“In the Mountain Forest I Lose My Self”: The Experience of No-Self in Wang Wei’s Short Landscape Poems

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Abstract This article discusses the dialectics of subject and object in Wang Wei’s short landscape poems from the perspective of Buddhist metaphysics. First, the article traces Wang’s Buddhist connections and surveys the Buddhist concepts, ideas, and practices of which Wang himself explicitly wrote in his essays and poems. Then it uses these ideas to analyze poems from his “Wang Stream Collection” (Wangchuan ji). The conjunctive theme of this article is the underlying emptiness of all existing phenomena, one of the main metaphysical doctrines of Mahayana philosophy and a recurrent motif in Wang’s poetry. The author demonstrates that, when seen from the standpoint of emptiness, the relation of the perceiver and the perceived in Wang’s short nature poems proves to be more sophisticated than usually thought. Because both the human agent and the natural objects around him are intrinsically empty, they are interrelated and interdependent in the act of perception at the deepest and the most subtle ontological level.

Keywords Wang Wei, landscape poetry, Buddhist poetry, Mahayana philosophy, no-self

In this article, I discuss how the speaker, or the so-called lyrical self, is expressed and constituted in Wang Wei’s 王維 (699–759 or 701–761) short landscape poems in his famed “Wang Stream Collection” 輞川集 (Wangchuan ji), written later in the poet’s life and widely considered one of the greatest achievements of Chinese landscape poetry.[1] I approach Wang’s poems from the framework of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy and posit that the concept of “no-self” opens a way to conceiving the ontological dimension of the poems in question. This article roughly comprises three parts. First, I chart the background of Chinese

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Buddhism during Wang's own lifetime and track down his personal connection with some influential Buddhist teachers. This helps us better understand the wider spiritual framework in which he lived and wrote. I also discuss the role of Buddhist practice in Wang's writings because it enables us to identify the meditative qualities of his short landscape poems. Second, I analyze Wang's own writings and specify the Buddhist concepts and ideas that were essential to him—the most important of them being the idea of "emptiness." Third, I analyze several of Wang's poems utilizing this idea of emptiness and its psychological equivalent, the "no-self." My main claim is that in his short landscape poems Wang aspires to express a unique experience in which the perceiving persona loses its "self" and is totally immersed in its natural surroundings.

As Chen Yunji 陳允吉 has pointed out, the question of whether Wang's short landscape poems written in the latter years of his life represent Chan Buddhist ideas is hardly a new one.[2] In fact, the debate started at least as early as the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when literary critic Li Mengyang 李夢陽 (1473–1530) stated that Wang's poems are "like Chan."[3]

This discussion is well justified since, as I suggest, Wang Wei was not just a conventional secular poet who injected Buddhist concepts and ideas superficially into his verses and only when they served his aesthetic purposes. On the contrary, Buddhism seems to have been for Wang a deep-rooted and lifelong conviction. This can be adduced from several factors relating to both his background and his oeuvre. First, Wang Wei's family was known for its deep affiliation to Buddhism. Both his mother, Cui 崔 (n.d.), and his brother Wang Jin 王縉 (700–781) were devoted Buddhist practitioners and munificent *danapatis* (patrons).[4] After Wang's mother died, he himself donated his Lantian estate to a monastery around 758.[5] Second, his writings are so replete with references to Buddhist teachers, monks, temples, practices, ceremonies, ideas, concepts, texts, and so forth, that some scholars even talk about his influence on the historical development of the religion.[6] Third, he utilizes Buddhist themes in his poetry even on occasions when they are not invited by the social situation, which as Stephen Owen has noted, "suggests a conviction that was genuinely religious."[7] Fourth, his Buddhistic poems are not mere descriptions of casual temple visits or superficial and arbitrary inclusions of Buddhist terminology but often contain serious and in-depth doctrinal issues and deliberations. For instance, in his poem "Visiting Qinglong Monastery on a Summer Day to Meet Dhyana Master Cao" 夏日過青龍寺謁操禪師 (Xiari guo Qinglongsi ye Cao chanshi) the speaker wants to meet master Cao in order to inquire about the "principle of the mind caught in principles" 欲問義心義.[8]

Considering all these aspects, it is not difficult to understand why the majority of literary critics have been leaning toward a Buddhist interpretation

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even in the case of the seemingly simple poems that include no explicit Buddhist references. Still, the tradition of the Buddhist reading is often plagued with the superficiality of the literary analysis. While propositions such as "Wang Wei's life and poetry together bear the distinctive imprint of Buddhism"[9] are not untrue per se, they tell us next to nothing about Wang Wei or Buddhism. In this article, I attempt to go a step deeper and examine exactly what Buddhist ideas and concepts were important to Wang and how they can guide our readings of his poetry.

However, one should bear in mind that Wang Wei was neither a Buddhist philosopher nor a scholar but a poet, so his ambition was not to (re)define or debate the abstract concepts but to reify them in a living and direct experience. Thus, I do try to establish him not as some kind of dogmatic "Chan poet" but more as an individual artist who drew profound inspiration from Chan phraseology and ideas but preferably utilized them in relation to empiricism and praxis in his personal life.

Chan Thought and Practice during Wang's Time

Wang Wei's lifetime, meaning roughly the first half of the eighth century, was a tumultuous era for Chinese Buddhism, characterized by controversies about doctrines, concepts, practices, and especially lineages. The ascent to the throne in 690 of Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705), a famous *danapati* of Buddhism, marked the culmination of pro-Buddhist policies in the Tang era.[10] Empress Wu supported a new system of Great Cloud monasteries, gave official priority to Buddhism (over Daoism), and summoned monastic dignitaries to her court in the capital city of Luoyang.[11] The most important Chan monk patronized by her was undoubtedly Shenxiu 神秀 (606?–706), a head disciple of the famous fifth patriarch, Hongren 宏忍 (601–674), and also, in his lifetime, considered to be his successor, that is to say, the sixth patriarch.[12] After Shenxiu's death, his lineage was carried on mainly by his famous students Yifu 義福 (658–736) and Puji 普寂 (651–739). The latter especially was able to win a significant number of influential disciples and to succeed in having himself recognized as the seventh patriarch of the Chan school.[13]

Another important figure in this cohort was a monk named Jingjue 淨覺 (ca. 688–746) who studied under Shenxiu but whose most intimate religious relationship was with Xuanze 玄賾 (n.d.), another student of Hongren.[14] Jingjue is considered to be the author of *Lengqie shizi ji* 楞伽師資記 (The Record of Masters and Students of Lanka [vatara Sutra], hereafter *The Record of Lanka*),[15] an early Chan history that lists Gunabhadra (and not Bodhidharma) as the first patriarch of Chinese Chan and Shenxiu, unsurprisingly, as the sole Dharma heir of Hongren. But this, as it later turned out, was just one side of the story.

Things took a drastic turn in the early 730s when monk-turned-polemicist Shenhui 神會 (670–762) held his (in)famous public debates in Great Cloud

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Temple 大雲寺 in Huatai 滑臺 (Huaxian in modern Henan Province), in which he ferociously attacked Shenxiu and Puji and their lineage, which he labeled as the "Northern school" (*beizong* 北宗) of Chan.[16] Shenhui's debates were later recorded by his lay student Dugu Pei 獨孤沛 (n.d.) in a text titled *Putidamo nanzong ding shifei lun* 菩提達摩南宗定是非論 (Definition of True and False Regarding Bodhidharma's Southern School).[17] In the text, Shenhui is totally pertinacious and relentless in his distinction between the "Northern" and the "Southern" schools and in his conviction that the real sixth patriarch was not Shenxiu but his own teacher, Huineng 惠能 (638–713). When his interlocutor Dharma master Chongyuan 崇遠 (n.d.) asks why Puji cannot be identified as a member of the Southern school (*nanzong* 南宗), Shenhui replies that Puji never even went near Shaozhou, the place of Huineng's residence.[18] So the main question concerns the problem of lineages: Puji was not physically in contact with Huineng and therefore cannot be seen as his legitimate Dharma heir. In essence, Shenhui is claiming that Puji had not received the direct transmission of Buddhism in the chain of transmissions that began with Bodhidharma.[19]

