，
莫拋舟楫滯春潭。

Since the great roc by nature always flies southward;⁹⁴
Though the post in Zhexi is grand, I remain unsatisfied.
Hope you can cross the western river early and return—
Do not discard boat and row, lingering in the pools of spring.

The exact date of these poems is controversial, but likely falls between 824 and 827.⁹⁵

The first three poems recall the days when they worked together in the Hanlin Academy during the Changqing court. Intriguingly, this Changqing memory shared between Yuan Zhen and Li Deyu, though it contains personal closeness as well, is largely framed within a

⁹⁴ This line refers to the “Carefree Wandering” (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊) chapter in *Zhuangzi* 莊子: “In the darkness of the Northern Ocean, there is a fish named K’un. The K’un is so big that no one knows how many thousands of tricents [three hundred paces] its body extends. After it metamorphoses into a bird, its name becomes P’eng. The P’eng is so huge that no one knows how many thousands of tricents its back stretches. Rousing itself to flight, its wings are like clouds suspended in the sky. When the seas stir, the P’eng prepares for its journey to the Southern Ocean, the Lake of Heaven.” 北冥有魚，其名為鯤。鯤之大，不知其幾千里也。化而為鳥，其名為鵬。鵬之背，不知其幾千里也；怒而飛，其翼若垂天之雲。是鳥也，海運則將徙于南冥。南冥者，天池也 Translation follows *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*, tr. Victor H. Mair (New York: Bantam Books, 1994).

⁹⁵ Wu Weibin 吳偉斌, *Xinbian Yuan Zhen ji* 新編元稹集 (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2015), 7928-30.

noticeable institutional context. The locations mentioned and explained in annotations provide the physical setting: within the Daming Palace, especially the Inner Palace. The ability to enter, remain in, and become intimate with this imperial space was not only part of a Hanlin Academician's duty but also a marker of proximity to the emperor—in other words, to power.

Although some Yuan–Bai exchanges also include extensive bureaucratic themes, that background usually gives way to their more foregrounded interaction. In the exchanged poems discussed in the previous chapter, titles, official duties, political encounters, and even specific historical moments are mentioned, but they function more like a blurred backdrop while the spotlight falls on the two figures in front. In the four poems to Li Deyu, by contrast, the institutional setting is not negligible: each memory is situated beside particular imperial buildings, making the setting as vivid and important as the actors.

Moreover, the last poem, closing the reminiscence, appears to voice a more direct political aspiration. “Zheyou” (Right of River Zhe) refers to Li Deyu's post in Zhexi, yet the grammatical subject Yuan uses is “I.” It is unclear whether he is speaking on Li Deyu's behalf, expressing sympathy, or speaking for both as fellow victims of the same turmoil. The last couplet is likely metaphorical: on a surface reading, Yuan hopes Li Deyu will return to court and not waste his talents on a post beneath his ambition. It may also imply that Yuan refers to himself as the “boat and oar,” wishing that once Li returned, he could facilitate Yuan's own recall rather than leaving him stranded in an unsatisfying position. Even if this risks over-reading, given their political ally Li Shen's advancement in Huichang 會昌 (841–

846) era,⁹⁶ such an intention is highly plausible. The unfortunate fact is that Yuan did not live to see Li Deyu's eventual ascendancy under Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (r. 840–846).

In 825, the first year of Baoli 寶曆 (825–827), after Emperor Muzong who had first promoted them passed away and Jingzong ascended the throne, and while Li Fengji and his allies controlled central power, Li Deyu, still in Zhexi, wrote a poem recording a dream. In the preface, he noted that in last July he “suddenly dreamed of composing a poem recalling past days in the Inner Court” 忽夢賦詩懷禁掖舊遊. Having remembered fragments upon waking but later forgetting much, he gathered what remained and wrote it down this year, sending it to one or two old colleagues.⁹⁷ Yuan Zhen was one of them and wrote a matching poem. Li Deyu's appointment as Hanlin Academician lasted two years and two months, while Yuan Zhen's lasted only eight months. Their time as colleagues overlapped from February to October 821, the first year of the Changqing reign. Muzong's appreciation and their shared experiences were evidently meaningful enough to prompt two forty-couplet poems. Because they also depict Changqing encounters, these poems may be read as an alternative Changqing narrative—this time shared and created by Yuan Zhen and Li Deyu.

Forty-Couplet Poem Recounting a Dream⁹⁸

Li Deyu

靜室便幽獨，	The quiet chambers lent themselves to solitude;
虛樓散鬱陶。	The empty tower dispelled melancholy.
學士各有一	<i>Each Academician had his own room, and in the West Court (the</i>
室，西垣有小	<i>Secretariat) there was a small tower where we often gathered for</i>
	<i>banquets and conversations.</i>

⁹⁶ *JTS*, 173. 4499-4500.

⁹⁷ Fu Xuancong and Zhou Jianguo 周建國, *Li Deyu wenji jiaojian* 李德裕文集校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), 556.

⁹⁸ Fu Xuancong and Zhou Jianguo, *Li Deyu wenji jiaojian*, 556-57.

樓，時宴語於此。

花光晨艷艷，
松韻晚騷騷。
畫壁看飛鶴，
僊圖見巨鼈。
內署垣壁，比畫松鶴。先是西壁畫海中曲龍山，憲宗曾欲臨幸，中使懼而塗焉。

倚簷陰藥樹，
落格蔓蒲桃。
此八句悉是內署中物，惟嘗遊者，依然可想也。

荷靜蓬池鱸，
冰寒郢水醪。
每學士初上賜食，皆是蓬萊池魚鱸。夏至後，賜及頒燒香酒。以酒味稍濃，每和水而飲，禁中有郢酒坊也。

荔枝來自遠，
蘆橘賜仍叨。
先朝初臨御，
南方曾獻荔枝，亦蒙頒賜。自後以道遠罷獻也。

麝氣隨蘭澤，
霜華入杏膏。
恩光惟覺重，
携挈未爲勞。
此八句述以恩賜。每有賜與，常携挈而歸。

夕閱梨園騎，

In the morning, flowers glowed brilliantly in the light;
In the evening, the pines murmured with a rustling sound.

On painted walls, one could see flying cranes;

In the paintings of immortals, giant turtles appeared.

The walls of the Hanlin Academy were adorned with paintings of pines and cranes. Formerly, on the west wall there had been a painting of the Curved Dragon Mountain in the Sea. Emperor Xianzong once wished to visit the place himself, but the eunuchs, fearing the journey, erased it.

Leaning against the eaves shaded by peony trees,

While trailing grapevines falling off the trellis.

These eight lines all depict scenes within the Hanlin Academy, which those who have once been there can still imagine vividly.

The lotus lay still, and Penglai Pool fish slices were served;

Ice chill, wine from the Ying workshop was poured

Whenever an Academician first assumed office, the food bestowed was the sliced fish from Penglai Pool. After the summer solstice, the aromatic wine was conferred. Since the smell was rather strong, we often mixed it with water before drinking. There was a Ying wine workshop in the inner court.

The bestowed lychees came from afar,

And we were also graced with loquat.

At the beginning of the previous reign, the south once presented lychees, and I too received a share by imperial bestowal; later, because the route was so long, the tribute was discontinued.

The scent of musk mingled with orchid fragrance,

And frost-like radiance blended into apricot ointments.

The weight of imperial favor felt immense,

Yet carrying home such gifts never felt burdensome.

These eight lines describe the imperial bestowals, which were often taken home after court.

