

Using an Ancient Theme to Reveal the Author's Mind: A Study of Wang Anshi's *On Reading the Biography of Lord Mengchang*

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Abstract: Wang Anshi's essay, *On Reading the Biography of Lord Mengchang*, has long been considered a succinct and subtle masterpiece of argumentation with brilliant use of language. But some critics of modern scholarship have condemned its less than rigorous logic, the "sophistry," or even its being a false essay. From the perspective of content, history, and ideas, this study believes that it is a well done prose and it is a text that contains Wang's political vision. It also outlines the evolution of criticism on the essay and the influences that had a bearing on the way it was accepted from one age to the next.

Keywords: Wang Anshi, *On Reading the Biography of Lord Mengchang*, Men of Talent, Erroneous-essay Thesis, Historical Criticism.

1. Introduction

It is a classic piece of argumentation and *On Reading the Biography of Lord Mengchang* has been the subject of ongoing interest. It appears in twenty of twenty-six representative Qing anthologies of classical prose, making it a canonical item in the Wang Anshi corpus, and writers and scholars across the centuries have admired its force and momentum. With the introduction of formal logic and positivist methods into modern Chinese scholarship, however, the essay also became controversial. Beginning with its rhetorical techniques, this article confronts and analyzes its supposed sophistry. It then places the text against the Northern Song's domestic and external crises and Wang's political aspirations, thereby investigating the actual motive behind his use of an ancient subject to disclose his own convictions. The aim is to offer a fuller and more balanced literary assessment of this much-disputed historical essay.

2. A Ninety-Character Masterpiece Across the Ages

Wang Anshi wrote *On Reading the Biography of Lord Mengchang* as a refutational reading note after studying the "Biography of Lord Mengchang" in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*. Although the entire piece comprises only four sentences, successive generations lavished praise on it. Jin Shengtian remarked, "Four strokes, each struck with certainty and each like an inch of iron: none can bend them" [1]. Wu Rulun likewise called it "the supreme model among short compositions" [2], while Shen Deqian acclaimed it as "an unrivalled masterpiece for the ages" [3].

The essay begins: "Everyone praises Lord Mengchang for his ability to attract worthy men. They therefore gathered around him, and in the end he relied on their strength to escape tiger-and-leopard Qin" [4]. Wang first presents the target of his attack in direct terms: Lord Mengchang treated talented retainers with courtesy; they consequently attached themselves to him; and their abilities later enabled his escape from Qin. The exclamation "Alas!" heightens the second sentence, which rejects the claim that Lord Mengchang could

attract worthy men: he was merely the leader of cock-crowers and dog thieves, so how could he be credited with securing men of genuine worth? This is a very succinct judgment that packs a punch. It abruptly recasts Lord Mengchang's character and draws a sharp boundary between resourceful tricksters and authentic talent. Wang next argues, "Had it not been so, with the strength of Qi at his command, a single worthy man should have enabled him to face south as ruler and bring Qin under control. Why would he still have needed the power of cock-crowers and dog thieves?" [4]. Since Qi possessed such strength, the presence of even one true man of talent should have been enough to check violent Qin. Lord Mengchang's household therefore contained no such men, much less proved his capacity to attract them. The closing line, "The appearance of cock-crowers and dog thieves at his gate was precisely why worthy men did not come," overturns the earlier assertion that talent flocked to him. Centered throughout on the proposition that Lord Mengchang failed to secure worthy men, the prose is disciplined and spare. Like a short blade drawn from its sheath, each stroke condemns and refutes with exceptional momentum.

This phrase, "cock-crowing and dog-thieving" comes from the "Biography of Lord Mengchang." When Tian Wen (Lord Mengchang) was imprisoned in Qin and was about to die, a favorite consort of King Zhaoxiang offered to intercede for him in return for a white fur coat from a fox. One retainer, who was good at stealing, disguised himself as a dog and stole the robe. Later on, when the fugitives arrived at Hangu Pass another retainer crowed like a cock, and the guards took this to be the dawn, and opened the gate – so the fugitives escaped. Wang does not recount this colorful and well-known scene. Rather, he plays with the idiom by reversing Lord Mengchang's traditional image. It occurs thrice. The first tells that he was chief of "cock-crowers and dog thieves", the second that his escape from Qin was due to their "power" and the third that "true worthies stayed away" because his house was full of such men. Each recurrence has a different location and has an irreplaceable role. This doesn't come across as slow or as if the person has said it before. Instead, repetition drives into the heart of the subject, crystallizes the vocabulary, makes the construct more understandable, and illustrates

Wang's idea of "how to have a lot of meaning in a few words.

