

CHAPTER ONE



Poetry as Political and Social Criticism

Virtually all Chinese studies of Song literary theory—even those that allow for a number of competing theories—focus on two key terms: *wen* (Writing), and *dao* (the Way). Any divergences between theories stem from the different weight they attribute to Writing, including prose and poetry, in helping people to follow the correct Way. Certain groups of literati in the Northern Song, for instance Ouyang Xiu and his circle, claim that learning to write well is fundamental to following the Way. Others, most notably the *Daoxue* (Learning of the Way) group headed by Cheng Yi (1033–1107), and culminating with Zhu Xi (1130–1200) in the southern Song, were suspicious of Writing, seeing it as potentially distracting to the inner self-cultivation required of those who follow the Way.¹

Whatever the differences between these thinkers, none question the basic premise that following the Way should be the main aim of peoples' lives. Yet what constituted this mysterious Way? Again, most mainstream Song thinkers agreed that the essence of the Way was expressed in the canonical texts of Confucianism, though they frequently differed in their interpretations of these texts. Most would have accepted the basic premises, namely, that the Confucian Way posited a moral order in the universe and, by extension, among human beings in society. This moral order required that people accept their place within the familial and social hierarchy and behave in a respectful and courteous manner towards

each other, based on the exhaustive rules of propriety found in the Classics. Writing, as a vehicle for the Way, should promote correct social behavior and criticize abuses and corruption among scholar-officials who served in the government. It should also reflect the feelings and describe the plight of the common people, so that those in power could adjust their policies for the peoples' benefit.²

Northern Song poets were well aware of the social and political functions of writing, and occasionally their poetry reflects these ideas in a very direct manner. Nevertheless, to focus solely on poetry whose content deals directly with social and political issues, means neglecting the majority of their works. Even if we include poems that refer to sociopolitical topics indirectly or allegorically (a rather fluid and slippery category), there are still numerous excellent compositions that focus entirely on more personal issues and apolitical content. Rather than assuming only a handful of Northern Song poems actually fulfilled the requirement of making literature a vehicle for the Way, I will argue that the Northern Song poets' definition of following the Way was less tied up with the content of their poetry than most later critics have assumed. Instead, the crucial factor for these poets was to keep the writing of poetry as a social activity: a vehicle for exchanging views, bringing people together in a harmonious manner, and allowing them to release emotional tension in a constructive way.

POETRY AND THE WAY: A BROADER VIEW

Evidence that direct political and social criticism was not the most important function of poetry in the Northern Song comes first of all from the small numbers of poems on such topics. Zhu Dongrun, in the preface to his edition of Mei Yaochen's collected poetry, estimates that only about thirty or forty of Mei's 2900-plus poems can be counted among his best works—by which he means that they directly reflect the hardships of the common people and criticize the harsh Song government. These include Mei's famous "Words of a Farmer," "The Poor Girl of Ru Riverbank" and the like.³ Zhu criticizes Mei for composing hundreds of poems on what he considers trivial topics and for wasting his time exchanging and matching empty verses with his numerous literati friends. On many occasions, Mei seems to treat poetic composition as little more than an entertaining word game, neglecting its sociopolitical function altogether.⁴ If Zhu had evaluated the poetry of Ouyang Xiu and

most other Northern Song poets, he would have found a similarly small proportion of poems showing sustained concern for the common people or directly attacking corruption in the government.⁵

Zhu's explanation for this imbalance is that even the greatest poets, such as Du Fu (712–772), composed large numbers of mediocre works, and we should not expect Mei and his contemporaries to be any different. Hence we should judge them by their best works alone, while pointing out their limitations.⁶ Yet given the extreme statistics, it is more logical to conclude that these Northern Song poets saw direct political or social criticism as only one, and not the central, function of poetry. Furthermore, if we examine their own statements about poetry, we find that these writers considered even the most lighthearted of their poems to be consistent with making literature a vehicle for the Way. They were neither halfhearted nor hypocritical in combining their literary theories with their poetic practice.

Among Northern Song literati, Ouyang Xiu made some of the clearest statements about the functions of poetry (*shi*). One of his best known comments comes in a grave inscription for Mei Yaochen. He sums up Mei's reasons for composing so many poems:⁷

Shengyu's character was kind, generous, joyful, and easygoing. He never caused offence to others. When he was poor and miserable, or moved by righteous indignation so that he had something to curse, mock, laugh at, or ridicule, he would always express it in poems. But he used this to find happiness, not to settle grievances. One could say that he was a Superior Person (*jun zi*).

It is significant that in this passage Ouyang describes how Mei released his pent-up emotions or energy in poetry to find happiness, but does not mention anything about the concerns of the common people or criticizing corrupt officials. An earlier sentence from the same text claims that even the lowest members of society knew about Mei's poetry, but this demonstrates Mei's fame rather than his social conscience: "Even reckless and ignorant fellows, who could not even understand the meaning of poems, would still say, 'Everyone in the world considers these valuable. If I can get one, I can use it to make myself look important!'"⁸ The impression one receives is that for Mei, writing poetry was primarily a means of expressing or releasing his inner feelings—both joyful and sad—and sharing them with his friends and acquaintances.