However, the debate also involves questions related to Chan doctrines and praxis. The high point of the meeting is a discussion of the correct interpretation of the meaning of seated meditation:

> Dharma master [Chong]yuan asked: "Two virtuous Dhyana masters, Puji of Mt. Song and Xiangmo Zang[20] of the eastern mountain, both taught people that in seated meditation one should congeal the mind in order to enter concentration, dwell in the mind and observe the purity, stir the mind to illuminate the external realm, and gather the mind to realize the internal. According to them, this exactly is the teaching. How come you now say that Chan does not teach people to do seated meditation nor congeal the mind in order to enter concentration, dwell in the mind and observe the purity, stir the mind to illuminate the external nor gather the mind to realize the internal? What does 'seated meditation' really mean?"
>
> Senior monk [Shenhui] replied: "If you teach people that in seated meditation one should 'congeal the mind in order to enter concentration, dwell in the mind and observe the purity, stir the mind to illuminate the external realm, and gather the mind to realize the internal,' it will only obstruct the bodhi wisdom. Today I tell that 'sitting' means that you do not give rise to any thoughts and 'meditation' means that you see your original nature. Hence, I do not teach people to use their bodies for sitting and dwell in mind to enter concentration."
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> 遠法師問：「嵩岳普寂禪師，東岳降魔藏禪師，此二大德皆教人坐禪，『凝心入定，住心看淨，起心外照，攝心內證』，指此以為教門。禪師今日何故說禪不教人坐，不教人『凝心入定，住心看淨，起心外照，攝心內證』？何名坐禪？」和上答：「若教人坐，『凝心入定，住心看淨，起心外照，攝心內證』者，此障菩提。今言坐者，念不起為坐；今言禪者，見本性為禪。所以不教人坐身住心入定。」[21]

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These are blatant and obnoxious accusations. According to Shenhui, Shenxiu and his disciples not only possess a shallow and limited understanding of Buddhist cultivation but, moreover, have completely misunderstood the whole point of meditation and its true meaning. The main target of Shenhui's criticism was the "gradual teaching" (*jianjiao* 漸教) supposedly advocated by the "Northern" school, which Shenhui condemned as being not only inferior to his own "sudden teaching" (*dunjiao* 頓教) but an essentially misguided doctrine and practice. When discussing the matter, Shenhui uses Huineng as the guarantor of this thesis:

> Dharma master [Chong]yuan asked: "Is this kind of teaching not Buddhadharma? Why you do not approve it?" Senior monk [Shenhui] replied: "These doctrines of 'sudden' and 'gradual' are not identical, and for this reason I cannot approve it. My master of the sixth generation [Huineng] without exception taught about 'straightforwardly and directly understanding and seeing one's own nature' and never spoke a word about gradual progress."
> 遠法師問，「如此教門，豈非是佛法？何故不許？」和上答，「皆為頓漸不同，所以不許。我六代大師，一一皆言『單刀直入，直了見性』，不言階漸。」[22]

Shenhui denounces the value of "gradual process" (*jiejian* 階漸) and, following Huineng's alleged words, proclaims that the real aim of meditation is "seeing one's own true nature," which can be reached only by a direct and sudden realization.

Although Shenhui used the term *Northern school* in a pejorative sense, it started to gain leverage in the wake of the An Lushan revolt (755–763).[23] Since the mid-eighth century, Shenhui's proselytization had significant consequences for how the development of Chan lineages and practices was understood not only in the following years but, to some extent, up to the turn of the twentieth century when the Dunhuang scriptures were discovered, which revolutionized our understanding of the history of the Tang dynasty Chan.

As for Wang Wei, it can quite literally be said that he was born and raised in the middle of these early eighth-century sectarian disputes. His mother was a lay student of Puji, and Wang mentions Puji twice in his writings.[24] Wang also clearly knew Shenxiu's other chief students. For instance, he wrote a stele inscription for Jingjue after his death.[25] He also wrote a poem titled "Visiting the Hermitage of Dhyana Master Fu" 過福禪師蘭若 (Guo Fu chanshi lanre) describing a visit to Yifu's hut.[26] These texts show that he was personally associated with the generation of Shenxiu's disciples.

At some point Wang Wei also became a close acquaintance of Shenhui and met him in Nanyang, probably in 745,[27] when they discussed, inter alia, the correct method of cultivation:

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> That time censor Wang [Wei] asked the senior monk [Shenhui]: "How to practice in order to attain liberation?" Shenhui replied: "The original mind of the sentient beings is already pure. If you raise a thought of practice, this is just a delusion and can never lead to liberation." Censor Wang was greatly surprised and said: "How marvelous! I have heard many venerable monks speak, but none of them has ever said anything like this."
> 於時王侍御問和上言：「若爲修道的解脫？」答曰：「衆生本自心清净，若更欲起心有修，既是忘心，不可得解脫。」王侍御驚愕云：「大奇！曾聞諸大德言説，皆未有作如此説。」[28]

Due to this record of an apparently transformational encounter, some scholars believe that Shenhui exerted a sweeping influence on Wang Wei's Buddhist ideas.[29] Chen Yunji claims that after their meeting Wang Wei became the first major Tang poet to praise the teachings of the Southern school.[30] This view has been bolstered by the fact that Wang Wei wrote, probably at Shenhui's request, an epitaph for Huineng, the celebrated "founder" of the "Southern school," titled "A Stele Inscription for Dhyana Master [Hui]neng" 能禪師碑 (Neng chanshi bei). This particular text, however, is tacked together using generalized spiritual clichés and seemingly random quotes from Chinese classics, to the extent that Alan Cole has called it a piece of "literary Frankensteinism."[31] Thus it tells us practically nothing about Wang Wei's personal Buddhist leanings or his views on Huineng's teachings. So the question of how deep an impact Shenhui and his ideas had on Wang in reality remains open.

To track down hints concerning Wang Wei's Buddhist affiliations, some scholars have alluded to his other writings. When Wang's own teacher, Daoguang 道光 (689–739), passed away, he composed another epitaph titled "Inscription for the Pagoda for Venerable Dhyana Master Daoguang of the Great Jianfu Monastery" 大薦福寺大德道光禪師塔銘 (Da Jianfusi dade Daoguang chanshi taming), which includes a brief reference to Daoguang's doctrinal background: "Then he met up with the Dhyana Master Baojian from Wutai, who said to him, 'I have wandered everywhere under the heavens and have never met anyone as teachable as you.' Baojian then secretly gave to him the sudden teaching, so that he obtained the stage of liberated vision" 遇五臺寶鑒禪師。曰吾周行天下。未有如爾可教。遂密授頓教。得解脫知見.[32] The quote mentions the "sudden teaching," which has led some scholars to conclude that Daoguang—and, implicitly, Wang Wei himself—was directly involved in the Southern doctrines advocated by Shenhui. This opinion has been challenged by Yang Jingqing, who points out that "'sudden teaching' had . . . been a common term representing certain Buddhist teachings for several centuries before Wang Wei," and so it does not necessarily mean that Baojian bestowed the so-called

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Southern school teaching on Daoguang.[33] In fact, it is far from certain what Wang actually meant by "sudden teaching." As we have already seen, he seems to have been impressed by Shenhui's ideas on meditation but never went into this issue in any detail.

