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HIDDEN SPOOR: RUAN XIAOXU AND HIS TREATISE ON RECLUSION

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In early medieval China great attention was paid to compiling accounts of men in reclusion, yet the prefaces to these compilations often contain only vague or stale reasoning concerning the nature of reclusion itself. A preface by Shen Yue (441–513) is a notable exception: Shen differentiated between “disengagement” and “reclusion.” A slightly later contemporary of Shen, Ruan Xiaoxu (479–536), took issue with him in a unique and tightly constructed disquisition on what Ruan saw as a basic dichotomy in the Way of man: “the root” and “overt traces.” Ruan’s overlooked treatise is examined here, as are some relevant facets of his life.

DURING THE SIX DYNASTIES an unprecedented degree of attention was paid to reclusion, in general, and to delimiting the nature of reclusion, in specific. Compilations of accounts of famous men in reclusion apparently gained a *succès fou* during the Six Dynasties, there being no less than thirty works of this nature completed by the mid-sixth century.¹ We are most familiar with the *Lives of Lofty Gentlemen* 高士傳 of both Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐 (215–82) and Xi Kang 嵇康 (223–62), with Fan Ye’s 范曄 (398–446) “Accounts of Disengaged Persons” 逸民傳 in the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, and Shen Yue’s 沈約 (441–513) “Accounts of Reclusion and Disengagement” 隱逸傳 in the *Song shu* 宋書.

Prefatorial remarks by the compilers of accounts of reclusion invariably cite classical justifications for the presence and acclamation of reclusion throughout the ages. However, they often are in disagreement over which examples most appropriately represent the practice of reclusion, and, for that matter, what should be understood as the most appropriate criteria for adjudicating the rationale and behavior of men in reclusion. Xi Kang, for one, apparently had a rather generalized conception of reclusion. He composed notices of and eulogies for “those since high antiquity who were sage and worthy, reclusive and detached, whose minds were set on escape and who left behind a reputation.”² Still,

his accounts also included several men who had not renounced their official status, and he also was taken to task for his lack of circumspection.³

Huangfu Mi found that compilations written before his own had shortcomings either of consistency of design or of temporal scope. His “Lofty Gentlemen” were those who “loftily made renunciations” and who were “not humbled by a king or a lord, whose reputations were not dissipated by the passage of time.” Yet there was no room in his compilation for “those who may [simply] have held fast to their resolve in the manner of [Bo] Yi and [Shu] Qi, whose chosen acts mayhaps were like those of the two Gong (Gong Sheng and Gong She).”⁴

In his preface Huangfu Mi does not expound upon the nature of reclusion, yet in intentionally excluding Bo Yi and, especially, Gong Sheng, his views are clear. He does not regard the mere refusal to associate with a particular ruler due to particular circumstances as conduct befitting reclusion: such men may have withdrawn, but they did not choose reclusion as their way of life—in fact, in the end they chose not to live at all. But none of those whom Huangfu Mi termed “Lofty Gentlemen” chose death over life in reclusion.⁵

¹ See my “Patterns of Reclusion in Early and Early Medieval China: A Study of the Formulation of the Practice of Reclusion in China and its Portrayal” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Washington, 1989), 301–69.

² *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1962), 21.605, n. 1, from a *Xi Family Register* 嵇氏譜 quoting a biography of Xi Kang written by his elder brother Xi 喜.

³ By Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721) in his *Shi tong*; see *Shi tong tongshi* 史通通釋 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1978), 7.187, 18.522. What remains of Xi Kang’s work, whose full title was *Sheng xian gaoshi zhuan zan* 聖賢高士傳贊, is reprinted as an appendix to Dai Mingyang’s 戴明揚 *Xi Kang ji jiaozhu* 嵇康集校注 (1962; rpt. Taipei: Heluo tushu, 1978), 397–421.

⁴ *Gaoshi zhuan* 高士傳 (*Sbby*), “Preface” 序.

⁵ Gong Sheng 龔勝 (68 B.C.E.–11 C.E.) and Gong She 龔舍 (62–6 B.C.E.) declined to serve under Wang Mang, although they held office previously. The elderly statesman Gong Sheng

Fan Ye generalized the conduct of men in reclusion into six categories:

Some lived in seclusion, seeking to maintain their resolve. Some turned and fled so as to keep their inner principles intact. Some sought personal tranquility, thereby repressing their impatience. Some removed themselves from danger, in pursuit of security. Some defiled themselves in the profane world and thereby stirred their mettle. Some condemned worldly things, thereby arousing their purity.⁶

Further, according to Fan Ye, men in reclusion did not willingly practice reclusion and accept resultant material duress because they eschewed human contact or rejoiced in the joys of the natural world. It simply was “where their innate nature led them 性分所至. . . . Even were one to try to convert or change their chosen course, he simply would be unable to affect them.”⁷