Other comments on poetry by Ouyang Xiu provide a similar picture. His famous *Remarks on Poetry* (*Shibua*) are almost exclusively concerned with stylistic points—rhyme, imagery, diction and the like—or with recording memorable anecdotes about minor poets, and few of the poems he chooses as examples betray any concern with pressing social issues.⁹ Elsewhere, when he does make a direct parallel between the poetry of his contemporaries and the canonical Confucian text, the *Classic of Poetry*, it is to support a quite unexpected, but in the light of his poetic theory, entirely characteristic, contention:¹⁰

Now the Superior Person (*jun zi*), in broadly adopting things from others, should not neglect even the comical or the crude and base. All the more so in poetry! There is nothing that cannot be found among the three hundred poems of ancient times [i.e., the *Classic of Poetry*]. Yet they are free without being abandoned, joyful without being decadent, and ultimately they return to correctness. This is the reason they are considered so highly.

In other words, portraying “the comical or the crude and base” is just as acceptable in poetry as engaging in political or social criticism, and by extension, can accord just as closely with the Confucian Way. A similar idea appears in the passage on Mei Yaochen quoted above: Mei was a “Superior Person” because he was able to express his strong feelings, including laughter and mockery, in poetry.

Faced with the fact that much of Northern Song poetry does not deal with pressing social or political issues—that instead, it often focuses on humorous and trivial subject matter—some scholars conclude that poetry was simply not as important as prose for writers of this period. They claim that writers expressed serious political and social concerns in prose—especially official memorials, commentaries on the *Classics*, and historical treatises—whereas poetry simply became a diversion, a form of entertainment.¹¹

To a certain extent, this view is accurate. The majority of Song literati were government officials; none considered themselves to be professional poets. Since poetic composition, like playing musical instruments or practicing calligraphy, was therefore a form of relaxation to while away their leisure time, it is more surprising that these writers did occasionally compose serious politically engaged verse than that much of their poetry focused on more personal emotions.

But did this make poetry less important to these writers than

prose? As I demonstrate, poetry fulfilled a number of essential social and private functions during the Northern Song—just as it did in other periods of Chinese history. Rather than concluding that Song literati considered prose more important than poetry, they used these different forms of writing for contrasting, but equally significant, social purposes. Hence, comparing their lighthearted verses to the *Classic of Poetry*, as Ouyang did, was not an empty verbal gesture.

INDIRECT POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CRITICISM: A CHIMERA?

For the circle of Northern Song poets around Ouyang Xiu and Mei Yaochen, overtly sociopolitical poetry made up only a small proportion of their oeuvre, and was not their central focus when composing poems. But poetry does not always express its meaning directly, and many scholars of Chinese poetry claim to spot hidden political messages in works that appear innocuous and apolitical. Could it be that, even though these poets did not often deal openly with sensitive political issues, much of their poetry was in fact covert commentary on politics, including regular hidden attacks on their opponents in the government?

The obvious objection to this approach is that many Northern Song poets fearlessly and openly expressed their political views when they felt the need—in government memorials, prose discourses, and in some of their poems. There was little reason to hide those same views in other poems. Indeed, this search for hidden political messages is fraught with difficulties. To illustrate these difficulties, I examine poems that critics have often interpreted politically or that appear to contain allegorical elements. In the process, I suggest an alternative way of approaching such poems that accords more closely with the functions of poetry that the writers themselves espoused.

Let us begin with one of Mei Yaochen's most famous poems, on a blowfish or, as he calls it, a river-pig fish:¹²

*During a Party at Fan Raozhou's, a Guest Talks About Eating the
River-Pig Fish [1038]*

On spring islets the reed sprouts grow,
On spring banks the willow catkins fly,
At this time the river-pig
4 Is treasured more than all other fish.
Its appearance is certainly weird,

- And its poison extremely deadly;
 When angry, its belly swells like a swine,
 8 Furious eyes glaring like a frog of Wu.¹³
 If you make a mistake when cooking
 It will slice up your throat like Moye's sword.¹⁴
 Since it can destroy your life in a trice,
 12 Why even bother taking a bite?
 With these arguments I challenged some Southerners,
 But united as one, they wouldn't stop praising it,
 They all claimed its flavor was incomparably fine,
 16 None of them mentioned that it kills folk like flies.
 Nothing that I said would make them relent,
 Sighing, I could only remind myself:
 When Tuizhi arrived in [southern] Chaoyang,
 20 He worried about eating a caged snake,
 But after Zihou lived in Liuzhou [for a while],
 He was perfectly willing to consume a toad!¹⁵
 Yet even if these two creatures were abhorrent
 24 They would not make you fear for your life,
 They could never be compared to this so-called delicacy,
 Which hides within it unending disaster.
 "With great beauty, trouble will also appear":¹⁶
 28 This indeed is a praiseworthy saying.