This leads to another important element of Buddhism: the practice. As Erik Zürcher has noted, Buddhism is not just a "history of ideas" but a "way to salvation, a way of life."[34] At the heart of the Chan idea of salvation lies the practice of meditation.[35] As has been pointed out repeatedly, the classical Chinese Chan texts are more interested in talking about Chan doctrine than actual Chan practice.[36] In fact, we do not know much about the early history of Buddhist methods of cultivation at all.[37] Apparently, some of the first Dhyana (*chan*) practices resembled Daoist respiratory techniques meant to lead to mental concentration.[38]

In the sixth century Tiantai master Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597) established the twofold formula of the basic methods of meditation, which includes *zhi* 止 (tranquility or *shamatha*) at one end and *guan* 觀 (insight or *vipashyana*) at the other.[39] The former refers to various practices for calming the mind, including breathing methods, and the latter to different ways of observing the unfolding of phenomena.[40]

The earliest extant Chan text explicitly talking about meditation is Jingjue's *Record of Lanka* found in the oasis city of Dunhuang in the early twentieth century and dating from 713–716.[41] Unlike other early Chan histories, this text concentrates not on the masters' biographies but on their teachings.[42] In this respect, the most interesting section of the text is the one that talks about the fourth patriarch, Daoxin 道信 (580–651), because as Sam van Schaik has pointed out, "*we have no surviving instructions on how to do Zen [Chan] meditation practice before Daoxin*."[43] In *The Record of Lanka*, Daoxin divides his meditation methods into five types:

> Briefly speaking, there are five types of meditations. The first one is recognizing the essence of the mind. The nature of this essence is pure and identical with the Buddha. The second is recognizing the function of the mind. The function gives birth to the Dharma treasure and is the manifestation of stillness which is same with the myriad confusions. The third is the constant awareness with no interruptions. Awareness appears as the mind but the perceived dharmas have no characteristics. The fourth is to constantly perceive the body as empty. The internal and external collude and the body exists in the middle of the *dharmadhatu* without any hindrances. The fifth is maintaining the unity without wavering and constantly both in movement and in stillness. Doing so allows the practitioner to see clearly the Buddha nature and quickly pass the gate of concentration.

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> 略而言之。凡有五種。一者。知心體。體性清淨。體與佛同。二者。知心用。用生法寶。起作恒寂。萬惑皆如。三者。常覺不停。覺心在前。覺法無相。四者。常觀身空寂。內外通同。入身於法界之中。未曾有礙。五者。守一不移。動靜常住。画像能令學者。明見佛性。早入定門。[44]

In the *Chuan fabao ji* 傳法寶記 (Record of the Transmission of the Dharma Treasure), another early "proto-Chan" history written around 713,[45] Daoxin talks more specifically about the act of meditation and advocates formal and sustained seated meditation: "Strive hard and make an effort in your sitting, for sitting is the fundament. If you are able practice this way for three or five years and only take a mouthful of food to chase away hunger and sicknesses, then close your door and just sit. Do not read sutras or speak to other people" 努力勤坐，坐為根本。能坐三五年，得一口食塞饑瘡，即閉門坐。莫讀經，莫共人語.[46] Daoxin's instructions echo austere yogic exercises. At the core of his spiritual cultivation is "sitting" (*zuo* 坐), a term repeated three times in the short quote. This form of meditation is mirrored in several of Wang Wei's poems in which he, in similar vein, uses sitting as a metonym for meditation. A poem titled "Sitting Alone in the Autumn Night" (Qiuye du zuo 秋夜獨坐) is an illustrative example:

	Sitting alone and mourning my gray temples	獨坐悲雙鬢
2	in an empty room at the second watch.	空堂欲二更
	Forest fruits fall in the rain,	雨中山果落
4	weed crickets cry beneath a lamp	燈下草蟲鳴
	Hoary hair is difficult to change back	白髪終難變
6	like yellow gold cannot be created.	黃金不可成
	If you want to know how to avoid aging and sickness,	欲知除老病
8	only study the unborn.	惟有學無生[47]

The poem describes a solitary late-night meditation session in a secluded residence. The speaker laments the signs of aging in his body and wishes to expel them by absorbing himself into a steadfast meditation. The rhetoric resembles, to a certain extent, Daoxin's idea of a prolonged solitary sitting meditation that is deepened by cutting off connections with the external world. However, Wang's description of the content of his practice, "studying the unborn" (*xue wusheng* 學無生), does not seem to fit very well into Daoxin's list of the methods of meditation. In other words, Wang's characterization is so general and imprecise that no definite inferences about the exact nature of his practice can be made on its basis.

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From all this we can see that Wang Wei was clearly involved with the wide range of famous and influential Buddhist figures of his time and was familiar with their teachings, doctrines, debates, and controversies. Still, it is difficult, if not downright impossible, to say how he actually positioned himself in relation to his Buddhist mentors and friends, and especially to their views. After all, he was a poet, not a philosopher or a scholar.

When examining the spiritual landscape of Wang's lifetime, it is also extremely important to bear in mind that the "official" historiography of Tang Buddhism has largely been constructed retroactively, meaning that the actual historical events have been remodeled, reshaped, redefined, and in some cases even fabricated by later generations.[48] For instance, as Xiao Chi 蕭馳 has noted, a clear distinction between the "Northern" and "Southern" schools did not yet exist during Wang's time.[49] This means that all lengthy scholarly discussions about whether Wang inclined more to the north or to the south have virtually been anachronistic shadowboxing.[50]

Emptiness

In a wider Mahayana context, the concept "unborn" mentioned above in Wang's poem refers to nirvana, which is subject not to birth and death but to the condition of the absolute. Since the original and absolute quality of all things is emptiness, there is actually no thing that could be born or could die. In this sense, the term *unborn* is equivalent to emptiness or *sunyata*, a Sanskrit term that was rendered into Chinese as *kong* 空. Emptiness is a recurring theme throughout Mahayana literature, the best-known instance being the terse invocations of the *Xinjing* 心經 (Heart Sutra): "Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. Form is nothing but emptiness, emptiness is nothing but form" 色不異空。空不異色。色即是空。空即是色.[51] These striking ontological statements declare, in short, that all perceived forms are inherently empty, meaning that they are without independent existence, but at the same time, that this emptiness itself is just another form. Unlike conventional ideas of emptiness, Buddhism never suggests nihilistic nothingness. In its context the words refer to the conditioned and relative nature of existence.[52] This is to say, form and emptiness are not mutually exclusive opposites but, rather, two complementary sides of existence that depend on each other and, in doing so, transcend all dualistic categories in the most profound sense.

The interdependent nature of form and emptiness as the underlying nature of all conditioned phenomena is a cardinal doctrine of the Mahayana worldview. Wang Wei was clearly familiar with these teachings, as can be seen for example in his "Preface to a Poem 'Flowering Herbs at the Lodging of Master

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[Dao]guang at Jianfu Monastery'" 薦福寺光師房花藥詩序 (Jianfusi Guang shi fang huayao shi xu), which begins:

> The mind is lodged in the midst of existence and nonexistence, and the eye is bounded by both form and emptiness. All these are illusory but detachment from them is also illusory. The perfected person does not cast aside illusion, but he does go beyond the limits of existence and nonexistence, of form and emptiness. For that reason his eye may reside in the dust while his mind never shares that condition. His mind is not in the world, and his body never becomes an object. Because identifying oneself as an object causes the self to be attached through limitless realms, and this is dangerous indeed.
> 心舍于有無，眼界于色空，皆幻也，離亦幻也，至人者不捨幻，而過于色空有無之際。故目可塵也，而心未始同；心不世也，而身未嘗物。物者方酌我于無垠之域，亦已殆矣！[53]

The quote utilizes and comments on concepts of "form" (*se* 色) and "emptiness" (*kong* 空) in a rhetoric distinctively echoing the phraseology of the *Heart Sutra*. At the same time, it acknowledges the obvious trap of fixation with the idea of emptiness and reminds us that real understanding goes beyond any such distinctions as form/emptiness and existence/nonexistence.

Wang also refers to the idea of emptiness of all phenomena in his verses. The most illustrative example is undoubtedly a couplet from his poem "In the Mountains, to Be Shown to My Brothers" 山中示弟 (Shan zhong shi di): "Karmic conditions give rise to false forms, / but due to their empty nature, they cannot be approached" 緣合妄相有，性空無所親.[54] Here Wang Wei talks about the nature (of false forms, *xing* 性) which is intrinsically empty (*kong* 空). The phrase *xingkong* 性空 is turned the other way round in the lines from the poem "Visiting Venerable Xuan" (Ye Xuan shangren 謁璿上人): "Fleeting fame depends on tassels and girdles, / but the nature of emptiness has no restraining halter" 浮名寄纓珮，空性無羈鞅.[55] Both of these examples first show an image (created forms/official's uniform) and then reveal its fundamental existence only as an empty phenomenon—a poetic device that Wang has clearly adopted from Buddhist philosophy.