Fan’s discussion was the fullest to date of the conduct of men in reclusion. Why they chose reclusion and what they did in reclusion depended upon their nature, he tells us, but the nature of reclusion itself is left to be inferred. Fan Ye does not offer a profound analysis of the underlying basis for reclusion, but his pronouncements have retained a certain authority through the ages. This is mainly because his remarks formed the focal point of the first section devoted to reclusion in any of the official dynastic histories.⁸ Of perhaps

had retired at seventy-two *sui*; his refusal to accept an honorary, emeritus office in the end resulted in his starving himself to death. See *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1962), 72.3080–85, and my “Patterns of Reclusion,” 170–79 for translation. Bo Yi 伯夷 and Shu Qi 叔齊, of course, are legendary for their refusal to “eat the grain of the Zhou,” starving to death in the Shouyang Mountains 首陽山; see *Shi ji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 61.2122–25.

⁶ *Hou Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1963), 83.2755; see also *Wen xuan* 文選 (Taibei: Zhengzhong, 1971 facsimile reproduction of a 1869 woodblock edition), 50.9b.

⁷ *Hou Han shu*, 83.2755. The *Wen xuan* text (50.9b) writes “where their valorous nature led them” 介性所至. Both readings have Tang commentaries corroborating their texts, and neither reading holds absolute authority. See also *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1985), 501.6b, which quotes the text as: 性所至.

⁸ There had been several precedent histories of the Later Han and the Jin which included sections denominated “Disengaged Persons,” “Scholars-At-Home,” “Lofty Gentlemen,” etc., but none of them has survived beyond excerpts found in

greater importance, Fan’s “Preface” was chosen for inclusion in the influential *Wen xuan*, the compilation of which was completed in the late 520s.⁹

Shen Yue’s preface to his “Accounts of Reclusion and Disengagement,” composed sometime before mid-488,¹⁰ opens with a long list of quotations from the classics. For Shen, however, the very diversity of terminology and characterization of reclusion in the great books of antiquity is in itself reason for pause, and he uses the occasion to discourse on what he believes to be the true nature of reclusion.¹¹ Shen first defines the word “reclusion” 隱: “one’s overt traces 迹 are not noticeably manifest, and one’s inner principle 道 cannot be discerned.” This circumspection describes what he later labels “the worthy man in reclusion” 賢隱, which Shen considers to be the only bona fide sort of reclusion.¹²

By the fact that [the worthy man] does not in any way condemn the world, and yet still has reason to shun the world, we know assuredly that his purport is in veiling his inner principle and is not in hiding himself away.

commentaries and compendia. Examples can conveniently be found in Zhou Tianyou 周天游, comp., *Bajia Hou Han shu jizhu* 八家後漢書輯注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1986), and Tang Qiu 唐球 (1804–1881), comp., *Jiujia jiu Jin shu jiben* 九家舊晉書輯本 (*Congshu jicheng*).

⁹ See David R. Knechtges, tr. and annot., *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature*, vol. 1: *Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982), 10.

¹⁰ See *Song shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1983), 100.2466.

¹¹ The extracted statements that follow come from *Song shu* 93.2275–76, 2297.

¹² Shen Yue likely had in mind here, and throughout his “Preface,” the statements made by Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 B.C.E.–C.E. 18) concerning reclusion: “When in words and conduct the Sage does not meet with his time, the Sage goes into reclusion. When in words and conduct the Worthy does not meet with his time, the Worthy goes into reclusion. When in words and conduct a ‘discourser’ does not meet with his time, the ‘discourser’ goes into reclusion.” See Yang Xiong, *Fa yan* 法言 (*Sbby*), 11.6a. The last category was meant in reference to the casuistry of Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (154–93 B.C.E.), and was meant to exclude Dongfang from the ranks of true “men in hiding” 隱者. When Yang was asked whether Dongfang Shuo was not one who “hid within the court” 朝隱, Yang responded that the ancients disparaged ones who “hid within their sinecured offices” 祿隱 (*Fa yan* 11.6a/b). As might be imagined, Dongfang Shuo never was included in any compilations of accounts of Lofty Gentlemen.

The worthy man in reclusion is there because of foul destiny, Shen tells us, and hides away his inner self as well as the outward aspects of his reclusion: "When one goes into reclusion because the cycle of fate is closed off, the overt traces 迹 of being in reclusion are not to be seen." For Shen Yue, the reason for worthy men to be in reclusion is "because they had no choice." Worthy men are always present in the world, yet at some times they deliberately keep themselves obscured and do not emerge: "It came down to preserving their life and keeping from harm." Still, the worthiness of worthy men in reclusion is only slightly less than that of the worthy who has found his time; Shen Yue calls them "proximate sages" 亞聖. They may have lived in reclusion; however,

had they encountered a ruler who could perceive their loyalty, and had they met with a fate which brought them their time, would they then have given reign to their sentiments by the rivers and seas and chosen disengagement in the hills and brush-forests?