At dusk, we watched the Pear Garden riders returning;

宵聞禁仗燹。 At night, we heard the imperial guards' hounds.
 每梨園獵回， Whenever the Pear Garden finished its hunts, even late at night, we
 或抵暮夜，院 could still see the riders returning at the gate of the Academy.
 門常見歸騎。
 扇回交彩翟， Fans turned, flashing colored pheasant-feathers;
 鷗起颺銀條。 Hawks rose, lifting silver cords.
 轡待袁絲攬， Reins awaited the grasp By Yuan Ang;⁹⁹
 書期蜀客操。 Letters expected to be written by the guest from Shu.¹⁰⁰
 盡規常謇謇， We always remonstrated frankly,
 退食尚忉忉。 Yet even when retired from duty, we remained worried.
 此八句述內庭 These eight lines describe the sights within the inner court.
 所覩。
 龜顧垂金鈿， The tortoise turned its head,
 鸞飛曳錦袍。 Gold ornaments dangling; the phoenix flew, trailing embroidered
 robes.
 曾蒙賜錦袍。 Once, I was granted a brocade robe. The term “trailing” takes the
 曳者，蓋取詩 meaning from “there is not trailing or not flowing for the poet.”
 人不曳不婁之
 義也。
 御溝楊柳弱， The willows along the imperial moat were tender;
 天厩驪驪豪。 The steeds from the Heavenly Stables were splendid.
 學士皆蒙借飛 All Academicians were allowed to borrow a flying-dragon horse.
 龍馬。
 屢換青春直， We often rotated the spring duty shifts,
 閑隨上苑遨。 At leisure times we wandered the Imperial Garden.
 普濟寺與芙蓉 The Puji Temple adjoined the Lotus Garden, where we often went for
 苑相連，常所 strolls and sightseeing; the Lotus Garden was also called the Southern
 遊眺，芙蓉亦 Park.
 謂之南苑也。
 煙低行殿竹， Mist hung low among bamboos near the halls;
 風拆繞牆桃。 The wind tore at peach blossoms along the walls.

⁹⁹ Yuan Ang was a man of Chu, with the style name Si. ... When Emperor Wen was coming down from Baling and wished to drive westward at full speed down a steep slope, Yuan Ang, on horseback, rode up alongside the carriage and took hold of the reins. The emperor said, “General, are you afraid?” Ang said, “I have heard that the son of a family worth a thousand in gold does not sit beneath an overhanging eave, and the son of a family worth a hundred in gold does not ride on the crossbar at the front of the carriage shaft. A sagely ruler does not place himself in danger to gamble on good fortune. Now Your Majesty is galloping in a six-horse carriage, racing down a steep mountain. If the horses are scared and the carriage crashes, even if Your Majesty makes light of your own person, what about Emperor Gaozu’s ancestral temple and the Empress Dowager?” The emperor thereupon stopped. 袁盎者，楚人也，字絲。……文帝從霸陵上，欲西馳下峻阪。袁盎騎，並車擊轡。上曰：“將軍怯邪？”盎曰：“臣聞千金之子坐不垂堂，百金之子不騎衡，聖主不乘危而徼幸。今陛下騁六驂，馳下峻山，如有馬驚車敗，陛下縱自輕，柰高廟、太后何？”上乃止 *Shiji*, 101. 2737, 2740.

¹⁰⁰ The “guest from Shu” here likely refers to Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 B.C.), the famous Western Han writer.

此八句述沐澣 日遊戲。 *These eight lines describe our entertainments on the vacation days.*

.....

Intriguingly, this poem exhibits a striking feature: there is scarcely an “I,” or a “you and I,” as the remembering subject, which prevails in the Yuan-Bai exchange. If a subject must be posited, “my fellow colleagues” 吾僚 in the fifth couplet is the most likely candidate,¹⁰¹ making Li Deyu’s Changqing reminiscence read as a collective memory, except for a self-reflection at the end. Among the sixteen couplets quoted above, nothing is overtly private: any former Academician who was once his colleague could recognize the scenes in the opening four couplets, receive the same bestowals, and witness what Li records of the inner court.¹⁰² Only the leisurely activities hint at a particular circle of friends, yet Li does not specify with whom he rotated shifts or wandered the Imperial Garden. As with the four poems discussed above, the institutional setting here is unmistakable and even overwhelming. Li’s self-annotations reinforce this impression: they add no personal histories, only notes on objective details, official custom, and public knowledge.

Even so, although Li’s poem and annotations read like shared memory or common knowledge, they were in fact inaccessible to most. As noted, few ever entered the Inner Court, let alone lingered there long enough to accumulate so many memories—facts that justify the abundance of annotations, since most contemporary and later readers would need the background explained. Politically, this can be read as a display of intimacy with the

¹⁰¹ The original couplet is: “Our lord values talented writers, and my fellow colleagues are all outstanding figures.” 我后憐詞客，吾僚並雋髦

¹⁰² More than ten people have served as Hanlin Academician in Muzong’s court, see Fu Xuancong, *Tang Hanlin xueshi zhuan lun*, 642-45.

throne and a claim to past proximity to power, yet it still leaves Li's account resembling a bureaucratic record—or even a poetic documentary—of the Changqing Hanlin Academy.¹⁰³

In response to this institutional tone, Yuan Zhen's matching poem attempts to supply an additional voice.

Matching the Grand Master Li of Zhexi's "Forty-Couplet Recounting a Dream"¹⁰⁴ ...

Yuan Zhen

顧我曾陪附，	Looking back, I once attended at your side;
思君正鬱陶。	Thinking of you now, melancholy takes me.
近酬新《樂錄》，	I recently replied to your new "Record of Music";
仍寄續《離騷》。	You still sent along a new sequel of "Li Sao."
近蒙大夫寄《簫 策歌》。酬和才 畢，此篇續至。	Recently the Grand Master sent me his "Song of the Bili"; having just finished my response, this piece follows.
阿閣偏隨鳳，	At the Ah Pavilion, ¹⁰⁵ we were often on duty, accompanying the emperor,
大夫與積偏多同 直。	The Grand Master and I frequently shared night duty.
方壺共跨鼇。	On Fanghu Island we bestrode the giant turtle together.
借騎銀杏葉，	Borrowing the "ginkgo-leaf" horses to ride,
學士初入，例借 飛龍馬。	Newly appointed Academicians could customarily borrow flying- dragon horses.
橫賜錦垂萄。	Brocades with dangling grape patterns were generously bestowed.
解已具本篇。	Explained earlier in the original poem.
冰井分珍果，	At the ice-cellar, rare fruits were distributed;
金瓶貯御醪。	Imperial wine was kept in golden bottles.

¹⁰³ Several mid- and late-Tang literati produced records about the Hanlin Academy, possibly following the tradition of "record on the hall wall" (*tingbi ji* 廳壁記). For example, Li Zhao's 李肇 (fl. 9th cent.) *Hanlin zhi* 翰林志, Du Yuanying's 杜元穎 (769–833) *Hanlin yuan shi biji* 翰林院使壁記, Wei Chuhou's *Hanlin xueshi ji* 翰林學士記, Wei Biaowei's 韋表微 (fl. 9th cent.) *Hanlin xueshi yuan xinlou ji* 翰林學士院新樓記, Yang Ju's 楊鉅 (fl. late 9th cent.) *Hanlin xueshi yuan jiugui* 翰林學士院舊規, Wei Zhiyi's 韋執誼 (ca. 765–807) *Hanlin yuan gushi* 翰林院故事, Yuan Zhen's *Chengzhi xueshi yuan ji* 承旨學士院記, and Ding Juhui's 丁居晦 (fl. 9th cent.) *Chongxiu chengzhi xueshi biji* 重修承旨學士壁記. See Fu Xuancong, *Tang Hanlin xueshi zhuanlun*, 5-8. Li Zhao, Du Yuanying, Wei Chuhou, Wei Biaowei, and Yuan Zhen were all active in the 820s, and all served as Hanlin Academicians during Muzong's reign.