When discussing the Buddhist interpretation of "emptiness," another text that must be taken into account in addition to the sutras is *Dasheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論 (Treatise on the Awakening of Faith to Mahayana, hereafter *Treatise*), which has been called "one of the most influential texts in the history of East Asian Buddhism."[56] The *Treatise* is traditionally attributed to the Indian Buddhist philosopher Ashvagosha (ca. 80–ca. 150), but according to the latest scholarship, it was in fact written in China during the mid-fifth century.[57] In

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essence, the *Treatise* is a synthesis of various Buddhist texts and ideas and both the "Northern" and the "Southern" schools of Chan borrowed heavily from it.[58]

One of the main tenets of the *Treatise* is to expound the nature of *zhenru* 真如 or *bhutatathata* (lit. "true suchness"), a fundamental concept in Mahayana philosophy that means the ultimate source and character of all perceived phenomena.[59] As the scripture asserts, "The *bhutatathata* is devoid of any characteristics" 言眞如者。亦無有相[60] and thus cannot be reached by words. Yet its two meanings are identified by language referring to the two sides of emptiness: "The first one is emptiness in accordance to the real. This is because it is able to reveal the real in its entirety. The other one is non-empty in accordance to the real. This is because it has its own self-essence which is full of uncontaminated, virtuous merit" 一者如實空。以能究竟顯實故。二者如實不空。以有自體具足無漏性功德故.[61] This doctrine is also known as "two kinds of emptiness" (*erkong* 二空). Wang Wei was seemingly familiar with these concepts and ideas. His "In Praise of the Buddha" (Zan fo wen 讚佛文), a concise essay curiously neglected by most of the previous Wang scholarship,[62] begins: "I assert that the subtle master of *bhutatathata* spreads to all ten directions but has accomplished nothing" 竊以真如妙宰，具十方而無成.[63] In addition, in the aforementioned stele for Jingjue he asks: "Where can we seek the two kinds of emptiness that reside outside the Dharma" 二空法外。何處進求?[64] In both of these quotes, Wang uses concepts that are presumably borrowed from the *Treatise*.

The topic of emptiness was also discussed in Shenhui's circles, with whom, as already mentioned, Wang Wei was in close contact. This can be seen, for instance, in the short dialogue between Chongyuan and Shenhui:

> Dharma master Chongyuan asked: "What is emptiness? If you say that emptiness exists, it would be similar with something that has material form. But if you say that emptiness does not exist, what do we then take refuge in?" [Shenhui] replied: "Only because you haven't seen your true nature, you talk about emptiness. If you have seen your true nature, then even the emptiness does not exist anymore. Seeing things like this is called 'taking refuge'."
> 崇遠法師問:「云何為空？若道有空，還同質礙。若說無空，即何所歸依？」答曰:「只為未見性，是以說空。若見本性，空亦不有。如此見者，是名歸依。」[65]

In this brief interaction, Chongyuan is trying to understand the definition of *emptiness* via limited and dualistic verbal means. Shenhui's answer echoes the teachings of the *Treatise* when he seeks to guide his interlocutor's attention away from words to a self-realization that would help him transcend such illusory boundaries created by language. In other words, Shenhui is saying here that

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emptiness is not something that can be explained but something that must be personally experienced. This stance, I later try to establish, is the key to the Buddhist reading of Wang's poetry.

As all these examples attest, Wang not only was familiar with the basic Mahayana teachings of emptiness but also wrote about concepts such as *bhutatathata* and the "two kinds of emptiness" in a competent and almost scholarly manner. So for him the Buddhist terms are not just superficial verbal decorations but profound metaphysical ideas that he craftily and deliberately wove into his writings.

No-Self

The psychological dimension of the doctrine of the intrinsic emptiness of all phenomena is the concept of "no-self" (Skt. *anatman*, Ch. *wuwo* 無我), meaning, at the elemental level, the "nonexistence of individual self" and, in the wider Mahayana sense, the "universal insubstantiality" or the "selflessness of all dharmas."[66] The teaching of nonexistence of the self was unknown within the pre-Buddhist Chinese world conception and was therefore completely misunderstood by the early Chinese Buddhists before the fifth century CE.[67]

According to Buddhist psychology, a human being consists of five psychophysical constituents called *skandhas* (aggregates): form (*rupa*), sensation (*vedana*), perception (*samjna*), mental formations (*samskara*), and consciousness (*vijnana*). And since all these elements are in a state of permanent flux, there can be no fixed or stable identity or selfhood. The meaning and the correct understanding of no-self are repeatedly discussed in several important Mahayana scriptures familiar to Wang Wei.[68] For instance, in the second chapter of the *Daban niepan jing* 大般涅槃經 (Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra) the Buddha instructs his disciples: "All dharmas [phenomena] are devoid of self or anything pertaining to self. Monks, you should cultivate this understanding, for having done so will remove your egotism. And after one has abandoned their egotism, that person will thereupon enter nirvana" 一切諸法無我我所。汝諸比丘應當修習。如是修已則除我慢。離我慢已便入涅槃.[69] According to the sutra, all existing phenomena lack any kind of independent self-nature, and by realizing this, one is able to enter the nirvana, meaning the highest truth. In this quote, the word *wo* 我 (self) appears in the expressions "no-self" (*wuwo* 無我), "pertaining to self" (*wosuo* 我所), and "egotism" (*woman* 我慢). By cultivating the understanding of no-self and the fact that all phenomena are devoid of anything pertaining to self, one is able to uproot one's egotism. But this kind of understanding easily falls into the trap of dualism and makes the metaphysical absence of the self into something that exists. Hence, later on the same sutra warns against this kind of misconception:

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> When worldly people say, "There is no self in the Buddha's Dharma [teaching]," I call this "the perception of no-self in what is self." So if someone says, "There is definitely no self in the Buddha's Dharma, and that is why the Tathagata [Buddha] commands his disciples to cultivate practices focused on no-self," I would call that an inversion. 世間之人說佛法無我，是名我中生無我想。若言佛法必定無我是故如來勑諸弟子修習無我，名為顛倒。[70]

In this quote, the Buddha states that the absolute denial of the self is as wrong as the absolute affirmation of it. So for him the practice that insists on the one-sided notion of self or no-self is a distortion of his teaching. The transcending of all types of ontological dualisms created by ideas of self and no-self is discussed widely in several major Buddhist texts. For instance, the *Treatise* asserts firmly:

> If one knows that although all dharmas are spoken of, in reality there is no speaker and nothing that can be spoken of. And although the dharmas are conceived, in reality there is no conceiver and nothing that can be conceived. This is called "compliance." When one is freed from conceiving, this is called "attaining entry."
> 若知一切法雖説無有能說可說。雖念亦無能念可念。是名隨順。若離於念名爲得入。[71]

The text refutes the possibility of dividing a perception ontologically into a perceiver (subject) and something perceived (object). By the same token, in the third chapter of the *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經 (Vimalakirti Sutra). the famous Buddhist layman Vimalakirti instructs Buddha's disciple Mahakatyayana in this matter, saying: "The five skandhas are totally empty and without any arising—this is the meaning of suffering. The dharmas ultimately do not exist—this is the meaning of emptiness. There is no self in the self, yet no duality—this is the meaning of no-self" 五受陰，洞達空無所起。是苦義，諸法究竟無所有，是空義。於我無我而不二，是無我義.[72] Here, Vimalakirti again warns against the dualistic view that makes an essential difference between having and not having a self. For him, the concept of no-self refers to the ultimate way of understanding the nature of reality, which naturally goes beyond all such bifurcations. But at the same time one must be careful not to get attached to the concept of no-self because that would only create a new kind of dualistic view.