Shen Yue makes a point of distinguishing the reclusion of the worthy man from that of aloof recluses, both in their overt traces 迹 and in their basic motivations. The former, as we have seen, leave no overt traces of their reclusion; the latter, "make a show of the niceties of having risen above the world." Shen calls these recluses "ones in hiding" 隱者, and because they show off the overt traces of their reclusion, he labels their behavior "contrived reclusion" 致隱. "Ones in hiding" condemn the world and merely seek to avoid others; in flaunting their disengagement and making a show of secluding their physical presence, they merely "appease their hearts beyond the everyday world." For Shen Yue, these recluses are but "disengaged" 逸, and not "in reclusion" 隱.¹³

Shen Yue's exemplar of "ones in hiding" is the Basket Hefter 荷篠. The Basket Hefter, we remember, was the anonymous recluse who once entertained Confucius' disciple Zilu 子路; Zilu was feasted with chicken and

millet, but when he tried to revisit the recluse, the recluse had disappeared. Confucius told Zilu that the Basket Hefter was "one in hiding" 隱者.¹⁴ Shen Yue writes that the Basket Hefter and anonymous recluses of his ilk were distinctive in "having left overt traces 迹 that could be passed down." In differentiating between the reclusion of these men and that of the worthy, Shen writes,

In the reclusion of the worthy man, his purport is more profound than self-obfuscation. In the reclusion of the Basket Hefter [and his sort], the matter goes no further than avoiding others.¹⁵

Shen Yue expressly intended his preface to contradict the delimitation of reclusion advocated by Yuan Shu 袁淑 (408–53), who had collected various accounts of "men in reclusion since antiquity who had left behind overt traces without leaving behind their name."¹⁶ Yuan's *Accounts of Genuine Reclusion* 真隱傳 itself had been compiled to deride the trothless retirement of his friend He Shangzhi 何尚之 (382–460) who had given up his high office to retire briefly to the countryside—at age seventy-one. Yuan's compilation excluded any and all men of the world, and included only accounts of "recluses" who literally had not left behind their names: they were all renowned for their acts, or, in two cases, their writings, but remained anonymous except for sobriquets such as "The Master of Ghost Valley" 鬼谷子, or "The Master from Sumen Mountains" 蘇門先生, etc.¹⁷ Shen Yue considered that these men were far from genuine: perhaps they were "disengaged" 逸, but they were not "in reclusion" 隱.¹⁸

Compilers of accounts of reclusion agreed that men in reclusion eschewed office; they did not agree, however, on why or how. Nor were they in accord about suitable parameters for the collocation of accounts, or

¹³ See *Song shu*, 93.2275–76, 2297. For discussion and full translation, see my "Patterns of Reclusion," 339–48, 480–86; and Kamitsuka Yoshiko 神冢淑子, "Shin Yaku no in'itsu shisō" 沈約の隱逸思想, *Nihon Chūgoku gakkai hō* 日本中國學會報 31 (1979): 111–14. See also Richard B. Mather, "Shen Yueh's Poems of Reclusion: From Total Withdrawal to Living in the Suburbs," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 5 (1983): 55, and *The Poet Shen Yueh (441–513)* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988), 121–22.

¹⁴ See *Lun yu*, 18.7 (abridged account in *Gaoshi zhuan* A.9a).

¹⁵ *Song shu*, 93.2275.

¹⁶ See *Nan shi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975), 30.784.

¹⁷ *Taiping yulan*, 510.4a–5b has preserved ten of the accounts. In addition to the two mentioned above, there are brief notices on "The Elder from Zheng" 鄭長, "The Venerable One from the South" 南公, "Pheasant-Cap Master" 鶡冠子, "The Rural Oldster" 野老, "The Man who Offered the King of Chu a Fish" 獻魚于楚王, "The Adept at the River's Bank" 河上丈人, "The Master of Huqiu" 狐丘先生, and "The Man Watching Confucius" 侯孔子者.

¹⁸ *Song shu*, 93.2276.

about the nature of reclusion itself.¹⁹ Yuan Shu's compilation was restricted to those who had left behind only a transmittable rumor, yet Shen Yue considered the reclusion of those persons to have been "the reclusion of the Basket Hefter, and not the reclusion of the worthy man."