¹⁰⁴ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhenji*, 802-03.

¹⁰⁵ "Ah Pavilion" means a pavilion with eaves on all four sides.

獨辭珠有戒， Like Zhongli Yi 鐘離意 (fl. 1st cent.), I alone declined pearls as a caution;¹⁰⁶
廉取玉非叨。 Like Zihan 子罕 (fl. 6th cent. B.C.), I accepted jade with integrity, not out of greed.¹⁰⁷

麥紙侵紅點， The grain-patterned paper was speckled with vermilion marks,
書、詔皆用麥紋 *Memorials and edicts were written on grain-patterned paper.*
紙。
蘭燈燄碧高。 Orchid lamps burned high with a bluish flame.
麻制例皆通宵勘 *By regulation we proofread and wrote hemp-paper edicts through*
寫。 *the night.*

代予言不易， Speaking on behalf of the emperor was no easy duty;
承聖旨偏勞。 Serving as the Recipient-of-Edicts was especially toilsome.
積與大夫，相代 *I and the Grand Master alternated as the Recipients of Edicts in*
爲翰林承旨。 *Hanlin Academy.*

繞月同棲鵲， Magpies flew around the moon to roost together;
驚風比夜燄。 Night hounds were like a blustering wind.
吏傳開鎖契， Clerks passed tokens that opened the lock;
學士院密通銀 *The Academy had confidential access to the Silver Terrace Gate;*
臺，每旦，常聞 *each dawn the gate attendants checked tokens to open the lock—*
門使勘契門鎖， *the noise was incessant.*
聲甚煩多。

¹⁰⁶ When Emperor Xianzong (r. 57–75) ascended the throne, Zhongli Yi was summoned to serve as the Imperial Secretary. At that time, the Governor of Jiaozhi, Zhang Hui, was convicted of embezzling a thousand catties of gold. He was summoned back and executed according to the law, and his assets and property were recorded and handed over to the Grand National Treasury. An edict ordered that they be distributed among the officials. Yi received precious pearls, but he cast them all onto the ground and did not bow to accept the gift. The emperor was astonished and asked him why. Yi replied: “I have heard that Confucius endured his thirst rather than drink from the water of Bandit Spring, and that Zeng Shen turned his carriage around at the lane of Shengmu, because they disliked those names. This treasure is defiled by embezzlement; I truly do not dare accept it.” The emperor sighed in admiration and said, “How pure are the words of the Secretary!” He thereupon instead bestowed on Yi three hundred thousand cash from the palace treasury. 顯宗即位，徵爲尚書。時交阯太守張恢，坐臧千金，徵還伏法，以資物簿入大司農，詔班賜群臣。意得珠璣，悉以委地而不拜賜。帝怪而問其故。對曰：“臣聞孔子忍渴於盜泉之水，曾參回車於勝母之間，惡其名也。此臧穢之寶，誠不敢拜。”帝嗟歎曰：“清乎尚書之言！”乃更以庫錢三十萬賜意。 *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 41. 1407-08.

¹⁰⁷ This allusion comes from *Zuozhuan*, Xiang 15.8 (558 B.C.): There was a man of Song who obtained a piece of jade and presented it to Yue Xi (Zihan). Yue Xi refused to accept it. The presenter of the jade said, “I showed this to the jade smith, and the jade smith thought it a treasure. That is why I presume to present it.” Yue Xi said, “I consider not being covetous a treasure, while you consider the jade a treasure. If you give it to me, then we both lose what we treasure most. It is better for each of us to keep his own treasure.” The man bowed with his forehead touching the ground and told his story: “A commoner cherishing a precious jade disk cannot go through a village without meeting harm. I am submitting this so as to avoid death.” Yue Xi placed him in the lane where he himself lived and had a jade smith work on the jade and refine it. After the man became rich, he sent him back to his place. 宋人或得玉，獻諸子罕。子罕弗受。獻玉者曰：“以示玉人，玉人以爲寶也，故敢獻之。”子罕曰：“我以不貪爲寶，爾以玉爲寶。若以與我，皆喪寶也，不若人有其寶。”稽首而告曰：“小人懷璧，不可以越鄉，納此以請死也。”子罕寘諸其里，使玉人爲之攻之，富而後使復其所。 *Zuo Tradition = Zuozhuan: Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals,”* tr. Stephen Durrant, Wai-Yee Li, David Schaberg (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016) 2: 1034-37.

神撼引鈴條。
院有懸鈴，以備
夜直。警急文書
出入，皆引之以
代傳呼。每用
兵，鈴輒有聲，
如人引。聲耗緩
急具如之，曾莫
之差。

渥澤深難報，
危心過自操。
犯顏誠懇懇，
騰口懼切切。
佩寵雖綢綬，
安貧尚葛袍。
賓親多謝絕，
延薦必英豪。
自“阿閣”而
下，皆言稹同在
翰林日，居處深
祕，與頻繁奉
職、勤勞、畏
慎、周密等事
也。

分阻盃盤會，
閑隨寺觀遨。
學士無過從聚會
之例。大夫與
稹，時時期於寺
觀閑行而已矣。
祇園一林杏，
慈恩。
仙洞萬株桃。
玄都。
灑海滄波減，
昆明劫火熬。

The bell-cord quivered, as if stirred by spirits.
In the Academy, there was a bell hung for night duty. When transporting urgent documents, it was pulled instead of shouted orders. In wartime, it sounded as if moved by someone—the tone matched the level of urgency with no errors.

Such abundant favor runs so deep that it is hard to repay;
My heart has stayed wary and cautious, self-restrained to excess.
I dared to offend his majesty's countenance with utmost sincerity;
When words leapt forth I feared and fretted.
Though I wore purplish-blue ribbon of favor,
I was content with plain living and still wore robes made of ramie.
Visits from kin and guests were largely declined;
Whomever I recommended must be truly worthy.
From "Ah Pavilion" onward, all describe the days when I also served in Hanlin Academy: staying deep within the mysterious inner court, frequently performing duties, working hard, remaining cautious and awed, handling all matters with meticulous care, and the like.¹⁰⁸

We kept away from banquets and parties,
And in spare hours strolled through temples and cloisters.
Academicians had no regular social gatherings; Grand Master and I met now and then only for leisurely walks at temples.

At Jetavana (*Ci'en Temple*), there was a whole grove of apricots;

At the Immortal Grotto (*Xuandu Abbey*), there were ten thousand peach trees.

On Bohai, the blue swells abated;
Kunming Lake as though seared by calamity's fire.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Since this annotation says “when I also served in Hanlin Academy,” 稹同在翰林日 I translate the omitted subject in these lines primarily as “I.” Some of the couplets also feel too personal to be describing someone else, but it is uncertain if they also refer to Li Deyu.

¹⁰⁹ Kunming lake was an imperial artificial pond in the Western Han. It is said that there was black ash at the bottom: “It is also said that when Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 B.C.) dug out the Kunming Pool, he found black ash. A *Hu* from a foreign land said, ‘This is the remnant of the ashes from the destruction of Heaven and Earth.’” 又曰武帝穿昆明池得黑灰有外國胡云此是天地劫灰之餘也 *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 871. 3861. Here Kunming Lake likely refers to the emperor himself.