Many traditional and modern Chinese commentators interpret this poem as a work of indirect political or social criticism. Jonathan Chaves gives an excellent summary of these interpretations, showing how none bear really close scrutiny.¹⁷ For example, he cites the argument of James T. C. Liu, that the river-pig fish poem composed at a drinking party held by former central government minister Fan Zhongyan was Mei's veiled criticism of his host for becoming too involved in factional politics at court. Liu's interpretation is part of a broader argument that Mei gradually grew more and more critical of Fan's extreme factionalism, and eventually broke off relations with him in the 1040s.¹⁸

It is true that Fan and several of his supporters, including Ouyang Xiu, were southerners, and had been exiled to the provinces two years earlier (1036) for their outspoken criticism of the chief councilor Lü Yijian. Over the next few years they would continue to alienate conservatives in the government, suffering further periods of exile in the mid-1040s.¹⁹ Yet it is highly unlikely that Mei would have set out to criticize Fan in this particular poem, even indirectly, while he was his guest. The only real support for this

argument comes from the southern Song philosopher Zhu Xi, who frequently made clear his dislike for Mei Yaochen's poetry and what he considered the loose morals of the Ouyang Xiu circle. He unleashed the following diatribe against the river-pig fish poem (in Chaves' translation):²⁰

Many of Shengyu's poems are not good. Take, for example, his poem on the river-pig fish. At that time, all the gentlemen said it was outstanding, but in my opinion that poem is like going into a man's house and cursing him to his face, just like throwing off one's clothes, going into a man's house and cursing his grandfather, cursing his father. From first to last, it is utterly lacking in deep and detached thought.

The violence of Zhu Xi's reaction suggests he has misunderstood the context in which Mei composed the poem. He assumes the host, Fan Zhongyan, had offered river-pig fish to his guests at the party, and that Mei was accusing Fan of trying to poison him with it, or at the very least, of providing an unsavory dish which he cannot imagine eating. This would certainly have been extremely offensive and un-Confucian, as Zhu claims, not only to Fan himself but even to his ancestors! But the unusual wording of the poem's title makes it clear that river-pig fish was not on the menu at Fan's party; one of the guests simply raised the subject of this strange creature during conversation—presumably describing to a fascinated audience the potentially fatal consequences of eating the fish when it was not properly prepared—and Mei composed a spontaneous poem recounting the ensuing lively debate on the merits of the fish.

If Mei was not insulting Fan directly as a host, was he still indirectly criticizing Fan for becoming too involved in factional struggles at Court? This might still be considered rude behavior from a guest, if not quite as heinous as Zhu Xi claimed. Several pieces of evidence challenge this interpretation of the poem. First, Ouyang Xiu, a strong political ally of Fan Zhongyan and one of Mei's closest friends, wrote comments about this poem on at least two separate occasions. Yet nowhere does he mention that the poem caused offence to anyone. On the contrary, he expresses unbounded admiration for the poem's craftsmanship and wit, which lifted his spirits whenever he read it. The following remarks are representative:²¹

Mei Shengyu once composed a poem on the river-pig fish at a party given by Fan Zhongyan . . . Shengyu constantly worked hard at composing poetry, aiming for a relaxed yet profound, ancient, and bland [style]. Consequently, his structures and ideas are very carefully thought out. This poem was composed in the midst of eating and drinking, but the force of his brush is strong and rich. Though he completed it in just a few moments, in the end it turned out to be one of his outstanding works.

. . . Whenever my body feels unhealthy, I recite [this poem] several times through, and immediately I feel fine. I have also copied it out several times to present to people as an unusual gift.

A poem criticizing Fan Zhongyan, and by extension, disagreeing with all southerners like Ouyang Xiu, who supported Fan's faction, would surely not make Ouyang feel so wonderful every time he read it. There must be some other more convincing interpretation to explain the poem's appeal. Traditional Chinese commentaries on the poem do not help much since they are mainly concerned with a minor textual point, first raised by Ouyang Xiu, about exactly when the river-pig fish swims upriver.²² But taking our cue from Ouyang's earlier comment that Mei composed poetry to overcome negative feelings and find happiness—not to settle grievances—we could posit the following explanation of the river-pig poem.

Even if we allow that the poem may have political implications, there is no reason to treat it as Mei's attack on the political tastes of southerners like Ouyang and Fan. After all, Mei himself was from Anhui province on the south banks of the Yangtze River, a region where the river-pig fish thrived and was annually harvested.²³ One cannot therefore equate the critical narrator of his poem with Mei himself, since Mei too belonged firmly in the group of southerners.

