Topos And Entelechy In The Ethos Of Reclusion In China

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

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

Students of traditional China generally will have gained some understanding of the nature of reclusion in China, of the various rationales for eschewing officialdom, and of the diverse conduct of men in reclusion. They also may have noticed that some officers of state seemingly went in and out of reclusion, or when in office rationalized that they were in reclusion within the court, while a great number of literati wrote thematically in the persona of the man-in-reclusion. Students of early medieval China probably will also be aware that certain individuals, especially during the Southern Dynasties, found a certain utility in their status as “lofty gentlemen.” Scholarship is not wanting in these areas,² yet there still is need for disambiguating the nature of reclusion and its role in the scholar-official ethos and literati culture of imperial China, especially early medieval China.

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

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


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

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

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

Fan Teng 汲訨 (d. 301) later minced no words in his response to a summons in 301: “Once the gate is closed, can it be reopened?” And as put so succinctly centuries later by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1473–1529): “In the end, a man in reclusion doubtless does not emerge. Should one be said to be in reclusion, and yet emerge, then doubtless he was not a man in reclusion.” Practitioners of reclusion habitually eschewed official positions; those who seemingly went in and out of reclusion, wrote in the persona of the man in reclusion, or eristically co-opted some of the putative noetic aspects of reclusion were, by all practical accounting, officials.

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

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

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

4 “Chushi Juan Shuze ming” 處士圖銘 (read: 處士圖) 叔ột銘, in Cai Zhonglang ji 彰中郎集 (Shanghai), 2.18a. The inscription is excerpted in Ouyang Xun 欧陽詢 (557–641), ed., Yiyen lei jia 藝文類聚 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 37.658, where it is titled “Chushi Juan Dian bei” 處士圖銘 (that excerpt does not include the passage quoted here). Juan 圖 was the name of a number of persons from Chenliu 陳留 during the Han, including Sir Juan 圖公 (one of the “Four Hoaryheads” 四皓), Juan Cheng 晁 (compiler of the Chenliu fengsu zhuang 陳留風俗傳), and Juan Wensheng 文生 (an acquaintance of Guo Tai). Hun 圖 as a surname is anomalous (sources on surnames refer only to Cai Yong’s inscription), and seems likely to be an error.

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

6 “Sihao lun” 四皓論 in Chen Menglei 陳孟蕾 (1651–after Jan. 1723) et al., comp., Gujin tushu jicheng 古今圖書集成 (Shanghai: Zhonghua, 1934), ce 274 ("Xueying dian., j. 2), 10a. This essay, not included in Wang’s collected works, is also quoted by Takigawa Kamitārō 高川兼太郎 in Shiki kaichū kōsho 史記會注考證 (Taipei: Hongshi, 1977), 55.28.
he chose, felt constrained, or was resigned to do so, the
scholar-official, or his persona, might demonstrate in
action or espouse in writing precepts associated with
reclusion; but he was, ultimately, a scholar-official and
not a man in reclusion.

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

Proof of the integrity and mettle of individuals devo-
ted to a life of reclusion is manifest in their response to
the inevitable calls to official position in the central
administration. For their continuing refusal to
serve in any official capacity, these individuals were
singled out for praise by their contemporaries and by
posterity. When viewed from the vantage-point of
officialdom, men who let down their resolve and ac-
ceded to the call to service also might be commended
within the prevailing scholar-official ethos, for they
sometimes went on to prominent official careers. Yet
when viewed in terms of reclusion, their conduct might
be seen as lacking. Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–86), in
a discussion of aspects of reclusion following his re-
counting of Fan Ying’s 樊英 (ca. 66–ca. 135) infamous
compliance to a summons to court, commented: “Now
if those were true Gentlemen, position is not what they
covet and punishments are not what they fear; in the
end they could not be made to come forward. Those
who can be made to come forward are all men who
covet position and fear punishments; how can they be
worthy of esteem?”

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

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

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

8 Zizhi tongjian 晉訏通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982), 51.
9 1649.
10 Jin shu 130.3209; cf. also Song shu 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1974), 95.2331.
[the meaning of] going forth or staying put?" 11 Thus, if we can believe the anecdote, under appropriate circumstances the principles of reclusion were considered sacrosanct even among the chieftains and warlords of the northern plains. When Helian Bobo accused Wei of not recognizing his "rightful" authority as emperor, David Knechtges suggests (personal communication) that Wei's excessive posturing might actually have been an indirect form of protest. Still, whether motivated by fear or motivated by righteous defiance, Wei's acquiescence to the summons of his ruler nevertheless constituted a relaxation of his resolve.