Shen Yue's gradation of reclusion was not unprecedented. After all, Confucius himself once had proclaimed laconically, "The Worthy might shun the entire world. The next best will shun a particular place, the next in turn a particular look, and the next again particular words."²⁰ And like Shen Yue, many later compilers of accounts of reclusion established gradations of reclusion to reflect their notions about the nature of reclusion.²¹ However, the close analysis made by Shen Yue of the nature of reclusion itself was something new.

A younger contemporary of Shen Yue, the learned bibliophile and practitioner of reclusion Ruan Xiaoxu 阮孝緒 (479–536), also compiled accounts of men in reclusion. In his *Accounts of Lofty Reclusion* 高隱傳, Ruan offered an innovative system for classifying reclusion. Ruan's compilation included men from the time of Yan 炎 (the Divine Husbandman, Shennong 神農) and Huang 黃 (the Yellow Emperor)²² down to the close of the Liang dynasty's Tianjian 天監 reign-period (502–19). But instead of simply arranging the accounts chronologically, he organized them into three ranks. In the first rank were placed those persons "whose words and conduct were unrivaled and preeminent, but whose personal and family names were not passed down." In the second rank were those "whose [fame] had not dissipated throughout the ages, and who had names which could be recorded." The third division contained those who "hung up their caps [and

withdrew] from the world of men, perching their hearts beyond the worldly dust."²³

Ruan's *Accounts*, in ten chapters, comprised sections devoted to each of his three classes of lofty men. When Ruan completed the work, the middle section alone contained notices of one hundred thirty-seven individuals. Soon after its completion, when Ruan's friend Liu Xu 劉訐 and his cousin Liu Xiao 劉歊 died in 518 and 519 at ages 31 and 32, respectively, Ruan added their accounts to this section. When Ruan himself passed away, Liu Xu's older brother Xie 掣 appended to it an account of Ruan.²⁴ Ruan's *Accounts of Lofty Reclusion* is listed in the bibliographical catalogues of the Sui and Tang dynastic histories, as well as in Zheng Qiao's 鄭樵 (1104–60) *Tong zhi* 通志, but it is no longer extant.

Ruan Xiaoxu also wrote a disquisition on the nature of reclusion, which has fortunately been preserved.²⁵ Context and content seem to indicate that this disquisition might have been written in conjunction with the *Accounts of Lofty Reclusion*.²⁶ Indeed, it is probable that the essay constituted part of the introductory matter of that book. Ruan himself listed a one-chapter supplement to his *Accounts*, called "prefatorial guidelines" 序例, in the enumeration of his own works, which he included in his famous bibliographical treatise *Qi lu* 七錄.²⁷

Ruan Xiaoxu compiled the *Accounts of Lofty Reclusion* sometime between 513 (the year of Shen Yue's death) and 518.²⁸ He certainly would have been familiar

¹⁹ For discussion and translation of all the prefaces and postfaces in compilations of accounts of pre-Tang reclusion, see my "Patterns of Reclusion," 301–68, 456–509.

²⁰ *Lun yu*, 14.39.

²¹ Examples are Xiao Zixian's 蕭子顯 (489–537) "Accounts of Lofty Disengagement" 高逸傳 in the *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書, appropriated by Li Yanshou 李延壽 (fl. 625) in the *Nan shi* 南史; Yao Silian's 姚思廉 (557–637) "Accounts of Scholars-At-Home" 處士傳 in the *Liang shu* 梁書; Wei Zheng's 魏徵 (580–643) "Accounts of Reclusion" 隱逸傳 in the *Sui shu* 隋書; and Ouyang Xiu's 歐陽修 (1007–1072) "Accounts of Reclusion" 隱逸傳 in the *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書.

²² *Nan shi* writes 炎皇 for the 炎黃 of the *Liang shu*; probably what is meant is legendary antiquity. See *Nan shi*, 76.1894, and *Liang shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975), 51.741.

²³ See *Nan shi*, 76.1894–96. *Liang shu*, 51.741, simply records that the accounts were organized into three gradations, without mentioning the content of each grade.

²⁴ See *Nan shi*, 76.1896. Ruan and the two Lius shared common interests and always were found together; they were known among people of the capital as the "Three in Reclusion" 三隱; see *Nan shi*, 49.1227.

²⁵ *Liang shu*, 51.741, and *Quan Liang wen* 全梁文, 66.17a/b, in *Quan shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文, comp. Yan Kejun (1815; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua, 1985).

²⁶ Yan Kejun straightaway titles it "Gaoyin zhuan lun" 高隱傳論.

²⁷ See Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), ed., *Guang Hongming ji* 廣弘明集 (*Sbby*), 3.12a, and *Quan Liang wen*, 66.17a.