未陪登鶴駕，
已訃墮烏號。
痛淚過江浪，
冤聲出海濤。
尚看恩詔溼，
已夢壽宮牢。
本篇言此兩句是
夢中作，故言
“夢”字。

再造承天寶，
新持濟巨篙。

猶憐弊簪履，
重委舊旌旄。
“渤海”已下，
皆言舉感先恩、
捧荷新澤等事。
北望心彌苦，
西回首屢搔。

九霄難就日，
兩浙僅容舸。

……

Before we could attend His Majesty's passing,
The death edict had fallen and the mourning wail had risen.
My bitter tears outmatched river waves;
Cries of grievance rose like the sea's surf.
The ink on the gracious edict was still damp;
I already dreamed of the mausoleum secured fast.
These two lines in the original poem were said to be composed in the dream; hence I use the word "dream."

Heaven's treasure is renewed;
The new emperor takes up the great pole to steer the vessel of state.

Still pitying the shabby hairpin and shoes,
Again entrusting the old banners to the old ministers.
From "Bohai" onward, all express gratitude for favor from the previous emperor and for the new grace of the new emperor.

Gazing north (but unable to return), my heart grows more pained;
Turning west (but cannot meet my friend), I scratch my head again and again.

The sun above in the Nine Heavens is out of reach,
In the two Zhe areas only a skiff will fit.

Yuan's poem begins with compliments on Li Deyu's literary talents and political merits—appropriate courtesies—then turns to their shared past in the Changqing years, as he announces in the title: “Grand Master's original title said he once composed a poem in a dream, sending it to one or two colleagues; therefore my matching poem, too, will only recount our former Hanlin days.”¹¹⁰ 大夫本題言曾於夢中賦詩以寄一二僚友，故今所和者亦止述翰苑舊遊而已 He preserves Li's bureaucratic frame by opening with Hanlin settings and customs, and even supplements them—for instance, the regulations for drafting edicts, the lock-checking at dawn, and the movement of urgent documents. Yet he overlays this with a restored first-person angle and exclusive memories shared with Li. Continuing the

¹¹⁰ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhenji*, 802.

exchange-poem convention of “I” and “you” (“Looking back, I once attended at your side; thinking of you now, melancholy takes me”), he establishes the speaking subjects for what follows. The autobiographical annotations—night duty together, alternating as Recipients-of-Edicts, strolling in temples during leisure—not only reveal intention but constrain interpretation within a personal perspective. It thus seems that Li’s poem furnishes the institutional stage (the Hanlin Academy), and Yuan reintroduces the actors on that stage (Li Deyu and himself). This narrative strategy that combines bureaucratic context with personal encounters accords with the “Four Poems Sent to Grand Master Li” above. Still, the conspicuous institutional settings present their relationship less as conventional friendship and more as close colleague bond.¹¹¹

Another distinction lies in structure. Li Deyu arranges his recollections into four groups of four couplets each: scenes in the Hanlin Academy (內署中物), imperial bestowals (恩賜), sights in the Inner Court (內庭所觀), and entertainments on vacation days (沐澣日遊戲), foregrounding a descriptive and introductory style rather than narration. Yuan’s poem offers no such explicit taxonomy, but he does signal certain contents. From “Ah Pavilion” onward, twelve couplets show the two of them “staying deep within the mysterious inner court, frequently performing duties, working hard, remaining cautious and awed, handling matters with meticulous care...” In fact, more than half of these couplets fall under what might be

¹¹¹ An intriguing detail is that, both in the title and in the annotation, Yuan addresses Li Deyu by his official title “Grand Master,” while referring to himself by his given name, which is a humble gesture. In contrast, in his exchanged poems with Bai Juyi—for example, the poems discussed in Chapter 2 and the “Poem in Response to Hanlin Academician Bai’s [Poem] in Place of a Letter in One Hundred Rhymes”—Yuan uses Bai’s style name (Letian) and the first-person pronoun *yu* 予 for himself (though in the title of the hundred-rhyme poem he still refers to Bai by his official title). The possibility of alteration during transmission cannot be ruled out, but this contrast clearly marks a distinction between formal and informal address, or even between distance and intimacy. The different word choices may reflect the expected range of circulation and readership, or simply the different nature of the relationships involved.

called an official service category—that is, performing duties, working hard, remaining cautious and awed, and handling matters with meticulous care—emphasizing both the toil and vigilance of service and their upright devotion to court. Such topics are only briefly touched in Li’s “inner court sights” part.

However, it is worth pointing out that some of the official duties Yuan mentions are not merely ordinary administrative tasks. “Offend his majesty’s countenance” (犯顏) likely suggests speaking with the emperor in person—a privilege enjoyed mostly by high officials or those holding significant posts. Although this expression may be metaphorical, the “purplish-blue ribbon” (綢綬) in the next couplet is another indication of status and power. Purple ribbon usually alludes to the Han law that only those of the highest rank could wear a golden seal and purple ribbon; in the Tang dynasty, it refers to the purple robe, an honor for officials above rank three or awarded as special favor. Yuan Zhen was granted a purple robe and golden fish-purse on the day he received his appointment as Hanlin Academician at age forty-three.¹¹² Yuan also writes about “visits from kin and guests were largely declined”—a claim of integrity—but it is worth asking at what position, and with how much power, one has to be in order to avoid suspicion, or at least to perform such a gesture. Further, not everyone had the power and opportunity to recommend others, let alone assert—as Yuan does here—that “whomever I recommended must be truly worthy,” which seems to imply that he (or he and Li Deyu) could recommend multiple candidates. Although these descriptions may possibly refer to both Yuan and Li as Academicians, the type of responsibility and the implied significance nonetheless align more closely with the post that Yuan held in the Hanlin

¹¹² Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 620.

Academy—the Recipient-of-Edicts, the head of Academicians—a position later succeeded by

Li Deyu. As recorded by Yuan, its duties include:

In general, whenever there were major edicts and decrees, important dismissals and appointments, confidential plans of the grand councilors, secret memorials from officials inside and outside the court—anything to which the emperor gave particular attention—it was he (the Recipient-of-Edicts) alone who was granted audience; no one else was allowed to take part.¹¹³

大凡大詔令、大廢置、丞相之密畫、內外之密奏、上之所甚注意者，莫不專對，他人無得而參。

Thus, these couplets, even if they may apply to both Yuan and Li, still point to the kind of role that Yuan presents as central to his Changqing experience: significant, powerful, and uneasy—a role he had once played and continued to recall. Rather than focusing only on edict writing as a literary accomplishment, he highlights other aspects of the post—remonstrating face to face, wearing the purple robe as a sign of great favor, being wary of suspicion, and recommending only “truly worthy” men—which together evoke proximity to the emperor and participation in major discussions and decisions. In this respect, his emphasis contrasts with Bai Juyi’s “Further Thought” poem, where Yuan appears above all as an outstanding edict writer. Yuan does not deny that identity, but he absorbs it into a broader picture of Hanlin service. Taken together, these elements sketch a familiar moral portrait of the upright court official—fearless in speech, cautious under favor, and careful about patronage.¹¹⁴ The poem thus also works as an implicit defense of his conduct in light of the

¹¹³ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 647. For a general review of Yuan’s Changqing career from an institutional perspective, see Lai Ruihe, *Tangdai gaoceng wenguan*, 193-97. Still, Lai Ruihe mostly adopts the *JTS* perspective.,

¹¹⁴ Earlier couplet, “Like Zhongli Yi, I alone declined pearls as a caution; like Zihan, I accepted jade with integrity, not out of greed” may also be relevant.

existing attacks on his career and reputation. The contrast suggests that, even when they look back on the same post, Yuan and Bai select and arrange different facets of it, and these differences contribute to the multiple ways in which the Changqing years could be remembered and retold.