The topic of the no-self is crucial to my argument for two reasons. First, the questions related to (self-)identity, existence, perception, and especially the relationship between a subject and an object are all negotiated through it in the Mahayana framework. Second, this conceptualization is essential for Wang Wei's writings and opens up a new way of understanding the existential dimension of his short landscape poems. Wang's affiliation of the doctrine of

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no-self is evident for instance in his poem "Layman Hu Lay Sick in Bed, so I Send Him Some Rice and This Poem" 胡居士臥病遺米因贈 (Hu jushi wo bing wei mi yin zeng) that begins:

	After understanding the four great elements,	了觀四大因
2	what could one's root-nature possess?	根性何所有
	When delusional thoughts cease to arise,	妄計苟不生
4	this body stops experiencing good and bad.	是身孰休咎
	Why are forms and sounds called "guests"	色聲何謂客
6	and who preserves the *shandhas* and the *dhatus*?	陰界復誰守[73]

The Buddhist orientation of this poem is clear right from the start, because the form of address, *jushi* 居士, in the poem's title refers to a Buddhist lay practitioner.[74] The first couplet of the poem states that after realizing that the self is only a temporary entity constituted by the four elements (earth, water, fire, air), the root nature is freed from the idea of possessing any independently existing qualities. The fifth and sixth lines take this proposition even further and present perceptions only as "guests" (i.e., objects with no real substance) of the five skandhas. And because of the constant flux of the skandhas, there is no "who" that can be claimed to preserve them. So, in essence, Wang is trying to console his sick friend here by referring to the Buddhist doctrine of the ultimate illusory nature of human suffering. Even though the skandhas are experiencing unpleasant states, behind those experiences there is no self that is feeling that suffering.

Seen in this light, the first couplet of the aforementioned poem "In the Mountains, to Be Shown to My Brothers" becomes an expression of a pivotal ontological insight: "In the mountain forest I lose my self, / a hat and a belt create a person" 山林吾喪我，冠帶爾成人.[75] Inside a mountain forest, the speaker has direct experience of the empty nature of the five skandhas and thus feels that he "loses his self." The expression *wu sang wo* 吾喪我 (I lose my self) is actually taken from the second chapter of *Zhuangzi* 莊子:

> Nanguo Ziqi was reclining on his armrest, looking toward the sky and breathing slowly. He was staring blankly into space, seemingly dispirited. Yancheng Ziyou was standing beside him and asked: "What is this? Can you really make your body resemble a withered tree and your mind resemble cold ashes? The man who is currently reclining on an armrest is not the same who was reclining there before." Ziqi replied: "Well, this is an excellent question! Right now, I have lost my self, do you understand?"

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> 南郭子綦隱机而坐，仰天而噓，荅焉似喪其耦。顏成子游立侍乎前，曰：「何居乎？形固可使如槁木，而心固可使如死灰乎？今之隱机者，非昔之隱机者也。」子綦曰：「偃，不亦善乎，而問之也。今者吾喪我，女知之乎？」[76]

The passage depicts a short encounter with fictional characters named Yancheng Ziyou and Nanguo Ziqi. The former is impressed by his friend's ability to imitate inanimate objects, to which the latter replies that he has only lost his self. In his verse, Wang Wei replicates the expression *wu sang wo* 吾喪我 "I lose/have lost my self" but with two significant modifications. First, in Wang's poem the line is not part of a dialogue but a confession made in the anonymous first person, which gives it the effect of more direct and intimate selflessness. Second, the poem changes the setting of a gentleman's room to an open-air scene with a forested mountain slope, which foregrounds the relationship between the human persona and his natural surroundings. These shifts are extremely important because they serve as the key factors for the Buddhist reading of Wang's short landscape poems later on in this article.

The second line of the poem adds an ironic twist, claiming that only the garments of an official create a true and mature person. With this juxtaposition, the couplet also creates an ontological comparison: as the social role of an official is created by his clothes, so the illusion of the self is created by the skandhas. This insight is further reinforced in the occurrence of "losing one's self" discussed above. The experience is repeated in very similar fashion in the poem "Playfully Sent to the Fifth Brother Zhang Yin" 戲贈張五弟諲 (Xi zeng Zhang wudi Yin):

	I reside at the foot of Mount Zhongnan,	我家南山下
2	and ceasing activities, I abandon my self,	動息自遺身
	Approaching birds, they are not startled,	入鳥不相亂
4	meeting animals, they are all my kin.	見獸皆相親[77]

Mount Zhongnan, which stands some sixty miles south of the Tang capital Chang'an 長安 (present-day Xian), was (and still is) well known for its numerous Daoist and Buddhist hermits. Wang also had his famous estate somewhere in this area,[78] so the reference to the residence in the first line is clearly autobiographical. As in the earlier quote from the poem "In the Mountains, to Be Shown to My Brothers," the locus is again a mountain region, which in Wang's poetry appears repeatedly to function as a catalyst for transcending the limits of the human persona. Although the wording of these two examples differs, the underlying sequence of events is strikingly similar: the conscious I (吾/自) rids himself of (喪/遺) the illusory and transient ego-self (我/

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身). Interestingly, in the latter poem this occurrence of selflessness opens some kind of quasi-mystical communion with wildlife, as if being attached to selfhood restricts one's ability to interact with the surrounding forms of life.

However, the idea of nonself should not be understood one-dimensionally. As Vimalakirti points out, the experience of "losing one's self" goes beyond the duality of self and other or even the duality of self and no-self, which implies that in the purest form of perception there can be no ontological demarcation between the perceiver and the perceived. Also, saying that this kind of perception belongs to the realm of a self or a no-self would be a similar type of misunderstanding. In the ultimate nondual experience the perceiver and the perceived are mutually dependent, cogenerating and codependent.

Empty Mountain, Empty Mind

The Mahayana doctrine of the nonexistence of an independent self, I wish to assert, opens a new perspective on the ontological dimensions of Wang Wei's short landscape poems. Pauline Yu has noted that Wang's poetry is "typically reluctant to assert an overtly subjective presence."[79] Similarly, Nicholas Morrow Williams points out that in Wang's "Wang Stream Collection" the "imagery is presented to us without comment except for the all-important assertion of its shifting, transitory, and empty state of being."[80] These qualities are on full display in Wang's poem "Deer Park" 鹿柴 (Luchai):

	Empty mountain, no-one is seen,	空山不見人
2	only distant human voices are heard.	但聞人語響
	Returning sunlight enters the deep grove,	返景入深林
4	and shines again on green moss.	復照青苔上[81]

The first couplet describes a remote mountain scene where human beings are present only as distant voices. In the second half, the visual angle shifts from the panoramic view and zooms downward onto the shadowy floor of the grove. The dense quatrain is practically devoid of physical movement or action and exudes tranquility and an almost otherworldly quietude. However, the existential tensions of this seemingly simple poem are crystallized in one question: who exactly in the poem sees the mountain and hears the voices?

Grammatically speaking, the first line (空山不見人) should be read as the "empty mountain sees no one." But as Sabina Knight has pointed out, in order to make the line reasonable we need to add a pronoun between the second and the third characters, so that there is some imagined persona (me, you, he, she, etc.) who is the one seeing the empty mountain but not human beings.[82]

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On the one hand, we could reason that the nature of the speaker is so obvious—a hermit-like persona enjoying his solitary musings deep in the remote mountains[83]—that it does not need to be made explicit. On the other hand, the poem can be read as a depiction of a universal experience of vast and imposing "mountainness" that transcends all limited personal views. But the Buddhist understanding of the nature of the self gives room for a third line of interpretation.

In this reading the first character of the first line, *kong* 空 (empty), becomes crucial. As already mentioned, it is overwhelmingly pregnant with Buddhist significance. Hence, the first two characters of the poem, *kongshan* 空山 (empty mountain), carry a double meaning: first, the mountain is empty in the sense of "uninhabited"; second, it is empty in an ontological sense, meaning devoid of any independent self-existence. This two-level semantic structure has not gone unnoticed by Wang scholars. For instance, Marsha L. Wagner comments on the imagery in the first line: "There is a strong tension between the empty, hollow, nonmaterial connotations of *k'ung* [*kong*] and the heavy, solid massiveness of the mountain. The juxtaposition throws into question the physical reality of the mountain in a way that suggests the paradoxical Buddhist concept of nature."[84]

The image of an empty mountain brings together qualities that in Wagner's eyes appear paradoxical. But this is true only if one remains on the superficial, phenomenal level. When the image is read against the "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" doctrine of the *Heart Sutra*, the tension between massiveness and hollowness dissolves into a nondualistic understanding of reality: the mountain is an empty form, but simultaneously its emptiness can manifest itself only through this imposing form.

In a similar vein, the relationship between the (unspecified) lyrical persona and his natural surroundings can be seen as mutually interdependent according to the Mahayana idea of "no-self." This means that the perceiver and the perceived landscape (mountain, voices, sunlight, etc.) give rise to each other and exist only in a two-way ontological relationship. The landscape comes into being only via the act of direct perception, but at the same time, the self-identity of the perceiver dissolves and is supplanted by the immediate surroundings. In other words, in the instant when the speaker loses his self, the perceived landscape becomes his self.