²⁸ We know that Ruan's friends Liu Xu and Liu Xiao read the completed work before they died; see *Nan shi*, 76.1896. Liu Xu, as noted above, died in 518. And we know that Ruan compiled his work following a divination that had been performed for him sometime after 513; see *Liang shu*, 51.740, and below.

with Shen Yue's preface to the "Accounts of Reclusion and Disengagement" in the *Song shu*, for Shen's *Song shu* had already been in circulation since the end of the Yongming (483–93) era.²⁹ Further, Ruan and Shen both were active in the literary circles of the élite in the capital Jiankang 建康 (modern Nanjing), although Ruan's conservative clique, centered on Pei Ziyue 裴子野 (469–530), was not particularly enamored of the prosodic innovations espoused by Shen Yue and others.³⁰ When reading Ruan Xiaoxu's disquisition on reclusion, then, we should keep in mind Shen Yue's discussion of reclusion.

In his essay, Ruan Xiaoxu discusses his conception of the philosophical basis for reclusion, deriving from a fundamental dichotomy in the Way of man. The disquisition centers on the relationship between "overt traces" 跡 and the "root" 本 of the great and ultimate Way. He writes:

Now as for the root of the *ne plus ultra* Way 至道, what is most estimable subsists in Non-Action 無為. The overt traces of the Sages, however, are to be found in the reformation of corrupt practices. That corrupt practices are reformed is due to there being overt traces; that overt traces are brought to bear goes counter to the root. Whereas the root is Non-Action, this constitutes the extreme of countering the Way 非道之至. Nevertheless, if they (the Sages) did not pass down their overt traces, the world would lack the wherewithal for achieving peace. And yet if one does not delve to the root, then the Way and "[worldly] reality" 實 are lost one to the other.³¹

²⁹ See *Liang shu*, 30.442.

³⁰ See *Liang shu*, 30.443, and *Nan shi*, 33.866, 76.1894. See also Knechtges, *Wen xuan*, 1:11–13; Mather, *The Poet Shen Yüeh*, 53, n. 60; and John Marney, *Liang Chien-wen Ti* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), 78ff.

³¹ Cf. *Zhuangzi jishi* (Taipei: Shijie, 1971), 16.245: "To look at it from this standpoint, then the age has lost the Way, the Way has lost the age, and the age and the Way are lost one to another. What means do men of the Way have to flourish in the age? And likewise, what means does the age have to flourish in the Way? When the Way has not the means to flourish in the age, and the age has not the means to flourish in the Way, then even though the Sage be not enclosed by the mountain forests, his virtue is hidden nonetheless. As it is hidden, he therefore does not hide himself 隱故不自隱. As for those referred to in antiquity as Men of Hidden [Virtue] 隱士者 it is not that they concealed themselves and kept from sight; and it is not that they held back their words and

For Confucius and Dan [the Duke of Zhou] to preserve their overt traces, it was thus appropriate to expediently obscure "the root." Laozi and Zhuangzi simply illumined "the root," and similarly it was appropriate to profoundly suppress their overt traces. Where overt traces can be suppressed, herein lies the forte of these several fellows (i.e., Laozi and Zhuangzi). On the other hand, where "the root" becomes obscured, therein lies the deficiency of [Confucius of] Ni Hill 尼丘.

If one has not attained "complete oneness,"³² then one must lack truly perspicacious wisdom. Yet only one who can embody the dichotomy [of "the root" and "overt traces"]³³ will possess penetrating discernment. Accordingly, whereas the Sage has been thoroughly brought into evidence, it is because of his having forged overt traces; as the Worthy 賢 has yet to reside in the place of eminence, then we must even more so speak of "the root."³⁴

Truly this is because overt traces should reform corrupt practices, but it is only the Sage who is able to do so. The lucid principle of "the root" and "[worldly] reality," however, can be evidenced in the Worthy. If one were able to embody [the dichotomy of] "the root"

declined from going out in public; and it is not that they stowed away their knowledge and refrained from setting forth. It was that the fate of the times was too greatly awry. When one meets the right fate of the times, and accomplishes great acts in the world, then in returning to oneness one leaves no overt traces. When one does not meet the right fate of the times, and is greatly constrained in the world, then one roots himself firmly, finds peace in knowing that there will be a culmination, and waits. This is the Way of self-preservation."

³² I.e., one who has attained the Way. Cf. *Laozi* 39: "As for those of old attaining complete oneness: Heaven attained oneness and thereby became pure; / Earth attained oneness, becoming tranquil; / spirits attained oneness and thus became numinous; / the Valley in attaining oneness became full; / the myriad things attained oneness and came to life; / lords and kings attained oneness and thus were exemplars for the world. . . ."