At the same time, we can easily take the poem as Mei's reminder, both to himself and his southern colleagues, of the dangers of a political career. The rewards of attaining a high government post may be great, just as the flavor of river-pig is incomparably fine, but one small mistake can lead to disaster. And as with fish poisoning, a political disaster may not even be one's own fault, but the fault of somebody working behind the scenes. Composed at a time when several of Mei's friends were exiled to the provinces—due to events that I discuss further in the final section of this chapter—such an outpouring of emotion against the fatal

attractions of the river-pig fish would have struck a chord with their own painful experiences. Reading the poem, they would certainly have admired and empathized with Mei's ability to express their shared pent-up frustrations in a spontaneously composed verse on a trivial topic.

Mei is careful not to restrict the poem to a single political interpretation. The poem may also refer to other areas of life in which beauty or sensual attractions can lead the unwary into disaster. Or it could simply be a sharp observation on the unthinking way in which people follow fashions or local customs even when it does them no good at all. Such themes are common in many later poems by Mei and Ouyang. Part of the poem's success is surely in leaving readers to draw their own conclusions and apply its method of emotional release to their own personal setbacks.

We should not overlook the tone of the poem, which is both satirical and humorous. It is a classic example of the caricatured reasoning of Northern Song: using the rhetorical appeals and diction of serious intellectual debate to discuss a strange and intrinsically comical object.²⁴ The effect is so incongruous—a group of cultured southerners vehemently standing up for this poisonous, swine-bellied fish with its furious glaring eyes—that most readers of the time would surely have doubled up with laughter. This is a major reason for Ouyang Xiu's enthusiastic recommendation of the poem's ability to make one feel better: it transforms negative emotions caused by political enemies, traitorous friends, or faithless lovers, into laughter.

Another example of a poem that seems, on the surface, to involve sociopolitical criticism is Ouyang Xiu's "Hating Mosquitoes," which dates from 1046, during his second period of exile.²⁵ Both Ouyang and Mei Yaochen had previously composed poems about mosquitoes in 1034, and these early works were barely disguised attacks on corrupt and cruel government officials. Mei's poem, for instance, contains the lines: "Would that in the homes [of the rich], / The mosquitoes flaunted their lance-like beaks! / Instead they frequent the poor and humble, / With no compassion for their gauntness, / Suckers sharp, they race to the attack; / Drinking blood, they seek self-increase."²⁶ Though he does not specify exactly whom the mosquitoes represent, Mei makes no secret that their victims are the poor and humble. There is little doubt that he is attacking greedy, tax-collecting officials, who harass the unprotected poor but leave the rich in peace.²⁷

Yet turning to Ouyang Xiu's later poem, we find it much harder to reduce the interpretation to a simple political allegory. This is partly due to the inherent humor of Ouyang's self-caricature, as he vainly attempts to swat these pesky critters. But it is also because, despite his references to bad government allowing evil to arise, the mosquitoes are only attacking him, not some unfortunate and oppressed mass of poor people. At most, we can conclude that the poem expresses Ouyang's personal frustration with the petty forces of evil that disrupt his life, and in writing it he transforms that frustration into laughter.

*Hating Mosquitoes [1046]*²⁸

- The ten thousand species are crowded together,
 And among them some are decidedly hateful;
 The mosquito is truly one of the tiniest:
 4 Not worth leaving its traces on one's paper.²⁹
 The universe is broad and enormously capacious,
 Containing and nourishing both good and evil,
 In the desolate days before the ancient kings and emperors
 8 People and beasts lived in each others' filth,
 But Yu made a tripod that captured evil spirits,
 The dragons fled far away to hide in the depths;
 The Duke of Zhou expelled all surviving wild creatures,
 12 And humankind reclaimed the lands and rivers.³⁰
 Since then, thousands of years passed away,
 And Heaven and Earth grew peaceful and quiet,
 One could say great disorders disappeared from sight,
 16 And no-one paid attention to the tiny and slight:
 To the flies, gadflies, fleas, lice, and nits,
 Locusts, scorpions, vipers, cobras, and pythons.
 And you [mosquitoes] belong to this group too,
 20 With your bodies as small as grains of millet,
 But even though you're tiny, you swarm in huge numbers,
 And your small size means it's hard to avoid your poison,
 I once heard that up in Gaoyou Prefecture,
 24 A fierce tiger died from your cruel humiliation,
 And how miserable any girl who exposes her veins:
 Avenging your ancient grudge, you exact severe punishment!³¹
 The wetland regions especially suit your kind,
 28 Pity the people in such remote frontiers!
 At morning repasts, they lower their screen curtains,
 At summer's height, their cattle stay deep in the mud.