The explicitly defined locus positions "Deer Park" on the same continuum with the poems "In the Mountains" and "Playfully Sent" discussed above. Again, the heightened experience of selflessness is reached in the meditative openness of a mountainous spot surrounded by trees. As in "Playfully Sent," "Deer Park" goes beyond human presence, intensifying the vigor of the immediate natural

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elements. In "Deer Park" the character *ren* 人 (human being[s]) is mentioned in both the first and the second line—an extremely rare phenomenon in four-line *jueju* 絕句 poems of the Tang era—but then disappears and yields to the nonhuman natural images of trees, sunlight, and moss. This creates a powerful effect in the second couplet, as if the human existence is overwhelmed by its wild surroundings and eventually becomes an indistinguishable part of them.

These ideas are echoed in Chen Yunji's analysis of the poem, in which he reads Wang's verses against Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna's (150–250) views on the "middle way" (*zhongdao guan* 中道觀).[85] Nagarjuna posits that the true nature of the objects should be understood as the middle way between the two opposing extremes of "not existing and not nonexisting" (*feiyou feiwu* 非有非無), which points to the nonduality of ultimate reality.[86] For Chen, the part "not see a human being" 不見人 in the first line of the poem expresses deviation from "existence" (*you* 有), and the second line, "only distant human voices are heard" 但聞人語響, expresses deviation from "emptiness" (*kong* 空).[87]

This notion is, I believe, the key to the ontological dimension of "Deer Park." According to Chen Yunji, when reading Wang's poem we should pay utmost attention to how it describes a picturesque natural scene and simultaneously conveys the Mahayana Buddhist idea of perception.[88] The existence of an empty mountain is dependent on the perceiver and vice versa. On a psychological level this means that, when the perceiver manages to lose his self in an instant of total meditative awareness, the immediate natural surroundings become, at least momentarily, his self-identity. The empty mountain and the empty, selfless persona become one in the most profound way.

Still, this is only the first half of the poem. If the mountain is empty, then everything else in the poem must be empty too. Chen Yunji goes on to claim that the fading daylight in the third line creates a dusky atmosphere where everything seems to appear on the boundary line between "existence" and "nonexistence."[89] But, along with the "empty mountain," the penetrating sunlight carries an important Buddhist meaning. The fact that the sunlight "returns" to the grove in the third line and then shines "again" on the moss in the fourth line suggests intentionality in the action as if the light seeks out the moss again and again. The expression *fanjing* 返景 (returning sunlight) recalls the expression *huiguangfanzhao* 回光返照 (final radiance of setting sun),[90] which refers to the brightening of the light just before sunset, but it was often used in Chan discourse to describe shining the light of *prajna* wisdom inward to discover the Buddha nature already there. So, in this reading the sunlight in Wang's poem is illumination (*prajna* wisdom) that banishes darkness (ignorance). Thus, the illuminated grove is nothing other than the perceiver himself awakened to his own selflessness.

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Moreover, we should also bear in mind that, according to the rules of classical Chinese prosody, a quatrain contains two complementary sections: an introduction and a conclusion. The first couplet sets up a situation or poses a question, and the second couplet then goes on to resolve it. In the case of "Deer Park," the first couplet expresses the underlying emptiness of all being on a nonpersonal level, and the second couplet focuses on a specific place (grove/person) and uncovers the underlying "no-self-ness" of its existence.

The scene of sudden illumination is repeated in a poem titled "Bamboo Lodge" 竹里館 (Zhuli guan):

	I sit alone in a secluded bamboo grove,	獨坐幽篁裏
2	playing *qin* and droning for a long time.	彈琴復長嘯
	Deep in the woods unknown to others,	深林人不知
4	bright moon appears and shines on me.	明月來相照[91]

The first line alludes to the poem "Mountain Spirit" 山鬼 (Shangui) of *Chuci* 楚辭 in which the unspecified speaker laments his loneliness and groans forlornly: "I am sitting in a dense bamboo grove and never see the sky" 余處幽篁兮終不見天.[92] But unlike in "Mountain Spirit," the solitude in Wang's poem is voluntary and turns into some kind of ecstatic musical ritual. The playing of a *qin* can be read autobiographically, remembering that Wang was also a skillful musician. Droning (*xiao* 嘯) probably means a combination of breathing techniques and whistling, which were connected to Daoism.[93] The tradition of droning started during the Jin dynasty (266–420), and the Western Jin dynasty scholar Cheng Gongsui 成公綏 (231–273) even wrote an "Ode for Droning" 嘯賦 (Xiaofu). Although we cannot be entirely sure what type of respiratory technique Wang is talking about here, the sheer mention of "droning" in the first couplet positions the activities of the poem in the context of spiritual practice.

Due to the aforementioned two-step structure of a Chinese quatrain, the latter part of the poem functions as a "resolve" of the tension created by the first two lines. As in "Deer Park," the setting is again a dark grove into which heavenly light descends. As Pauline Yu has pointed out, the exact object of unknowing in the third line is not clear—it could be the existence of the grove itself or the speaker's presence there and its significance.[94] But it can, of course, be both at the same time. If we read the line to say that the "deep woods" 深林 remain "unknown to other people" 人不知, then withdrawing to a secluded spot can be interpreted symbolically as turning inward to the self, which is hidden from fellow humans.[95] Then the "shining" (*zhao* 照) mentioned in the last line has the exact same meaning as in the finale of "Deer Park": the light of wisdom that disperses the darkness of ignorance created by the illusion of the self.

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The fact that Wang is using the verb *zhao* in both of these poems is, of course, not without significance. The verb appears frequently in the major Mahayana sutras Wang was familiar with and often refers to some kind of supernatural "shining." For instance, in the first chapter of the *Mohe bore boluomi jing* 摩訶般若波羅蜜經 (Great Prajnaparamita Sutra) Buddha rises to a "samadhi-king state" and begins to emit rays of light from all parts of his body, and "each of those rays shined over the trichiliocosm" 遍照三千大千國土.[96] Also, in the seventh chapter of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* a goddess teaches Shariputra:

> "Shariputra, this room constantly manifests eight rare and unprecedented phenomena. What are these eight? This room is constantly flooded with rays of golden light that never change, day or night. It is not lit by the shining of the sun or moon. This is the first rare and unprecedented phenomenon."
> 舍利弗。此室常現八未曾有難得之法。何等為八。此室常以金色光照晝夜無異。不以日月所照為明。是為一未曾有難得之法。[97]

On both of these occasions the expression *zhao* is used to describe otherworldly or otherwise miraculous shining. In the first quote, Buddha enters a state of deep meditation, and his "shining" serves as a sign of his unsurpassable spiritual abilities. The shining in the second quote is even more enigmatic, because even the source of the never-ceasing "golden light" remains unknown.

The Buddhist connotations of shining in Wang's poem add a certain spiritual dimension to it. In "Bamboo Lodge," moonlight serves as the catalyst for the experience of "no-self-ness." In the phrase "shines on me" (*xiang zhao* 相照), the character *xiang* 相 can be read as an object of the verb but also as an adverb, meaning "mutually." When read against the Buddhist usage of *zhao*, the moonlight conveys an ontological submeaning, hinting that the speaker and the moon share the shining in a way that the object and subject cannot be totally separated. Or, if seen from the wholeness of the poem, the first couplet introduces a question of solitude, which is then resolved—or perhaps it *dissolves*—in the second couplet in the moment of moon-induced enlightenment.