³³ Following the *Liang shu* reading of 體二; cf. *Liang shu*, 51.754, no. 10. *Quan Liang wen*, 66.17b writes 體之. What is referred to here is the dichotomy of "the root" (i.e., leaving no overt traces) and "overt traces" (i.e., leaving behind a transforming influence). The juxtaposition of the two is implied above, and is specified below.

³⁴ Ruan is responding here and below to Shen Yue's conception of the "worthy man in reclusion." Ruan's own conception of the Worthy, as will be seen, is not limited within Shen Yue's compass.

and “overt traces,” and were able fully to apprehend [the nature of] “suppressing” 抑 and “promoting” 揚, then that is more than half of the purport of Confucius and Zhuangzi.³⁵

Ruan’s premise is that ideally the world should function through Non-Action, the essence of the Way. Were the material world of men (Ruan’s “[worldly] reality” 實) to function according to the Way, then one should do one’s best to suppress one’s overt traces. For Ruan, Zhuangzi and Laozi epitomize the actualization of this ideal. He notes, however, that corruption in the material world of men is, in point of fact, reformed through the transforming influence of the Sage, that being in effect the Sage’s overt traces. Were it not for these overt traces, the world would not attain to peace. The Sage, then, and only the Sage, is able to promote his overt traces; for the *sine qua non* of overt traces is the suppression of corrupt practices. The Sage promotes his overt traces, then, and thereby intentionally goes counter to “the root.” For Ruan, Confucius and the Duke of Zhou epitomize the Sage.

For Ruan Xiaoxu, only one who has attained the oneness of the Way has “perspicacious wisdom.” “Penetrating discernment,” however, is possessed by the Worthy, he who can embody the fundamental dichotomy in the Way of man—that is, the precept of sometimes promoting overt traces, sometimes suppressing them to leave the world to the Way. Should the worthy man, in his wisdom, promote his overt traces, he then will suppress corrupt influences and *de facto* be the Sage. Should he perceive it best to suppress his overt traces, he then is “in reclusion.”

The Sage is thoroughly in evidence and fully recognizable through his overt traces. The worthy man in reclusion, however, is not “in the place of eminence” and goes unrecognized: this is precisely because he has suppressed his overt traces. And it is in the action or non-action of the worthy man that we can perceive the dichotomous nature of the Way and the phenomenal world. If we can fathom this, then we can understand both Confucius and Zhuangzi, both the Sage and the worthy man in reclusion.

As noted above, Ruan Xiaoxu’s disquisition on reclusion is in reply to Shen Yue. Shen’s thesis was that the worthy man is in reclusion because he has not met with his time. Shen basically had not gone beyond elaborating on the age-old dictum, found principally in the *Lun yu* 論語 and the *Yi jing* 易經, that when the

Way is manifest in the world, one comes forth to benefit one’s time, but when the world is awry, one hides away one’s virtue.³⁶ Shen Yue also avowed that the great legendary recluses merely were “in hiding,” disengaged and carefree; they were not “in reclusion.”

Ruan Xiaoxu also considers men in reclusion to be worthies; were they not, they would be worldly Sages. But their reclusion is not predicated on the state of worldly affairs: were the Way to be truly present in the material reality of the world, then “the root,” being Non-Action, ought not to be obscured by worldly, overt traces running counter to the root. In their wisdom, according to Ruan, worthy men actively suppress their overt traces for the express purpose of illuminating “the root” and thus furthering the Way. They are not the Sage, but as worthy men, neither are they inferior. Ruan Xiaoxu effectively has deflated Shen’s basically Confucian stance by arguing that *all* men in reclusion are worthies; *ipso facto* they are to be esteemed. In so arguing he seemingly has skirted the issue of the aloof behavior of legendary recluses; he does this by redefining “overt traces” (more of which, anon) and by transforming a traditional justification for reclusion, a justification he himself once used.

For centuries previously scholars had belabored the point that even during remote times of great peace, there still were to be found great recluses like Xu You 許由 and his ilk. This formed the core of arguments for the support of an individual’s precedented “right” to reclusion, arguments brought forward equally by men in reclusion and by their rulers.³⁷ The former sought a plausible rationale and a formal (though patently facetious) justification from great antiquity. The latter might uphold this argument as a measure of the magnanimity of their rule, or as a calculated pretension of the legitimacy and security of their reign. Nor were such inferences lost to pretenders to the throne. A

³⁶ See, for example, *Lun yu*, 7.10, 8.13, 9.12, 15.6; and *Zhou yi* 周易 #2 Kun 坤, “Wen yan” 文言, #52 Gen 艮, “Commentary on the Decision” 彖, “Xi ci zhuan” 繫辭傳 A/6, B/4. For exposition of these precepts, see my “Patterns of Reclusion,” 44–73, and “The Moral Hero: A Pattern of Reclusion in Traditional China,” forthcoming in *Monumenta Serica*.