Apart from underscoring his political attitude and deeds in the Changqing court, Yuan also dwells on “gratitude for favor from the previous emperor and for the new grace of the new emperor.” This is present in Li’s poem as well, but Yuan devotes more space and emotion to it, making it more explicit and noticeable. Expressing immense gratitude for Muzong and hope tinged with regret over his own inability to return to Chang’an, Yuan turns Li’s institutional poetic documentary into a political self-narration. He does not recount the Changqing court conflicts, perhaps in deference to Li Deyu’s Hanlin theme, yet he does not entirely let go of the grievance he had voiced earlier when he asked, “When will I at last have requited our monarch’s great bounty?” Now that the monarch who promoted him is dead, the question is transformed rather than resolved. In exchange poetry it is normal for each writer to emphasize different concerns, but the dynamic here differs from the poems with Bai Juyi. With Bai, the Changqing narrative emerges from an exchange in which both poets gradually reshape their partly shared and partly divergent past through communication and negotiation. With Li Deyu, Yuan instead takes Li’s bureaucratic recollection as a base and layers his own self-justifying account on top of it, turning a shared Hanlin memory into a personal way of remembering Changqing—as a time of intense service, closeness to power and imperial favor, and a source of unresolved longing to return. This version of Changqing sits alongside, rather than within, the Changqing narrative constructed between Yuan and Bai: here Yuan is

not presenting himself as a talented writer or half of a literary duo, but as a former Academician, a colleague, and a once influential official situated within the political history of the period.

Though there are no further exchanges between Yuan Zhen and Li Deyu on this topic, another matching poem, based on these two, was written by a third person—Liu Yuxi, who was not present in the Changqing Hanlin Academy, and was not even in Chang’an at the time. His title says “The Grand Master Li of Zhexi showed me his ‘Forty-Couplet Poem Recounting a Dream,’ and it has been matched by Grand Councilor Yuan of Zhedong. Their poems are talented, so I continue their voices.”¹¹⁵ 浙西李大夫述夢四十韻并浙東元相公繼有酬和斐然繼聲本韻次用 Though Liu was part of their literary exchange circle, he definitely did not belong to Li Deyu’s “one or two colleagues,” and it remains unknown why Li also sent the poem to him. Replying to the two poems, Liu Yuxi mostly provides a flattering account of Li Deyu’s political career, with special emphasis on his post as the Hanlin Academician in the Changqing court. Notably, in contrast with the pessimistic endings of Li’s and Yuan’s poems, Liu Yuxi adopts a brighter tone on their experiences—by adding himself into the comparison.¹¹⁶

卧龍曾得雨，	The crouching dragon once received timely rain,
浙東。	<i>Zhedong</i>
孤鶴尚鳴臯。	The lone crane still calls on the riverbank.
浙西。	<i>Zhexi</i>

¹¹⁵ Tao Min 陶敏 and Tao Hongyu 陶紅雨, *Liu Yuxi quanji biannian jiaozhu* 劉禹錫全集編年校註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2019), 627.

¹¹⁶ Tao Min and Tao Hongyu, *Liu Yuxi quanji biannian jiaozhu*, 628.

劍用雄開匣，	When the sword is called for, the case is opened; ¹¹⁷
二公。	<i>of the two lords.</i>
弓閑蟄受弼。	My bow lies idle, hibernating in its sheath.
自謂。	<i>self-reference</i>
鳳姿嘗在竹，	The phoenix once perched among the bamboo,
二公。	<i>of the two lords.</i>
鸚羽不離蒿。	But my quail wings have never left the weeds.
自謂。	<i>self-reference</i>
吳越分雙鎮，	Wu and Yue stand as twin commands,
東西接萬艘。	east and west their harbors link ten-thousand ships.
今朝比潘陸，	Today you rival Pan Yue (247–300) and Lu Ji (261–303),
江海更滔滔。	broader and grander, like rivers and seas.

Liu, as their friend and possibly someone seeking political alliance, had been discarded by the court for years and was only just beginning to face a more favorable situation. Besides complimenting their literary talents, he also holds their political achievements in high regard, referring to their advancements in Changqing—especially Yuan’s appointment as the Grand Councilor—and their current posts as the Surveillance Commissioners, in contrast with his

¹¹⁷ “The ‘Alternative Biography of Lei Huan’ says: Huan, style Kongzhang, was a man of Poyang, skilled in astronomy, calendrics, and divination. When Zhang Hua, Minister of Works of the Jin, one night saw a peculiar *qi* rise in the region of the Dipper and Ox constellations, he asked Huan whether he had seen it. Huan said, ‘This is what is called the *qi* of a precious sword.’ Hua said, ‘In former days someone who read my physiognomy told me, “You will one day be eminent, with a precious sword at your side.” These words now seem about to be fulfilled.’ Thereupon he appointed Huan as Magistrate of Fengcheng. When Huan arrived at the district, he moved the prison and had the ground dug down more than thirty *chi*, obtaining a single cyan-stone case. Inside was a pair of swords, whose patterns and brilliance were not yet very distinct. Huan took yellow-and-white earth from Xishan in Nanchang and used it to wipe them; the swords’ radiance suddenly blazed forth and shone brilliantly. He then sent one sword, together with a little of this yellow earth, to Hua, and kept one sword for himself. When Hua received the sword and the earth, he said, ‘This is Gan Jiang; Mo Ye has still not come. Yet, as numinous objects brought by Heaven, in the end they ought to be reunited.’ He then sent Huan one *jin* of red earth from Huayin. When Huan used it to grind and polish the sword, its fresh radiance became even brighter. When Hua was executed, the sword was gone, and no one knew where its jade case was. Later, after Huan’s death, Huan’s son Shuang wore the sword and was crossing at Pingjin when the sword, for no reason, fell into the water. He had someone dive down to search for it. They saw two dragons, each more than ten *zhang* long, coiled around one another. After a short while, a faint radiance emerged, and the river shone as though lit by the sun.” 雷煥別傳曰：煥字孔章，鄱陽人，善星曆卜占。晉司空張華夜見異氣起牛斗，華問煥見之乎，煥曰：‘此謂寶劍氣。’華曰：‘時有相吾者云，君當貴，邊身佩寶劍，此言欲效矣。’乃以煥為豐城令。煥至縣，移獄，掘入三十餘尺，得青石函一枚。中有雙劍，文采未甚明。煥取南昌西山黃白土用拭，劍光豔照曜。乃送一劍并少黃土與華，自留一劍。華得劍土，曰：‘此干將也，莫耶已復不至。然天生神物，終當合耳。’乃更以華陰赤土一斤送與煥。煥得磨劍，鮮光愈亮。及華誅，劍亡，玉匣莫知所在。後煥亡，煥子爽帶劍經延平津，劍無故墮水，令人沒水逐覓，見二龍長數丈，盤交。須臾，光采微發，曜日映川 *Taiping yulan*, 343. 1577. Punctuation and a few corrections of characters follow Tao Min and Tao Hongyu, *Liu Yuxi quanji biannian jiaozhu*, 637.

humble self-evaluation. Though Yuan Zhen indeed faced attacks and a decline in reputation, to his friends and allies, he was still Grand Councilor Yuan, one who had once, and still, held an eminent position.