In both "Deer Park" and "Bamboo Lodge" the human presence is articulated at least to some degree. Wang's tendency to use the overwhelming natural imagery to minimize the human presence is taken to one kind of extremity in his poem "Magnolia Bank" 辛夷塢 (Xinyi wu):

	Lotus-like blossoms at the tip of the branches	木末芙蓉花
2	open their red calyxes in the mountains.	山中發紅萼
	The hut in the valley is quiet without humans,	澗戶寂無人
4	one by one the flowers open and then fall.	紛紛開且落[98]

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This poem and especially its closing image of rapidly blooming and withering blossoms are often read as a lyrical manifestation of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence.[99] In fact, this poem serves as an illustrative example of Wang's poetic strategy: he takes a Buddhist idea or tenet and, instead of using it explicitly, turns it into a graceful and elucidating natural image. In doing so, he transforms abstract philosophy into a palpable and direct experience.[100]

In this sense, the third line, "The hut in the valley is quiet without humans," becomes essential. How, why, and in which way is the hut devoid of humans? And who exactly is experiencing this deep quietness if there is no one there? Because of the poem's predominant Buddhist ethos, the expression *ji* 寂 can only be read in the sense of deep contemplation, as in the expressions *jinian* 寂念 (calming thoughts), *jiding* 寂定 (tranquil concentration), *jimie* 寂滅 (calmness and extinction), and so forth. Moreover, *ji* 寂 can be combined with *kong* 空 in the compound *kongji* 空寂, meaning "immaterial" as a condition of nirvana. *Dasheng bensheng xindi guan jing* 大乘本生心地觀經 (The Mahayana Perception of Original Nature and Mind Ground Sutra) even talks about "aranya" 蘭若 (a hermitage), which is "an immaterial abode" 空寂室.[101]

In a Buddhist context, the expression *wuren* 無人 (without human[s]) in Wang's poem refers not only to the absence of other fellow humans but also, on a deeper level, to the emptiness and nonexistence of the perceiving persona. In the state of meditative quiescence (*ji* 寂) that transcends the boundary between the perceiver and the perceived, the self-identity of the speaker (*ren* 人, here objectified as a[n] [external] person[ality]) becomes nonexistent (*wu* 無). So here "nonexistent" 無 is identical with "empty" 空. After the ontological realization of no-self-ness or emptiness of the speaker, the focus turns in the last line to the sequentially blooming and withering magnolia blossoms and, via their symbolic significance, to the Buddhist perspective of natural processes, which requires one to discern their temporariness and, to use Rafal Stepien's words, "the radical insubstantiality of empty forms."[102]

What is characteristic of all three short landscape poems discussed above is their emphasis on the concrete and seemingly mundane natural imagery and, at the same time, an intense aspiration to a direct and "unmediated" experience. Stephen Owen has stated that one of the main features of Wang Wei's poetics is its "serious interest in perception: how things are seen, how the physical world controls how things are seen, and how the forms of perception have inner significance."[103] This phenomenological approach is well articulated, for instance, in "Deer Park": the physical objects and the details of the grove are shown in the darkening evening light, which creates an aura of meditative attentiveness and perceptional immediacy. But at the same time, the poem seems to be reaching

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out somewhere deeper, to the unified realm beyond the distinction of external perception and inner significance.

In all these poems, the natural world is fully alive, vivid, and constantly changing—the sunlight moving through the canopy, the moon suddenly appearing, the blossoms opening and falling—but the unfolding of these events occurs without any trace of a separate self or doer. In practice, this means a mode of perception that is free from the discriminating and evaluating mind and attained via "self-abstention,"[104] that is to say, realizing the intrinsic emptiness of both subject and object. At that instant of "losing one's self," the immediate surroundings become his self-identity and the demarcation between the perceiver and the perceived no longer exists. This experience is, I believe, the quintessence of Wang Wei's "Mahayana poetics."

Conclusion

The Chan-inspired reading of Wang Wei's poetry cannot be proven to be the correct one—if there ever can be a "correct" reading of a poem—but it allows a deeper ontological interpretation of the terse and simple-seeming poems. In my approach, I posit that the much-discussed quietness and tranquility of Wang's poems become significant if seen from the point of view of the Mahayana idea of "no-self," which means, on the level of experience, the speaker's total identification with the surrounding environment. As I have sought to demonstrate in this article, this perspective enables one to analyze the relationship of a subject and object from an ontological angle. The mountain can be empty in many ways, even simultaneously, and this has to be taken into account in our readings.

Although Wang Wei was personally acquainted with eminent monks of both the "Northern" and "Southern" schools of Chan, he refrained from taking sides in any sectarian and doctrinal disputes in his own writings. Instead, he subscribed to the mainstream Mahayana Buddhist tenets and concepts, of which the most fundamental for him was the doctrine of the intrinsic "emptiness" of all phenomena. Wang discussed the correct understanding of "emptiness" in both his essays and poems, and this demonstrates its significance for him.

As a metaphysical aspect of experience, the emptiness of the self is manifested as no-self, which means that the perceiver no longer exists as an external point of view but is ontologically inseparable from the content of his perception. This notion, I believe, helps solve the interpretative quandary of Wang's enigmatic short landscape poems that seemingly shun explicit human presence. The mountain is empty and the persona is empty, and in this ultimate emptiness they come together.

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Notes

1. See, e.g., Zhao, "Wang Wei yu shanshuishi," 249; and Xiao, *Fofa yu shijing*, 104.
2. Chen Yunji, *Tangyin fojiao*, 12; see also N. M. Williams, "Quasi-Phantasmal Flowers," 27.
3. Eifring, "Beyond Perfection," 238.
4. Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 79–80.
5. To mark the occasion, Wang wrote a prose piece titled "A Memorial Requesting the Donation of My Estate for a Monastery" 請施莊為寺表. WWSWJ, 960–61.
6. Stepien, "Imagery of Emptiness," 215; N. M. Williams, "Quasi-Phantasmal Flowers," 34.
7. Owen, "How Did Buddhism Matter," 390.
8. WWSWJ, 448.
9. Chen Yinchi and Jing Chen, "Poetry and Buddhist Enlightenment," 205.
10. Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati*, 7. On Wu Zetian's path to the throne, see Eisenberg, "Emperor Gaozong."
11. Gernet, *History of Chinese Civilization*, 257; Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati*, 7; Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 45.
12. Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 45; Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati*, 27–29.
13. Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 64. Shenxiu had several prominent disciples, and after his death there was no consensus about the true identity of the seventh patriarch. Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati*, 30; McRae, *Northern School*, 56–67.
14. McRae, *Northern School*, 89; Adamek, *Mystique of Transmission*, 163–64.
15. Adamek, *Mystique of Transmission*, 163. However, it is questionable if one can really talk about authorship in any authentic sense here, since *The Record of Lanka*, like many texts at that time, was put together by taking pieces of earlier scriptures, possibly by a student of Jingjue. Van Schaik, *Spirit of Zen*, 56.
16. McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, 54.
17. The text was in fact edited after 745 and again after Shenhui's death in 762, so it cannot be taken as a verbatim transcription of the event. McRae, "Shenhui as Evangelist," 125n1.
18. SHHSCHL, 31.
19. McRae, "Shenhui as Evangelist," 125.
20. Xiangmo Zang 降魔藏 (645–736) was another monk associated with Shenxiu.
21. SHHSCHL, 30–31.
22. Ibid., 30.
23. McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, 54; Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 65.
24. WWSWJ, 961, 1016. In both of these occasions, Wang refers to Puji with his posthumous title Dazhao 大照.