³⁷ Four often cited examples are the arguments of Xue Fang 薛方 (d. ca. 25 C.E.) to Wang Mang 王莽; those of Wang Ba 王霸 (early 1st c. C.E.) and Yan Guang 嚴光 (a.k.a. Zhuang 莊 Guang, d. post-41 C.E. at 80 *sui*) to the Guangwu 光武 emperor; and the same emperor’s decree on behalf of Zhou Dang 周黨 (early 1st c. C.E.). See *Han shu*, 72.3095–96 for the first, and *Hou Han shu*, 83.2762–63 for the latter three.

³⁵ *Liang shu*, 51.741; *Quan Liang wen*, 66.17a/b.

blatant example concerns the satrap Huan Xuan 桓玄 during his short usurpation in 404:

Due to the fact that each successive dynasty had had its gentlemen who took flight, yet his own age alone was without any, Xuan summoned the sixth-generation descendant of Huangfu Mi, Xizhi 希之, to serve as Editorial Director and in addition gave him gifts and provisions, ordering him, however, to decline each time and not accept. He then gave him the appellation Lofty Gentleman 高士, but people of the time gave him the name "Bogus Recluse" 充隱.³⁸

In his disquisition on reclusion, Ruan does not resort to this type of stale reasoning. Nor does he mention the political implications of reclusion, except to put forward the Taoist cliché that were the material world of man to be in full accordance with the Way, it would not be appropriate for anyone to go against "the root" and leave behind his overt traces. In his own life Ruan also avoided politics: he was a man in reclusion. But he was not a "Taoist." His biography portrays him as a frugal and prudent man, a filial son, and a scholar in the "Confucian" tradition.³⁹

To grasp fully Ruan Xiaoxu's reasoning in his disquisition on reclusion, it is useful to look more closely at his personal conduct. Although Ruan eschewed office he had ample opportunity to serve. He belonged to a prominent family that included generations of officials, and his elder sister was the consort of one of the Liang princes (Xiao Hui 蕭恢, 476–526). Another Liang prince, who actually became emperor sixteen years after Ruan's death (Xiao Yi 蕭繹, Emperor Yuan 元, 508–54, r. 552–54), was in a way Ruan's literary protégé: he so valued Ruan's acumen that before circulating any of his own writings, he would first have Ruan inspect them. This is all in addition to Ruan's close associations with some of the most prominent literati of his day, especially those in the circle around Pei Ziyue noted above. Ruan was recommended to office more than once, but each time declined. Once, after not acceding to an imperial audience in 513, in which he would have been conferred an official position, he was asked,

³⁸ *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982), 99.2593–94. The anecdote is repeated in Xu Song's 許嵩 (fl. 756), *Jiankang shilu* 建康實錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1986), 10.322, where it says that Huan Xuan "secretly ordered him to decline and not accept."

³⁹ *Liang shu*, 51.739–42; *Nan shi*, 76.1893–96. The following discussion of Ruan's life is based on these accounts.

In the past, "when [the workings of] Heaven and Earth were stopped up, the worthy man hid away."⁴⁰ Now that the worldly route has been calmed, is it acceptable that you still hide away?

Ruan's response echoed a traditional justification:

Of old, even when the virtue of the Zhou had arisen, [Bo] Yi and [Shu] Qi were not averse to eating pulse and bracken. And when the way of the Han had just begun to flourish, Huang 黃 and Qi 綺 [of the Four Hoaryheads 四皓]⁴¹ did not find the mountain forests stifling. One's humane conduct, then, is dependent on the individual—what is its relation to the world of men? And how much more so, when this humble individual is not of the class of those worthies?⁴²

Although Ruan Xiaoxu eschewed offers of official employ, he was not aloof. In declining an appointment to the staff of the Liang prince Xiao Wei 蕭偉 (476–533), he said, "It is not my mind to be 'haughty before wealth and nobility';⁴³ it is just that I am by nature faint-hearted in the temples and halls of state. Now if one were to harness a meek deer, then what would distinguish a great steed?"⁴⁴ Ruan spent his life "in reclusion," but his conduct was not to flaunt his disengagement, nor, in the words of Shen Yue, to "appease his heart beyond the everyday world."

Ruan's personal conduct was the antithesis of that of Shen Yue. Whereas Ruan habitually, and by nature, he tells us, passed up offers of engagement within the political sphere, Shen spent virtually his entire adult life holding the most prestigious and influential official positions. This is not to say that Shen was not understanding of, and at times sympathetic to, yearnings to leave the world of public affairs.⁴⁵ However, we must keep in mind that in his writings about the nature of reclusion Shen Yue has a particular perspective, one

⁴⁰ See *Zhou yi* #2 Kun, "Wen yan."