The thought is repeated many times within the meager range of the characters, who number about ninety. Wang structures the four sentences under the headings proposition, refutation, reversal and verdict. He has first given the settled opinion his due, then sharply taken it to task, turned to his own model of a good servant, and now made his final pronouncement. The successive waves of argument provide energy to the short text; it is a model of the miniature critical essay.

3. The Erroneous-Essay Thesis and Wang Anshi's Sophistic Technique

Competing criticism is also a part of the reception of *On Reading the Biography of Lord Mengchang*. *Guwen Guanzhi in Modern Translation* says that the essay is a one sided attack that ignores everything else [5]. Xu Beiwen claims that Wang's logical refusal on the traditional view is based on an equivocation [5]. Li Guodong poses interested queries on the correctness of its historical thinking [6] and Wang Ziyue and Nie Gannu believe that even a famous essay can be wrong [7, 8]. The conflict comes because readers tend to read the book as if it is a formal argument, which it seems on the surface to be, a disquisition about history. If it's judged only on its own terms, the reasoning is incomplete: The evidence is not enough, and the refutation involves conceptual substitution and invented premises.

In the light of Guo Xiang's analysis, Wang's "sophistry" is likely to be found at a number of locations [9]. "Everyone praises" is too categorical to be proved from empirical data, and the words place an opinion in the reader's mind to pave the way for the author's subsequent opinion "How could he be said to have obtained worthy men?" Second, Han Yu's words "With the strength of Qi at his command, a single worthy man should have enabled him to face south and control Qin" on the premise of the poem follows what Han Yu said in "Sacrificial Essay at Tian Heng's Tomb" that during the collapse and disorder of Qin, "one worthy man could have made him king" [10]. "could have made him king", Wang extends the scope of the premise to "could have controlled Qin", making its persuasive power weaker. Last but not least, the idea 'This is why worthy men did not come' tacitly alters the meaning of 'worthy men'. That's not objective, and it's also a way of tying up the argumentative knot of the essay.

Wang's repudiation of Lord Mengchang's capacity to draw good men is based on a different criterion of goodness. So what is a *shi*, a man of service and talent? First attested in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions [11] the *graph* can mean a number of things, an adult male, commander, soldier, warrior, person of education, virtue, learning, skill. Confucius supplies one influential standard. When Zigong asks what qualifies a person to be called a *shi*, Confucius answers: "He conducts himself with a sense of shame and, when dispatched to the four quarters, does not disgrace his ruler's commission." Asked about the next rank, he replies, "His clan calls him filial, and his community calls him fraternal." Pressed once more, he adds, "His word can be trusted, and his actions produce results." In Wang's essay, the term plainly denotes the first broad category: people of real ability. Such men rose to prominence during the Eastern Zhou. Unlike hereditary aristocrats grounded in lineage, many came from humble origins, as in the saying that Sunshu Ao was raised from the seacoast and Baili Xi from the marketplace. Rulers and nobles

valued their knowledge without treating low birth as disqualifying. Through strategy or a specialized skill, these men could benefit the state, enhance a ruler's prestige, end interstate rivalry, and help their patron become sovereign of the realm. They accordingly gained political importance and gradually formed a distinct social stratum.

By the age of Duke Huan of Qi, whose chief minister was Guan Zhong, the *shi* already stood first among the four occupational groups of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Selection then relied on recommendation and ennoblement for military merit; no uniform examination standard existed. Talented individuals were recommended directly as guest ministers and served the ruling elite. By the Northern Song, centralized rule had matured and the civil-service examination system was well established. Even candidates from modest families normally spent ten or more years studying the Confucian canon, endured several rounds of examinations, gained imperial recognition, and received official appointments. Many became local administrators expected to govern as parental officials and win the people's confidence. The growth of Neo-Confucian learning further increased admiration for this morally cultivated type from the Northern Song onward. Standards of selection and the social recognition accorded to the *shi* therefore differed markedly between the pre-imperial period and Wang's own time.

Prior to Qin, a *shi*'s main standard was practicality and not morality. In this historical context "cock-crowers and dog thieves" are conceptually similar to men of talent, and one kind of them. Wang nevertheless considers the two categories to be incompatible. On the other side of the question is an outcome: Why did Qi finally fall to Qin if Lord Mengchang actually got worthy men? On the other hand, Guan Shan claims that Wang's reasoning is based upon the morality absolutism of the traditional Confucian culture [12]. According to this belief, every noble man ought to be open, upright and consistent at all times: Lord Mengchang's reliance on tricksters makes it clear that he was not a true nobleman. Essay therefore is a replacement for subjective moral judgment and instead locates the objectivity of the historical. However, this change of concepts did not displease the readers, but was nearly unanimously greeted across dynasties. Wang appealed to moral standards that had acquired truth-like authority over a millennium of Chinese history and exploited changing understandings of the *shi* to guide his audience with ease. His eminent position in the Northern Song literary world and his later service as chief councillor further encouraged readers, influenced by deference to authority, to overlook the small mechanisms of his sophistry

4. Political Conception and Composition amid Domestic and Foreign Crises

Literature, however, cannot be reduced to logic and factual verification. Such a method neglects authorial intention, central purpose, and historical setting; as a result, it produces a partial reading and, ultimately, a misreading. Given Wang Anshi's learning, he could hardly have been unaware of the historical record concerning Lord Mengchang's retainers. Why, then, did he compose the essay in this manner?