25. The epitaph is titled 為舜闍黎謝御題大通大照和尚塔額表. WWSWJ, 1016–17. We don't know how well Wang Wei actually knew Jingjue, but it is worthwhile to bear in mind that his surviving epitaphs do not include a single piece written for, or at the request of, anyone he did not know. Yang, *Chan Interpretation*, 117–18.
26. WWSWJ, 705.
27. The transcription refers to Wang as "censor Wang" (*Wang shiyu* 王侍御), and since this title was given to him in 745, it is likely that their meeting took place during that time. Yang, *Chan Interpretation*, 114n69.
28. SHYL, 124.
29. Yang, *Chan Interpretation*, 114.
30. Chen Yunji, *Tangyin fojiao*, 59.
31. Cole, *Patriarchs on Paper*, 99.
32. WWSWJ, 1052.
33. Yang, *Chan Interpretation*, 111.
34. Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, 1.
35. The Chinese word *chan* 禪 is an abbreviation of *channa* 禪那, which in turn is a phonetic loan of the Sanskrit word *Dhyana*, meaning "meditation." Thus the Chan tradition is renowned as the "meditation" school of East Asia. Sharf, "Mindfulness and Mindlessness," 55. See also van Schaik, *Spirit of Zen*, 6–7; and Yü, *Chinese Buddhism*, 172.
36. For instance, the Tang-era monk-scholar Zongmi 宗密 (780–841) famously complained that the Chan writings "speak mostly of the principle of Chan, while saying little of the practice of Chan." Broughton, *Zongmi on Chan*, 102.
37. On the early stages of Buddhist meditation in China, see Greene, *Chan before Chan*, 21–45.
38. Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, 33.
39. Donner, "Sudden and Gradual," 212.
40. Van Schaik, *Spirit of Zen*, 28. There are also other interpretations of these concepts. For instance, according to Chün-fang Yü (*Chinese Buddhism*, 159), *zhi* is practiced to "stop the flow of false ideas and realize the nonexistence of phenomena and the truth of emptiness," and *guan* to "realize that although phenomena are like dreams and illusion, they nevertheless have a temporary existence" and thereby achieve "insight into the truth of emptiness."
41. Dumoulin, *India and China*, 88.
42. Van Schaik, *Spirit of Zen*, 56, 63. Robert H. Sharf ("Mindfulness and Mindlessness," 56) has noted on the subject that "the sources for the study of early Chan . . . have much to say about competing Chan schools and ideologies but little to offer in the way of concrete descriptions of practice."
43. Van Schaik, *Spirit of Zen*, 68.
44. T.2837.85.1288a15–21.
45. The author of *Chuan fabao ji* is a layman, Du Fei 杜胐 (n.d.), who most probably was an early teacher of Yifu. McRae, *Northern School*, 87; Adamek, *Mystique of Transmission*, 161.
46. There are at least three different versions of *Chuan fabao ji*, which are all kept in the so-called Pelliot collection. This particular section in which Daoxin is talking about seated meditation is not included in the (short) version found on *Taisho Tripitaka* (T.2838). It can, however, be found, e.g., in manuscript P.3664. ZQCZWXSB, 66–76.

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47. WWSWJ, 585.
48. For instance, Bernard Faure (*Chan Insights*, 89) has asserted that Chan is more precisely a product of two traditions, the Buddhist orthodoxy and the Sino-Japanese historiographical tradition. Also, Cole (*Patriarchs on Paper*, 275) assumes that Chan authors were "quite aware of the art of writing 'religious literature,' and were equally aware of how their efforts fit into a long tradition of reshaping tradition."
49. Xiao, *Fofa yu shijing*, 91.
50. John McRae ("Shenhui as Evangelist," 227) stated in 1987 that "the history of early Ch'an is in the process of being thoroughly rewritten, but is already clear that the doctrine of sudden enlightenment and the dispute between the sudden and gradual teachings should no longer be used as yardsticks by which the religious message of Ch'an and its widespread acceptance in T'ang dynasty China are understood."
51. T.220.05.0022b03–04.
52. Das, "Self as No-Self," 2–3.
53. WWSWJ, 788.
54. Ibid., 583.
55. Ibid., 231.
56. Tarocco, "Lost in Translation?," 323.
57. It was initially listed in a catalog of canonical texts in 594 as a text of "dubious" origin. Tarocco, "Lost in Translation?," 327; Wawrytko, "Sinification of Buddhist Philosophy," 31; P. Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 110, 116.
58. DSQXL, 19–21. See also Wu, "Lun," 1.
59. Tarocco, "Lost in Translation?," 324.
60. T.1666.32.0576a14–15.
61. T.1666.32.0576a25–26.
62. As far as I am aware, Nicholas Morrow Williams's article "Quasi-Phantasmal Flowers" is the only study on Wang that even mentions this essay.
63. WWSWJ, 1025.
64. Ibid., 839.
65. SHYL, 78.
66. Walser, *Genealogies of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 17.
67. Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, 33. Initially the Chinese also interpreted the idea of karmic retribution as the "immortality of the soul" (73).
68. Hsiao Li-hua 蕭麗華 (*Tangdai shige*, 85) has listed all the Buddhist sutras Wang Wei refers to in his writings. The list includes all the major Mahayana scriptures, such as the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, the *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the *Platform Sutra*, and the *Lankavatara Sutra*.
69. T.374.12.0377b04–05.
70. T.374.12.0407b02.
71. T.1666.32.0576a21–23.
72. T.475.14.0541a18–20.
73. WWSWJ, 634.
74. Originally *jushi* 居士 meant something like a "retired scholar." Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, 132.
75. WWSWJ, 583.
76. Z, 17.

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77. WWSWJ, 258.
78. Yang, *Chan Interpretation*, 39.
79. Yu, *Poetry of Wang Wei*, 1.
80. N. M. Williams, "Quasi-Phantasmal Flowers," 27.
81. WWSWJ, 502.
82. Knight, *Chinese Literature*, 43.
83. Shan Chou ("Beginning with Images," 124–25) has stated that for the speaker of Wang's poetry "the consciousness of humans a distance away and dwindling further makes his solitude the more sweet."
84. Wagner, "Art of Wang Wei's Poetry," 105.
85. Chen Yunji, "Wang Wei," 60–63. Nagarjuna's magnum opus *Mulamadhyamakakarika* was translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva 鳩摩羅什 (334–413) and grew increasingly important during the Sui and Tang eras. N. M. Williams, "Quasi-Phantasmal Flowers," 37–38.
86. Chen Yunji, "Wang Wei," 61. Nagarjuna uses this formulation explicitly in chapter 25 of his treatise. See Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 75.
87. Chen Yunji, "Wang Wei," 63. Here Chen also cites Qing dynasty scholar Xu Zeng 徐增 (1612–?), who uses the distinction between "existence" (*you* 有) and "nonexistence" (*wu* 無). So, in this sense, "emptiness" (*kong* 空) and "nonexistence" (*wu* 無) are interchangeable.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. The expression 回光返照 is not found in the sutras but it appears profusely in the *yulu* 語録 (recorded sayings) literature.
91. WWSWJ, 514.
92. CC, 72. About the connection between Wang's poem and the "Mountain Spirit" see Yu, *Poetry of Wang Wei*, 204.
93. Yu, *Poetry of Wang Wei*, 191.
94. Ibid., 169.
95. For instance, Shan Chou translates the line 深林人不知 as "Deep in the forest, no-one knows [of me]." Chou, "Beginning with Images," 121.
96. T.223.08.0217b16–17.
97. T.475.14.0548b03–06.
98. WWSWJ, 515.
99. See, e.g., Chen Yinchi, *Zhong gu wenxue*, 164; Stepien, "Imagery of Emptiness," 221; and Zhao, "Wang Wei yu shanshuishi," 253.
100. Rafal Stepien ("Imagery of Emptiness," 225) has made the same observation: Wang Wei "clothes his Buddhist ideas . . . in the successful *embodiment* of abstract and often abstruse Chan notions in his poetic imagery." By the same token, Chen Yinchi (*Sui Tang foxue*, 139) has stated that in some of Wang's poems the Buddhist ideas merge with the immediate scenery.
101. T.159.03.0317a16.
102. Stepien, "Imagery of Emptiness," 213. N. M. Williams ("Quasi-Phantasmal Flowers," 51) has noted in a similar vein that in Wang's poetry the flower imagery often functions on two levels: flowers are "simultaneously harbingers of the beauties awaiting those who become truly enlightened, and reminders that physical beauty is a hollow simulacrum."

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103. Owen, *Great Age of Chinese Poetry*, 35.
104. See Stepien, "Imagery of Emptiness," 221.

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SHYL *Shenhui yulu* 神會語錄 (The Recorded Sayings of Shenhui). Kaohsiung: Foguangshan wenhua shiye youxian gongsi, 1996.

T *Taisho shinshu daizakyo* 大正新脩大藏經. Edited by Takakusu Junjiro 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭. Tokyo: Taisho Issaikyo Kankokai, 1924–1935.

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Z *Zhuangzi benyi* 莊子本義 (The Original Meaning of Zhuangzi). Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2012.

ZQCZWXSB *Zaoqi chanzong wenxian si bu* 早期禪宗文獻四部 (Four Early Texts of the Chan School), vol. 1, *Facsimiles and Diplomatic Transcription*. Edited by Marcus Bingenheimer and Chang Po-Yung. Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gufen youxian gongsi, 2018.

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