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


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

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

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

With the publicization of the private life of exemplary men-in-reclusion came the popularization of various outward aspects of reclusion and the integration of reclusion into society as a genteel option, as well as a means to secure recognition. Conduct that originally was an individual’s response to a particular combination of external circumstances and personal ideals was de-personalized into an open set of postures that could be assumed by others temporarily when expedient, with or without the resolve that had characterized the precedent. The phenomenon of idealized, abstract, nominal reclusion—reclusion abstracted from its most fundamental realization—pervaded the Six Dynasties. It played a role in virtually every facet of life: in divergent developing philosophical trends and organized religions; in the theory and practice of government; in literature; in art; in social relations; in the appreciation of the natural world; etc. And in contradistinction to the individuals found noteworthy by their contemporaries and by posterity for embracing reclusion as a way of life, a far greater number of persons came to extol the private life, while either seeking entry into officialdom, lamenting being employed therein, or finding self-justification for a temporary setback. A gentrified, diffuse—often de rigueur—nominal reclusion was fashioned, which inversely tended to render more distinct the conviction that characterized reclusion as a way of life.

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

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

\textsuperscript{17} See Liu Xu 刘昫 (887–946), comp., 

\textit{Jiu Tang shu 舊唐書} (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1985), 66.2470; also Ouyang Xiu 欧陽修 (1007–72) et al., comp., 

\textit{Xin Tang shu 新唐書} (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975), 96.3860–61. Su Wei 蘇軾 had a distinguished service record, but was praised by the Sui emperor as having embodied the axiom, “given employ, take action; shunted aside, stow yourself away” (see \textit{Lun yu} 7.10). The emperor also told his courtiers: “Should Su Wei come upon an age of disorder, then as with the Four Hoaryheads of the Southern Mountains, would it be easy to humble him?” See Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643), Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 (583–661) et al., comp., 

\textit{Sui shu 隋書} (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982), 41.1186.

\textsuperscript{18} See \textit{Xin Tang shu} 123.4375 and Liu Su 劉述 (fl. 807), comp., 

\textit{Da Tang xinyu 大唐新語} (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1984), 10.157–58, which may have been the source of the \textit{Xin Tang shu} account. The saying also was phrased as, “Zhongnan and Mt. Song’s Shao-shih peak are shortcuts on the road to officialdom” 赴南求捷徑, thus referring both to Lu Cangyong and his brother Zhengming; see \textit{Xin Tang shu} 196.5594.

\textsuperscript{19} A number of representative examples can conveniently be found in \textit{Yiwen leiju}, j. 36–37.

\textsuperscript{20} In addition to many works having similar titles, literary compositions entitled “Recluses” (i.e., disengaged persons) 逸民 or “Remote Ones” 吝者 were written by Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303), Lu Yun 陸雲 (262–303), Yu Ai 魏廬 (262–311), Zao Ju 趵墟 (d. ca. 311), Wang Yi 王邑 (early 4th c.), Jiang You 江逹 (mid 4th c.), Ge Hong 葛洪 (ca. 280–ca. 340), and Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433).
reclusion to encompass any and all conceivable situations, including even service, the antipode of reclusion, so long as the person remained aloof. The philosophical rationale for “hiding in the court” had been noted in the Han in the facetious jesting of Dongfang Shuo (154–93 B.C.E.), and by renowned figures such as Yang Xiong (33 B.C.E.–ca. 18 C.E.; Yang called it the ultimate in sophistry) and Wang Chong (27–ca. 100), but it gained great currency among the scholar-official class during the Jin and later. Cognoscenti of the bon mot (devotees of “abstruse learning” 玄學) grafted Zhuangzi’s philosophical Daoist detachment, and soon also Vimalakirti’s worldly Buddhism, onto the Confucian trunk of propagating the Way through service, thus cultivating a transcendence that proved to be more pragmatic than mystical, wherein one’s inner state was independent of one’s overt acts. A famous example of these views is found in Guo Xiang’s 郭象 (d. 312) commentary to Zhuangzi’s portrayal of the Immortal of Guye Mountain. In explanation of what he says is the metaphorical nature of the passage, Guo Xiang writes:

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

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

You, my eminences, can be said to have a will toward reclusion yet not understand reclusion. As for what constitutes the Way of reclusion, one can also be in reclusion in the court, and likewise one can be in reclusion in the marketplace. Reclusion is found first of all in oneself, not in external things.²²

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

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

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

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

²² Jin shu 82.2151.
²⁴ “Fan zhaoyin shi” 反昭隱詩, Wen xuan 22.4b.
²⁶ See Jin shu 94.2447.
current, and a stupendous coup for governance; and it provided a venue for more than a few individuals faced with a great moral dilemma. Yet, “hiding within the court” is reclusion only in the eye of the casuist.

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

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

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