Across these different modes of recollection and retelling, “Changqing” is no longer a single nostalgia but a set of positions—bureaucratic, autobiographical, and aspirational—that reassemble a short reign as political memory. This plurality of voices also opens the archive outward, inviting other contemporaries to reuse the same materials for their own purposes. On that ground, Liu Yuxi’s interventions shift the focus again from inward remembrance to outward endorsement, pushing the Changqing story toward renewed prospects.

In official histories, Muzong does not receive a high appraisal during his brief reign, yet these alternative accounts of the Changqing years fill in a missing piece of the puzzle. It is striking that, for different individuals, this seemingly negligible period could carry so many meanings and effects. From the official histories, through the Changqing narrative centered on the Yuan–Bai literary duo, Li Deyu’s Hanlin “documentary,” and Yuan Zhen’s political self-narration, to Liu Yuxi’s third-person praise, a more complex understanding of Changqing—and of how history is remembered, reworked, represented, and received in poetry—becomes possible.

Taken together, Yuan Zhen’s four poems to Li Deyu, his matching poem to “Poem Recounting a Dream,” and the earlier “During a lull in work” poem analyzed in Chapter 2 all show that his political aspirations did not fade but continued to be articulated through later exchanges. Across these poems, he repeatedly returns to the same cluster of concerns: gratitude for Muzong’s exceptional appreciation and a sense of unresolved obligation to

“requite” that favor, which lead to the hope of one day leaving his provincial post and re-entering the central court to make a difference—and to the fear and anxiety that accompany that hope. The Hanlin Academy and Inner Court thus become more than remembered settings: they function as the stage on which an unfinished political life is re-envisioned and offered back to potential allies. People around him also reacted differently to the expression of such concerns. Bai Juyi quietly and euphemistically stepped aside; Li Deyu, at least in poems discussed above, offered the stage and resources; while Liu Yuxi perceived and responded to Yuan’s continued longing for recognition and recall in a poem written in 828 or 829, where he both sympathizes with Yuan’s frustration and imagines a court still waiting for his return.¹¹⁸

Grand Councilor Yuan of Zhedong Lamented the Sultry Weather of Plum Rain Season in His Letter, Thus I Sent a Seven-Character Poem¹¹⁹

Liu Yuxi

稽山自與岐山別，
何事連年鸞鷲飛？
百辟商量舊相入，
九天祇候遠臣歸。

平湖晚泛窺清鏡，
高閣晨開掃翠微。

今日看書最惆悵，
爲聞梅雨損朝衣。

Ever since Mount Ji parted with Mount Qi,
For what matter did the phoenix fly for years?
Hundred officials confer to bring the former minister back,
The Nine Heavens reverently await the far-posted minister’s
return.

At dusk you drift on the level lake, peering into a clear
mirror;

At dawn the high pavilion opens, brushing away the green
mist.

Today, reading your letter, I am most melancholy—
For I hear the plum-rains have spoiled your court robes.

The title confirms Liu’s poem was written in reply to one of Yuan’s letters. Although that letter is now lost, this poem strongly indicates that Yuan once again raised his political

¹¹⁸ Scholars have noticed that in terms of political attitudes and stance, Liu Yuxi is more similar to Yuan Zhen, although he later associated more frequently with Bai Juyi. Zhu Jincheng, *Bai Juyi yanjiu*, 219-220.

¹¹⁹ Tao Min and Tao Hongyu, *Liu Yuxi quanji biannian jiaozhu*, 774-75.

concerns. The first couplet uses metaphorical expressions: Mount Ji refers to Yuan Zhen in Zhedong, and Mount Qi means the court in Chang'an. Liu Yuxi is asking the question for Yuan Zhen: Why was he kept on the post in Zhedong for almost six years and never summoned back? For consolation, Liu depicts an imaginary picture in which the court is expecting Yuan to return. While acknowledging the beauty of scenery in Yuezhou, where Yuan was then posted, Liu Yuxi further expresses his empathy: he understands what Yuan is sad about—and so is he—that “the plum-rains have spoiled your court robes,” in other words, the fear and worry of not being able to return to Chang'an.

Finally, this again suggests that Bai Juyi's efforts to console Yuan Zhen, together with the Changqing narrative the two of them managed to create, worked only within certain limits: they may have helped to restore Yuan's reputation to some extent, but they could not address or resolve the fundamental problem he faced. Just as the rupture within their friend circle could not be mended, so too did the rupture and the pronounced distinction between Yuan and Bai themselves remain. The divergence is visible within the very process of constructing the Changqing narrative: in the topics that fell silent, in the question Yuan posed that Bai chose not to answer, and in the subtle mismatch between what each of them wanted to stress. It also surfaces more clearly when they revisited Changqing apart from one another—Bai in his own self-reflection, and Yuan in poems exchanged with other contemporaries—turning the same years into different modes of retelling with different focuses. In this light, as their paths gradually diverged, the topics of their poetic exchanges also shifted. Traces of political experience still appear at times, but more as remembered background—dates, offices, and episodes that inevitably anchor their lives—or as courteous praise of one another's posts.

Political ideals and aspirations seldom seem to become the center of their ongoing poetic dialogue, which turns instead toward leisurely pleasure, personal concerns, the desire for physical reunion, and other forms of emotional attachment.¹²⁰

Epilogue: An Unfulfilled Appointment and The Rest of The Story

This thesis has traced how the brief Changqing reign was remembered, reconstructed, and contested in the writings of Yuan Zhen, Bai Juyi, and their contemporaries. Beginning from official accounts and the carefully crafted exchanges between Yuan and Bai, and moving toward later poems that take up Changqing as institutional memory, political self-narration, and retrospective praise, the discussion has followed how a short and seemingly marginal reign was repeatedly rewritten as part of personal history and political aspiration. The epilogue, however, does not turn to broader questions of Tang political culture or literary history. Instead, it returns to a more specific issue that has run quietly through the previous chapters: what became of the later Yuan–Bai exchange?

A short answer, based on the foregoing analysis, would be that their frequent and abundant exchanges continued, but their topics and emphases shifted. This epilogue adds one further observation: a single theme recurs again and again, mostly in Bai's poems (both matching and non-matching). Because most of Yuan's later poems have been lost, only half of the dialogue survives. To glimpse this unfinished half, the following pages turn back to Bai Juyi's side of the story.

¹²⁰ However, given that most of Yuan's later poems have been lost, the exact picture of their later exchanges remains uncertain. It is possible that Bai may have had access to some of Yuan's other poems to which he did not reply.

It is highly likely that the two had, from relatively early on, made an appointment to retire together, often referred to as the “Green Mountain Pact” 青山約. Although such vows of shared retirement were a common literary and political gesture, this one appears unusually concrete, given how often it is invoked and how specific the plan seems to be. The particular term first appears in the poem “Sent to Yuan Ninth” 寄元九, written in 809, where Bai sighs: “Now, as we grow old with the passing time, together we are failing to keep our pact with the green mountains.”¹²¹ 况隨白日老，共負青山約 This was the year when Yuan was appointed Investigating Censor and later reassigned to Luoyang. His investigation in Dongchuan 東川 was considered exemplary and was highly praised by Bai.¹²² In Luoyang, Yuan attempted to buy an estate, possibly with this shared retirement in mind.¹²³

Later in 817 or 818, when both men were demoted, Bai mentioned the pact again in a poem explicitly recalling that earlier agreement:¹²⁴

宦情君早厭，	You grew weary of official life early;
世事我深知。	As for worldly affairs, I know them too deeply.
常於榮顯日，	Even in our days of honor and glory,
已約林泉期。	We had already agreed on a date to retire with woods and springs.
况今各流落，	Now that we are each cast adrift,
身病齒髮衰。	Our bodies ailing, teeth and hair grown weak.
不作卧雲計，	If we make no plan to live as recluses among the clouds,
攜手欲何之？	Where do we hope to go together, hand in hand?