I have come to govern this distant hill country
 32 Where the land is extremely low and damp,
 With few official duties, I lazily do what I choose,
 It is sleep that really suits my inclinations,
 But I hate that you come in such great swarms:
 36 I'm tired of you swooping over my pillow and sleeping mat!
 Smoking the eaves, I suffer from fumes and dust,
 Scorching the walls, I'm exhausted lifting my candle.
 By ruined city walls you assemble on plants and trees,
 40 The air grows dry and the blazing heat rises,
 Xihe drives forward the chariot of the sun,
 But reaching the noon hour, it seems the wheels stop turning.
 When finally a breeze blows and evening cool comes,
 44 It feels like an amnesty: prisoners released from their shackles,
 I sweep the courtyard, open to the sky,
 Then sit in the moonlight in the shade of fine trees:
 Why do you *insist* on choosing this moment
 48 To make me endure such constant harassment?
 Furling your wings, waiting for day to darken,
 Gradually you emerge from ceilings and walls,
 You fill up the sky, sweep over like a curtain,
 52 Gather in crevices, so numerous you'd fill cupped hands,
 Crowding round my body, you besiege and defeat me,
 Clamoring in my ears, you wail for the deceased,
 Fiercely you charge: ready to unleash your crossbows,
 56 Cruelly you strike: sharper than flying arrows,
 My hands and feet are powerless to save me,
 You soon take control of both front and behind,³²
 Tired of fanning and swatting my dinner tray,
 60 I force my stiff servant to rouse from his slumbers,
 Vainly he exhausts the hundred strategies
 Then sinks back down and closes his eyes in defeat.³³
 I am certainly powerless to struggle any longer,
 64 And you are truly too cruel and ruthless!
 Who can explain the laws that creatures follow?
 Don't they just obstruct us in all we do?
 As for the Chuyu, Phoenix, and Kirin,³⁴
 68 No-one has glimpsed them for thousands of years,
 I long for them now, but cannot hope to see them,
 There's nothing to drive the evil ones away.

The traditional aim of the poetry of social and political criticism in China was to persuade the Emperor and his officials to govern more justly by describing to them how the common people

were suffering under their present inefficient and corrupt system. In theory, the Emperor would be moved to compassion by reading versified accounts of ordinary peoples' lives, and would initiate sweeping political reforms.³⁵

Some Northern Song poems could conceivably have had such an effect—assuming that the Emperor had read them—for example, Mei Yaochen's "Poor Girl of Ru Riverbank," which shows the hardships caused by the forcible enlisting of commoners to serve in military campaigns on China's borders.³⁶ Even Mei's "Swarming Mosquitoes" might have acted in a similar way, encouraging political leaders to look into the injustices perpetuated by an inefficient tax system. But what about Ouyang's "Hateful Mosquitoes"? What audience is he aiming to reach with this comical, mock-heroic battle between himself and a mass of evil little creatures? It is highly unlikely central government leaders would read such a poem and be moved by it to reform their policies, since the only real victim here is Ouyang himself. He shows no concern for the common people. Likewise, it is not clear what kind of social evil the mosquitoes represent. A crude allegorical reading of the poem suggests the mosquitoes refer to ordinary people and minor officers in this backward region, who constantly bother their local governor Ouyang Xiu with all their problems, preventing him from getting any sleep! Then again, the mosquitoes could be Ouyang's many petty-minded opponents in the central government, who gathered in swarms to falsely accuse him and his fellow reformers of illegal acts, resulting in his exile the previous year (1045). Alternatively, Ouyang could be expressing a broader view that the natural world contains just as many destructive forces as human society. Such a reading would harmonize best with his concluding questions: "Who can explain the laws that creatures follow?/Don't they just obstruct us in all we do?" (lines 65–66).³⁷

Whatever interpretation one chooses, and whether or not the poem is related to the political events of the time, the crucial point is that Ouyang uses poetry to release his personal frustrations, taking a difficult and uncomfortable situation and making it into the stuff of caricature and comedy. Like most of his other compositions, the poem is for himself and for circulation among his friends; it is not written for some amorphous mass of common people, or as a kind of versified policy statement directed towards a righteous ruler.³⁸

There are numerous other poems by Ouyang and Mei, especially from the 1040s and 1050s, which at first appear to fit the indi-

rect political and social criticism model, but on closer examination turn out to be more personal in scope. I will save detailed discussion of these poems, and their various nonpolitical functions, for the rest of this book, but will provide one further example here to bolster the argument.³⁹

In Ouyang Xiu's "Answering the Poem 'Heavy Rain' Sent to Me by Mei Shengyu," dated 1057, one might expect the topic, a flood, to inspire an effusion of sympathy for the suffering common people.⁴⁰ And certainly Ouyang's lines referring to "people below on the Earth . . . / Wallowing about in the midst of mud and mire . . . / No different from ducks or common swine" (lines 19–22), and his mention of the Sage Emperor Yao, if taken out of context, might lead some readers to assume that the poem is in the social criticism mold. Nevertheless, Ouyang spends most of the poem expressing concern for himself rather than for ordinary people. In the process, he creates another vivid caricature of his own misfortunes, similar to his mosquito poem, which can only be offset by the consolation of receiving a poem from his friend Mei Yaochen:

Evening clouds roll over like a mountain avalanche,
 Night rain pours down like a burst pipe overflowing.
 For a moment, I see the dark blue sky,
 4 Flaming brightly, the toad-moon rises,
 Then suddenly the Spirit of Yin strengthens,
 On all four sides it gathers momentum.
 Wild thunder roars through obscure blackness,
 8 Startling lightning illuminates fierce monsters!⁴¹
 They go on the prowl, waking dragons from hibernation,
 Descending, they strike the tombstones and the graves.
 Every time the thunder sounds its rumbling cartwheels,
 12 The rain correspondingly adjusts its pace.
 It seems that the downpour will never cease,
 But finally the storm retreats, silent and exhausted.
 Only a thousand-foot rainbow remains suspended,
 16 Violet and azure, stretching across the emptiness.
 In a matter of moments, a hundred changes of aspect:
 Who rolls up and unfolds this darkness and light?
 And do they know of the people below on the Earth,
 20 The watery downpour flooding their sleeves and hems?
 Wallowing about in the midst of mud and mire,
 They seem no different from ducks or common swine!
 Alas for me! Just come to the capital city,
 24 With hardly a mean hut to shelter my body.
 In the leisure district I'm renting an ancient hovel,

- Crude and mean, it's hidden among back alleys.
 The gushing from the neighbours pours into our ditches and drains,
- 28 The flow from the street surges over our courtyard.
 Going out of the gate, I'm shocked by vast floods,
 But if I stay behind closed doors, I fear being drowned.
 The walls are full of holes opening out in all directions,
- 32 It's fortunate my family has no valuable possessions!
 Toads croak beneath the kitchen stove,
 My old wife can only snivel and sob.
 At the nine city gates they've run out of firewood,
- 36 We're about to smash our cart for the morning cooking-fire,
 Weighed down and under water, I worry about survival:
 How can I focus on my writings and books?
 Now I understand that when Emperor Yao was alive,
- 40 People started to fear they would turn into fish!⁴²
 But Master Mei remembered me in times of trouble,
 He sent me a poem and sympathised with my plight.
 He consoled me with this latest composition:
- 44 Brightly shining, as pure as jasper and jade.
 My official duties are few, and my abilities are meager,
 I'm ashamed I've done little to pay back the State.
 My life will soon reach its final destination,
- 48 Why do I not retire to rivers and lakes?
 Since anyway I dwell in a traveler's rest,
 There's no point delaying my departure plans!

Ouyang gives a remarkably vivid portrayal of the storm and its aftermath, focusing particularly on his own plight. Yet even though everything he describes is plausible, even realistic, the combined effect of his series of images is incongruous and humorous. As in his mosquito poem, he makes himself out to be a hapless and rather ridiculous victim, quite unable to deal with the misfortunes that the world throws at him. The fact that Ouyang was by 1057 an eminent central government official in Kaifeng, the Northern Song capital, on the verge of becoming the city's mayor the following year should remind us not to take the description of his crude and mean home too seriously.⁴³

However, Ouyang has two motives for emphasizing the utter desperation of his situation, as he makes clear in lines 41 to 50. First, he wishes to show that Mei Yaochen's poetry, arriving in the midst of hopelessness, is an enormous consolation: "He consoled me with this latest composition,/ Brightly shining, as pure as jasper and jade"

(lines 43–44). Mei's poem improves his mood and inspires him to write this poetic response, in which he transforms an ugly situation into something he can laugh about. Secondly, the major disruption caused by this single shower of rain reminds Ouyang of the need to enjoy life while he has the opportunity. Earlier in the poem, he remarks that "in a matter of moments, a hundred changes of aspect [occur]" (line 17). By the poem's conclusion he realizes that he too is changing quickly—"my life will soon reach its final destination" (line 47)—and he should not waste his life in a job that contributes nothing to society, especially since he must live in such a run-down hovel. "Why do I not retire to rivers and lakes?" he concludes (line 48). In reality Ouyang did not retire from office for another decade or so, but writing the poem in response to Mei Yaochen allowed him to imagine wandering off into serene reclusion, and doubtless gave him a temporary distraction from his present difficulties.

I have shown that Ouyang Xiu and Mei Yaochen did compose a small number of poems directly concerned with the plight of the common people or the need for political reform. They show no reluctance about criticizing the government quite openly in their poetry (and in Ouyang's case even more so in prose works), when they see the need. However, the majority of their poems do not deal directly with political issues. Even those that seem to lend themselves to allegorical interpretations rarely fit the traditional mold of disguised political and social criticism. Rather they express the poets' frustration with the personal difficulties they must face as individuals, and allow them to channel that frustration safely into a creative endeavor, improving their mood and empathizing with their friends in the process.

Of course, even if the content of such poems is not directly concerned with current political struggles, it is true that occasionally political enemies made use of a poet's works to slander him. In part, this was because virtually all Northern Song poets were first and foremost government officials. Moreover, they constantly exchanged their poems with like-minded friends and acquaintances, who were generally also government officials. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that at times of political crisis their enemies suspected them of seditious tendencies and hidden factional alliances, and sought evidence of this in their poetry.

Following is a discussion of this misuse of poetry by political opponents, focusing specifically on the 1040s, and arguing that it

challenges, rather than supports, the view of Mid-Northern Song poetry as primarily political in content.