One mentions that it was written in 1042-1045 when Wang was assistant to a military commissioner located in Huainan, and another in 1059-1063 when he was employed in the central fiscal administration and Hanlin drafting office [13].

Both scenarios are in the middle to later years of Emperor Renzong's reign, a time of subsequent political, military and economic turmoil. Wang experienced the Song-Xia War of 1040-1042, in which the Song forces were beaten three times in succession and an annual tribute was paid to Western Xia. He also witnessed the rise and failure of the Qingli Reforms between 1043 and 1045. Serving in the provinces, he saw the weakness and poverty of local society firsthand and could scarcely have remained indifferent. After Emperor Shenzong's accession, Wang directed the New Policies from 1069 onward. Alongside measures to enrich the state and strengthen the military, he devoted particular attention to the recruitment of officials. Although that program also helped build support for reform, he consistently emphasized appointment by ability. Nor did he accept the conduct of conservative opponents during either the Qingli program or his own reforms. In "Letter in Reply to Sima Guang," he writes that "people have been accustomed to expediency for more than a day, while many scholar-officials count it virtuous to disregard affairs of state and flatter the crowd by conforming to custom" [4]. A qualified scholar-official, for Wang, therefore required the capacity to govern and the courage not to follow blindly. Taken together, these facts suggest that while composing *On Reading the Biography of Lord Mengchang*, he had already developed views on reform and on the type of talent the state required. The essay indirectly records that political thinking.

What sort of officials did the Northern Song need? From 1042 to 1063, the dynasty was constantly under pressure from the Liao and Western Xia, and eventually the Jin. There was a huge number of officials, huge expenses on officials and the army, inadequate income, low treasury, and chronic weakness in wealth and arms. Every year payments were made in large amounts of silver to the Liao, which further strained the situation. Inside, a factional battle raged between reformers and conservatives, hampering institutional reform and afflicting the nation with more political polarization. The pressure of these factors together was such that the state's need for talent was pretty much comparable to the one that Wang spoke of in his essay. It required officials who knew how things worked in the state, who were determined, who had the authority to take action, who were able to reform, and who could keep other states at bay. These were able men that could 'control Qin', not cock-crowers and dog thieves as in the words of *On Reading the Biography of Lord Mengchang*.

The essay can only be fully understood by an appreciation of Wang's beliefs and feelings. Cheng Qianfan and Wu Xinlei have given a particularly astute appraisal in *A Literary History of the Northern and Southern Song*: "The author clearly did not mean to analyze and appraise the practice of Warring States rulers in maintaining retainers in a comprehensive way, but rather simply to deprecate a common historical trend: rulers neglected and failed to develop real talent, thus failing to make their states prosperous and their people secure. This deprecation also shows Wang Anshi's desire to serve his country, as well as his inner struggle over his inability to make advancement by joining in corrupt uniformity" [14]. Wang's actual intent was to neither reject Lord Mengchang nor to change his historical personality. He took an old topic as an opportunity to express his own vision on talent selection. *On Reading the Biography of Lord Mengchang* is therefore not a profound work of history nor is it a misguided essay. Literary prose that has a larger mode of political and emotional expression is called.

5. Conclusion

"*On Reading the Biography of Lord Mengchang*" should not be read simply as a rigid historical argument nor should the argument's logic be interpreted as flawed and the work itself as mistaken. What Wang does do is to use an sophisticated method, that is to substitute objective historical evaluation with subjective moral judgment, and to redefine the category of the *shi*. This type of maneuver did not come about due to restricted learning. In this background of the Northern Song's chronic weakness, domestic strain, and outside threat, he utilized Lord Mengchang as a vehicle for his imagination of the "true men of talent" that the state needed. Meanwhile, he voiced his discontent with an official culture that was "content to drift and compromise," and his own battle between an appetite for helping the age and a refusal to move forward by "conformity. Thus, the importance of the essay is not so much in the accuracy with which it reconstructs the historical picture as in its exemplary power as a political allegory and a piece of literature. Readers can recover its enduring artistic intelligence only by moving beyond the narrow boundary of logic and positivist verification and returning to the author's emotional commitments and historical world.

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