¹²¹ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 734.

¹²² See in “Sent to Editorial Director Fan” 贈樊著作 in Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 55. Fan was the Vice Editorial Director (*zhuzuo zuolang* 著作佐郎) at the time, see *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 56.

¹²³ Zhou Xianglu, *Yuan Zhen nianpu xinbian*, 79-80; “Leaving for the Eastern Office” 東台去, in Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 183.

¹²⁴ This poem is titled “Back when Wei Zhi and I were at court, we shared the wish to retire; it has been almost ten years from now, and we drifted in demotion and grew old, I look back to the former pact and wish to set a new one for later years” 昔與微之在朝日同蓄休退之心殆今十年淪落老人追尋前約且約後期 Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 634-35.

待君女嫁後，	Let us wait until your daughter is married,
及我官滿時。	And my term of office is complete.
稍無骨肉累，	When we are free of family burdens,
粗有漁樵資。	And have the modest means for fishing and woodcutting.
歲晚青山路，	Then, at year's end, on the road to the green mountains,
白首期同歸。	White-haired, let us keep our plan to return together.

Although the use of allusion is somewhat opaque in the last couplet,¹²⁵ the poem clearly confirms the “Green Mountain Pact” and indicates what their plan looked like—at least by this time. After their shared and divergent experiences at the Changqing court, and as both men in fact grew older, the idea of retiring together appears with increasing frequency in Bai’s poems. In 823, he casually mentions his plan for retirement in “On New Year’s Eve, Sent to Weizhi”:¹²⁶

家山泉石尋常憶，	The springs and rocks of my home hills, I regularly recall;
世路風波子細諳。	The storms and waves of the worldly road, you know in detail.
老校於君合先退，	Being older than you, it suits me to retire first;
明年半百又加三。	Next year I shall be fifty, and three years more.

Yuan Zhen replied with: “We originally agreed on a date to retire from office together; we share the familiarity with New Year’s Eve feelings, both being old.”¹²⁷ 休官期限元同

¹²⁵ Bai’s wording seems to be related to this story: “Later, when Shi Chong (249–300) and Ouyang Jian (ca. 260s–300) were arrested, Yue was also arrested on the same day. Shi was sent first to the marketplace [for execution], and neither of them knew about the other. When Pan arrived later, Shi said to Pan, “An’ren, so you too have ended up like this?” Pan said, “One could say, it really is ‘In our white-haired years we shall share the same place of return!’” Pan’s poem for the Jingu Gathering says: “I entrust our pledged bond to my friend as firm as stone; in our white-haired years we shall share the same place of return.” Thus the poem became an omen.” 後收石崇、歐陽堅石，同日收岳。石先送市，亦不相知。潘後至，石謂潘曰：“安仁，卿亦復爾邪？”潘曰：“可謂‘白首同所歸’。”潘金谷集詩云：“投分寄石友，白首同所歸。”乃成其讖。Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫, *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 1081-82. This allusion seems somewhat ominous in this context.

¹²⁶ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1806-07.

¹²⁷ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 361.

約，除夜情懷老共諳 This seems to be the first and only time Yuan explicitly responded to the retirement pact in extant poems, and even here his attitude remains somewhat elusive.

In 825, when Bai was serving as the Prefect of Suzhou 蘇州 (*Suzhou cishi* 蘇州刺史) (also the year when Li Deyu recounted his dream), he wrote three poems to Yuan Zhen at year's end. Among them, one offers a brief summary of their rough careers.¹²⁸

榮進雖頻退亦頻，	Though honors and promotions have been frequent, demotions have been frequent too;
與君才命不調勻。	In talent and in fate, I am as ill-matched as you.
若不九重中掌事，	If not handling affairs within the Ninefold Palace Gate,
即須千里外拋身。	We would be cast off a thousand <i>li</i> away.
紫垣南北廳曾對，	We once faced each other in the north and south halls of the Secretariat,
滄海東西郡又鄰。	In prefectures by the sea we were again neighbors, east and west.
唯欠結廬嵩洛下，	The only thing lacking is to build cottages below Mount Song and by River Luo,
一時歸去作閑人。	To return together all at once and live as idle men.

Once again, Bai uses their political careers primarily to frame a shared destiny. In the end, he renews the call: since they have already shared bumpy fates and been close together whether at court or in the provinces, why not complete this destiny by retiring together?

Yuan's response is not extant.

In 828, Bai replied to forty-three poems from Yuan at Yuan's request. Twenty-three of these replies are arranged as a set in his collected works, and several of them express, directly or indirectly, the hope of retiring together. Yuan's originals are lost, so it remains unclear exactly how he framed the topic. Two examples from Bai's side are:¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 825.

¹²⁹ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 1733, 1735.

夙懷慕箕穎，	I have long admired Xu You, who lived under Mount Ji and by River Ying;
晚節期松篠。	In my later years I expect to follow the way of immortals and recluses. ¹³⁰
何當闕下來，	When will we come beneath the palace gate,
同拜陳情表。	And together submit our “Memorial Stating Feelings”? ¹³¹
我既無子孫，	Since I have no offspring,
君仍畢婚娶。	And you have already completed your child’s marriage.
久爲雲雨別，	For so long we have been parted like clouds and rain,
終擬江湖去。	In the end I still plan that we retire to rivers and lakes.
范蠡有扁舟，	Fan Li had his light boat,
陶潛有籃輿。	And Tao Qian had his sedan chair.
兩心苦相憶，	Two hearts bitterly long for each other;
兩口遙相語。	Two mouths speak to each other from afar.
最恨七年春，	What I regret most are these seven springs—
春來各一處。	Each spring that comes finds us in different places.

In 829, Bai brought the pact up yet again in another matching poem to Yuan, whose original is in this case preserved. Yuan’s poem seems to have been prompted by his participation in a Daoist ritual; Bai’s response begins with the local scenes and customs in Yuezhou, mentions the ritual, and then turns to compliment Yuan’s governance. The conclusion returns to his long-standing concern:¹³²

伊予一生志，	You and I have aspirations for a lifetime,
我爾百年軀。	Yet our bodies last only a hundred years.
江上三千里，	Along the river stretch three thousand <i>li</i> ,
城中十二衢。	And within the city lie twelve avenues.
出多無伴侶，	When going out, there is often no companion;
歸只對妻孥。	On returning, one faces only wives and children.
白首青山約，	White-haired, we have a pact with the green hills—
抽身去得無？	Can you draw yourself free and go?

¹³⁰ “松篠” likely alludes both to Chi Songzi 赤松子, an immortal, and to the “old man carrying a farm tool” (*hexiao zhangren* 荷篠丈人), a recluse figure from the *Analects* (18/7).

¹³¹ “Memorial Stating Feelings” (*chenqing biao* 陳情表): a memorial written by Li Mi 李密 (224–287) to decline an imperial appointment so that he could take care of his aged grandmother.

¹³² Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi shiji jiaozhu*, 2064.

More intriguingly, the last couplet of Yuan's original poem asks his family: "Luckily there is a Peach Blossom Spring nearby—would the whole family be willing to go?"¹³³ 幸有桃源近，全家肯去無？ Bai replaces this with his own question about whether Yuan can "draw himself free." Still, there is no sign of Yuan's answer. That same year, Yuan was finally called back to Chang'an, but in 830 he was transferred to the post of Military Commissioner of Wuchang (*Wuchangjun jiedushi* 武昌軍節度使), and he died there in 831. His death effectively closes their poetic dialogue, leaving Bai's repeated reminders of the Green Mountain Pact unanswered—and in another sense, already answered by impossibility of ever fulfilling it.