POETRY AS EVIDENCE OF POLITICAL WRONGDOING

As James T. C. Liu and others have noted, the period from the mid-1030s until the end of the Northern Song in 1126 was one of increasingly bitter factionalism in Chinese politics.⁴⁴ During the decade from 1035 to 1045, Ouyang Xiu and Mei Yaochen were part of a loose-knit group of reformers led by Fan Zhongyan, who called for a tougher policy to combat the incursions of foreign tribes in the north and west, and for an end to corrupt government practices. The members of this group, who include Yin Shu (1001–1046), Shi Jie (1005–1045), Fu Bi (1004–1083), and Han Qi (1008–1075), frequently met to exchange ideas and poems, and when most were exiled to the provinces in 1036 due to their numerous memorials attacking chief councilor Lü Yijian, they continued to send supportive poems to each other. By the early 1040s, as the members of the group gradually returned to the central government, their poetry exchanges continued unabated. Although some of their poems were overtly political—for instance, in a 1041 poem, Ouyang Xiu declared that unseasonably warm winter weather was due to “Tracherous generals not being killed, demeaning the country’s punishments” and upsetting the normal progress of the seasons⁴⁵—much was simply polite and conventional expression of mutual admiration or consolation in times of difficulty.

The very closeness of the social bonds between these like-minded scholar officials—as evidenced by their frequent poetic exchanges—worried and irritated the more conservative groups in the central government, especially when Emperor Renzong decided in 1043 to place Fan Zhongyan and Han Qi in charge of executing their proposed policy changes—the so-called Qingli Reforms.⁴⁶

The opposing faction, led by the censor Wang Gongchen (1013–1086), found the uncompromising and overbearing attitude of the reformers insufferable. Nevertheless, conservatives could not directly attack these imperially sponsored reforms, because they did not wish to appear as supporters of corruption and capitulation to foreign invaders. Instead, they sought to discredit reformers by digging out evidence of their subversive intentions and disrespectful attitude towards the Emperor. To make a convincing case, they had to prove, firstly, that the reformers were actually a faction—in

other words, a group of officials who had secretly agreed to collaborate in order to promote their own political agenda—and secondly, that this Qingli reform faction was seeking to wrest control of the government from the Emperor. To fulfil both these purposes, the conservatives made use of the poetry of their opponents, cunningly interwoven with other examples of what they claimed were the reformers' corrupt and subversive practices, to produce a web of circumstantial evidence sufficient to raise the Emperor's suspicions.

For instance, in 1044 a palace eunuch reminded Emperor Renzong of a poem series entitled "Four Worthies and One Villain" by Cai Xiang (1012–1067), written eight years earlier (1036) to protest against the first exile of Fan Zhongyan and three of Cai's friends, Ouyang Xiu, Yin Shu, and Yu Jing (1000–1064).⁴⁷ Cai compared the young reformers with ancient worthies bravely willing to take an independent stand against shameless accusers. Since Cai had lumped these four people together as early as 1036, the censor argued, it was obvious that their faction already existed for many years and was now in a position to do some real damage to the government. Other accusations followed, some based on forged letters in the reformers' names, designed to prove their disloyalty towards the Emperor.⁴⁸

Though not completely persuaded by these charges, Renzong sent the leading reformers on temporary missions outside the capital while considering his options. Then, in the winter of 1044, some of the younger supporters of Fan Zhongyan, led by Ouyang Xiu's close friend Su Shunqin (1008–1048), held a banquet at which they entertained themselves in traditional literati fashion by drinking wine and composing poems spontaneously. Unfortunately, word leaked out to Wang Gongchen that one of these wine-inspired poems contained lines insulting to the Emperor. According to the Qing scholar Pan Yongyin, the verse in question was by one Wang Yirou, a friend of Su's, and included the following declaration: "I wish to recline on the North Star, ordering the Lord of Heaven [or Emperor] to support me / The Duke of Zhou and Confucius I will drive forth as slaves."⁴⁹ Added to this impertinence was evidence that the party-goers had funded their banquet by selling old paper money belonging to the government, a practice which, even though common among Northern Song officials, was technically illegal.⁵⁰ When Renzong banished all those who had attended the party, Fan Zhongyan realized that he too was under attack and offered his resignation as councilor. However, after discovering that

Fan was not really sincere about resigning, the Emperor exiled him to the provinces as well. Fan never returned to the central government.⁵¹