⁴¹ The Four Hoaryheads were renowned for having left office under the Qin and remaining "in reclusion" also during the Han, despite the solicitations of Gaozu 高祖, the founder of the Han. See *Han shu*, 40.2033–36, 72.3056; *Shi ji*, 55.2044–47; and *Gaoshi zhuan* B.7a/b. See also my "Patterns of Reclusion," 142–63.

⁴² *Liang shu*, 51.740; *Nan shi*, 76.1894.

⁴³ Cf. *Xunzi xinzhū* 荀子新注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1979), 2.19.

⁴⁴ *Liang shu*, 51.741; *Nan shi* 76.1895.

⁴⁵ For a thoroughly sensitive treatment of Shen's ambivalent feelings, see Mather's *The Poet Shen Yüeh*.

quite different from that of Ruan Xiaoxu. In this light we may now return to the expression “overt traces.”

Shen Yue had said that for the worthy man in reclusion, his “overt traces are not noticeably manifest.” He intends here visible signs of “being in hiding,” and for him this in turn signifies aloof behavior. For Ruan Xiaoxu, however, “overt traces” are something quite different, as we have seen: “overt traces should reform corrupt practices, but it is only the Sage who is able to do so.” For Ruan, visible signs of being in reclusion are not even within the compass of “overt traces.” They cannot be, for in his definition men in reclusion do not leave “overt traces”; it is only men who are *not* in reclusion who go counter to “the root,” leaving behind the spoor of their worldly passage.

Further, in his discourse on reclusion, Ruan Xiaoxu made an unambiguous allusion to the *Zhuangzi* (see n. 31 above). In that text we are told: “When one meets the right fate of the times,” even should one accomplish great acts within the world, “in returning to oneness one leaves no overt traces.” The right fate of the times for *Zhuangzi*, of course, would be when the Way and the age are flourishing one in the other, or, in Ruan Xiaoxu’s phraseology, when the Way and “[worldly] reality” are in total concert and “the root” need not be obscured by worldly “overt traces.” For Ruan, then, “overt traces” are signs of activity within the material, temporal realm (Ruan’s “[worldly] reality),” and thus activity in the political realm. There can be no doubt that Ruan was addressing Shen Yue’s notion of “overt traces.” He pointedly rebuts Shen’s circumscription of the term and uses the word no less than ten times in his concentrated discourse so as to insure that the reader understands precisely what he intends by it.

Ruan Xiaoxu’s understanding of “overt traces” is apparent both in his disquisition on reclusion and in his *Accounts of Lofty Reclusion*. In his *Accounts* he placed in the highest category those “whose words and conduct were unrivaled and preeminent, but whose personal and family names were not passed down.” All that these individuals left behind were merely the signs of their being in reclusion; would they not, in Ruan

Xiaoxu’s view, be those who left no “overt traces” whatsoever? Moreover they are, presumably, the same “men in reclusion since antiquity who had left their overt traces without leaving behind their name” who were commemorated in Yuan Shu’s *Accounts of Genuine Reclusion*. For Shen Yue, on the contrary, these were precisely the “ones in hiding” who “left overt traces that could be passed down”: in leaving behind visible signs of their reclusion, for Shen they were merely “disengaged,” and not “in reclusion.”

Ruan Xiaoxu also affirmed his understanding of “overt traces” in his own life. He spent his life publicly in reclusion, according to his own account and that of all his contemporaries; he was not “in hiding,” but he did hide his “overt traces.” This is illustrated in an anecdote about how he came to compile his *Accounts of Lofty Reclusion*, and his disquisition on reclusion, which he undertook following a divination performed for him just after he declined imperial audience in 513:

At that time, the adept diviner Zhang Youdao 張有道 said to Xiaoxu: “I see that you hide your overt traces, yet it is difficult to ascertain your inner self. Without putting it to the test through divination, there is no way to verify it.” He then spread out [the stalks to determine] the hexagram, and when five lines had been selected [䷋], he said: “This is going to be the hexagram Xian 咸 ䷞ (#31). According to the method of “sympathetic intuition” it is not the augury of “laudable withdrawal” (being the pronouncement for the fifth line in hexagram #33 ䷋ Dun 遁, “Withdrawal”). Xiaoxu replied: “How do you know that the final line will not be a ‘nine at the top’ (thus Dun ䷋ and not Xian ䷞)?” The result was the hexagram Dun. Youdao sighed, “This is known as ‘Flight into Withdrawal; there is nothing not auspicious’ (being the pronouncement for the top line of the hexagram Dun). The [divinatory] Image is a true response to inner virtue: your inner self and your overt traces coincide.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ *Liang shu*, 51.740–41; *Nan shi*, 76.1894.