In 832, fulfilling Yuan's last wish, Bai wrote his tomb epitaph, where, possibly for the first time, he openly and directly confronted Yuan's experience in the Changqing court.

At the beginning of the Changqing reign, when Emperor Muzong ascended the throne, he, having long heard of Yuan's name, summoned him to service as the Vice Director of the Catering Bureau. Once he arrived at court, he was transferred to Director of the Bureau of Sacrifices, granted a scarlet robe and fish-purse, and appointed a Participant in the Drafting of Proclamations. Proclamations are the king's words. In recent times, by inherited convention, they had mostly fallen into an adroit yet vulgar style. From the moment Yuan took up the brush, vulgarity changed once into elegance, and through three such changes, into the mode of the classic admonitions. People of the time said that the right man had been found. The emperor approved of him, often summoned him for conversation, and came to know that he had the talent to assist governance. He was promoted to Secretariat Drafter and granted a purple robe and golden fish-purse, and appointed Hanlin Academician Recipient of Edicts. Shortly afterward he was appointed the Vice Director of the Ministry of Works. Soon after, still holding that office, he concurrently served as the Joint Manager of Affairs with the Secretariat-Chancellery [the late Tang title for Grand Councilors]. As he had attained high office, he was just about to put his own aims into practice, in answer to his ruler's recognition. Before long, however, slanderous men framed him with flying rumors, setting him at odds with his colleagues in the same post. An edict ordered an investigation, but nothing could be

¹³³ Ji Qin, *Yuan Zhen ji*, 361.

substantiated. The emperor realized that it was slander; preserving the larger pattern, he dismissed them both from office...¹³⁴

長慶初，穆宗嗣位，舊聞公名，以膳部員外郎徵用。既至，轉祠部郎中，賜緋魚袋，知制誥。制誥，王言也。近代相沿，多失於巧俗。自公下筆，俗一變至於雅，三變至於典謨。時謂得人。上嘉之，數召與語，知其有輔弼才。擢授中書舍人，賜紫金魚袋，翰林學士承旨。尋拜工部侍郎，旋守本官，同中書門下平章事。公既得位，方將行己志，答君知。無何，有儉人以飛語構同位，詔下按驗無狀。上知其誣，全大體，與同位兩罷之。……

Looking also at the aims behind his writings and compilations, how could they be confined to mere literary craft and brushwork? In truth, his heart lay in securing the people and saving the state, in bringing his lord to the level of Yao and Shun and making himself another Yi Yin or Gao Yao. Was it that Heaven did not grant this, or that the man himself was unfortunate? I have often grieved that at first, when he used the straightness of his own person as the measure for others and diligently carried this out, he met only with hardship and mischance, exiled to miasmatic regions for ten years, returning with hair mingled with white. Later, when he turned to expedient ways to rescue the age, changing and adapting himself, again he met with obstruction and unrest; he sat in the Grand Councilor's seat for only three months, leaving before the mat had warmed beneath him. Whether he advanced with flexible accommodation or stood firm in rectitude, in going forward and in drawing back, he never obtained what he had in mind... Therefore, his heart remained unfulfilled. Meeting the times and failing to meet them were the same to him; gaining high office and not gaining it were the same; rank and wealth were to him like floating clouds. Why so? Because although his career advanced, his Way did not; his person met with success, yet his heart did not.¹³⁵

又觀其述作編纂之旨，豈止於文章刀筆哉？實有心在於安人活國，致君堯舜，致身伊臯耳。抑天不與耶，將人不幸耶？予嘗悲公始以直躬律人，勤而行之，則坎壈而不偶，謫瘴鄉凡十年，髮班白而歸來。次以權道濟世，變而通之，又齟齬而不安，居相位僅三月，席不煖而罷去。通介進退，卒不獲心。……故公之心不足也。逢時與不逢時同，得位與不得位同，貴富與浮雲同。何者？時行而道未行，身遇而心不遇也。

This is a direct yet carefully composed and deeply sympathetic account of the most controversial part of Yuan's life. Bai, having witnessed the events and knowing what had happened all along, offers a final judgment that can never be heard or answered by the person he addresses. Here he no longer sidesteps the conflicts at the Changqing court or Yuan's

¹³⁴ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 1928.

¹³⁵ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 1929.

seemingly questionable “expedient ways.” Instead, he records them plainly and justifies them through a comprehensive and empathetic understanding of Yuan’s aspiration, career, and life: that his deepest and most important hope—to secure the people and to requite the emperor’s favor—never found fulfillment. Bai’s tone is clearly one of anger and grief at the injustice and misfortune Yuan suffered. The problem, in Bai’s account, was never a lack of loyalty or effort, but a mismatch between Yuan’s aspirations and the times he lived in. Read against Yuan’s earlier question, “When will I at last have requited our monarch’s great bounty?”, the epitaph functions as a belated reply: the requital never became possible, but the striving itself is acknowledged and affirmed.

The four-character inscription that follows condenses this judgment:

Alas, Weizhi! Having lived beyond the age of understanding the Mandate of Heaven,¹³⁶ one cannot call his death untimely; having held ranks that combined those of general and minister, one cannot call his station low. Yet he did not bring peace to our people, nor did he exhaust our Way. In his own heart, therefore, his aspiration remains unfinished.¹³⁷
嗚呼微之，年過知命，不謂之夭。位兼將相，不謂之少。然未康吾民，未盡吾道。在公之心，則爲不了。

If Yuan’s aspiration could not be fulfilled even after he had reached the highest offices, and given his attitudes toward civil service and reclusion in the “Four Elders Temple” poem, then how could the “Green Mountain Pact” ever truly be kept? It is unclear when Bai fully arrived at the realization that Yuan’s heart “did not meet its time.” Yet, considering the likely

¹³⁶ “The Master said: ‘At fifteen I devoted myself to learning, and at thirty stood firm. At forty I had no doubts, and at fifty understood the Mandate of Heaven. At sixty I listened in effortless accord. And at seventy I followed the mind’s passing fancies without overstepping any bounds.’” (*Analects* 2/4) 子曰：吾十有五而志于学，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳顺，七十而从心所欲，不逾矩。 Translation follows David Hinton. The phrase “understanding the Mandate of Heaven” is therefore commonly used to refer to being fifty years old.

¹³⁷ Xie Siwei, *Bai Juyi wenji jiaozhu*, 1929.

volume of exchanges now lost and the depth of understanding evident in the epitaph, it is plausible that he knew long before that the pact could not be kept. In that light, Bai's repeated invocations of shared retirement do not simply outline a future plan; they also trace the limits of what history and circumstance would ever allow. The pact hovers between possibility and impossibility, between promise and its perpetual deferral.

Still, what is the point of asking—again and again—about something one already knows is impossible? A final answer cannot be offered at this point, but the second concern running through this thesis can thus be brought into focus. Even when people forgive, communicate, and negotiate; even when topics shift or mutual understanding deepens, certain silences remain. In the end, some ruptures—within a friend circle, between two collaborators or close companions, between aspiration and outcome—cannot be repaired. Separation and death bring the Changqing narrative of Yuan and Bai, and its many reworkings, to a close. What remains are the poems themselves: records of an unfulfilled appointment, and of a shared attempt to turn a brief reign into enduring memory and story.

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