In this way, the conservatives cleverly manipulated their opponents' poetry to buttress their accusations and bring down many of the reformers, and by 1045 they had succeeded in having all the Qingli Reforms reversed. However, Ouyang Xiu had thus far escaped punishment and remained influential as a censor in the central government, a thorn in the flesh of his conservative enemies. Since there was no longer a reform faction left to which they could accuse Ouyang of belonging, they resorted instead to a personal attack on his moral behavior, accusing him of a criminal offence so that he would be forced from his position. Once again, they made use of poetry as evidence for their case: some of the erotic song lyrics (*ci*) that Ouyang had written in his youth, spiced up with more scurrilous forgeries added for good measure.⁵² They were also able to persuade the stepdaughter of Ouyang's sister, who happened to be in the capital jail at the time on an unrelated adultery charge, to accuse Ouyang of forcing her into a sexual relationship when she was a young girl staying at his house. Even though the girl was not his blood relative, such a relationship was considered to be incestuous in the Northern Song.⁵³ This accusation was made slightly more plausible by the content of Ouyang's song lyrics, which included lines like the following (in Egan's translation):⁵⁴

Young, a golden sparrow pin in her hair buns,
 She practices drawing eyebrows and dabs her face with rouge.
 No matter how often implored, how much loved
 4 All she understands is how to laugh.
 In a well-fitting dance dress
 She runs to the elegant banquet-mats, displaying her charm.
 Master Liu is filled with the love of flowers
 8 But for this one he's come a little early.

Fortunately, the judge in Ouyang's case realized the accusations by this stepniece were slanderous, and dismissed the so-called evidence from Ouyang's lyrics, calling them typical examples of the genre unrelated to the case at hand.⁵⁵ Yet, under pressure to find Ouyang guilty of something, he sentenced him on a separate charge of tax evasion. As a result, Ouyang was exiled to become governor of the remote region of Chuzhou (in present Anhui province).⁵⁶ Despite the fact that the poetic evidence did not prove as damning

as Ouyang's enemies had hoped, when combined with the accusations of incest it seriously stained his reputation and ultimately led to further personal attacks in the 1060s.⁵⁷

What does this whole episode tell us about the relationship between poetry and politics in the Mid-Northern Song? Certainly it reveals that writing poetry could be dangerous, especially if one was a central government official. But whether or not any particular poem would land its writer and his friends in trouble was quite unpredictable, and often bore no relation to the writer's original reason for composing the poem. Obviously Cai Xiang was taking a clear and uncompromising political stand when he wrote "Four Worthies and One Villain," and it is no surprise that the poem series resurfaced to haunt the reformers eight years later. But Wang Yirou was surely not consciously aiming to offend the Emperor when he composed his drunken couplet at Su Shunqin's party, and Ouyang Xiu could have had no inkling that his youthful romantic song lyrics would later be used to corroborate slanderous charges of incest against him and force him into exile. In both Wang's and Ouyang's cases, although their poems were personal, their opponents treated anything that they wrote, no matter what the original context, as politically significant simply because they were government officials. And poetry was a particularly useful weapon for their accusers, both because they could easily misinterpret it and because poetry supposedly expressed the poet's true private feelings, or intent (*zhi*), as opposed to his deceptively decent public persona.⁵⁸

On the other hand, poetry itself was not sufficient to condemn any of the reformers. Poets like Ouyang and Mei circulated scathing verse criticisms of Song military policy in the early 1040s without adverse consequences. It was only when their words were accompanied by illegal acts—selling off government property, or seducing a stepniece—that judges took them seriously, and even then, the poetic evidence might be discounted, as in Ouyang's case. Indeed, the overall impression one receives from this episode is that poetry was not a catalyst for these political events at all, but was simply dragged in haphazardly to provide an extra layer of circumstantial evidence after the conservative faction had decided to ruin the reformers.

Ironically, because the reformers, like most of their Northern Song contemporaries, treated poetry writing not primarily as a political activity but as a means of releasing and sharing their personal feelings, it is more likely their poems, rather than their more

public prose works, contained indiscreet remarks enemies could use against them.

Finally, we should remember that political enemies do not make the best literary critics. Clearly, in the case of Wang Yirou and Ouyang Xiu, their poems were misinterpreted. We cannot rely on this political misuse of poetry to prove that Northern Song poets themselves treated poetry as a political weapon. It would be more realistic to base our conclusions on the evidence of their own poetic theories, which virtually ignore the political function of poetry, and of the large numbers of poems that they composed on nonpolitical topics. In some ways, therefore, Zhu Dongrun's criticism of Mei Yaochen is a fair one. He claims that, later in his life, Mei spent too much time exchanging poems on trivial topics with his friends, and virtually transformed poetry writing into a kind of word game. This is an admission that for Mei, political comment was neither the only nor the main function of his poetry. But Zhu's view is based on the assumption that political or social criticism should be the primary aim of poets—the Way of Poetry, in traditional terms—and that poetry neglecting this aim is worthless in terms of its value for society. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate that in fact poetry fulfilled a number of other valuable social and personal functions in the Northern Song, and that poets themselves subscribed to a much broader definition of the Way of Poetry—perhaps even the Confucian moral Way itself—than most modern scholars have assumed. In short, the main purpose of poetry for Northern Song poets was to promote social cohesion through the *activity* of poetic exchanges, not through the content of the poems as such, a purpose that even the most trivial and lighthearted subject matter could fulfil in the right circumstances.⁵⁹