On Hearing the Donkey's Bray: Friendship, Ritual, and Social Convention in Medieval China

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The braying of the donkey is understood differently in two separate anecdotes from the *Shishuo xinyu*. This difference of signification raises the question of what the sound of the bray might mean for the early medieval cultural imagination. An examination of the donkey's bray within anecdotal, religious, biographical, and poetic contexts relates the humble animal's call to broader themes of friendship, ritual, politics, and interpretation itself.

In much of traditional Chinese literature, representations of sound function as background noise for literary descriptions and evoked scenes. Streams burble and winds sough through trees, and hearing these sounds, the literary subject might find him or herself in a state of reverie or a heightened moment of awareness. Such sounds are seemingly incidental, yet they serve as necessary details that shape the phenomenal experience of a given scene; without these sounds, the scene is somehow incomplete. Moreover, within the cultural imaginary, these auditory representations are laden with meaning and convey information, whether as a marker of seasonal time, a gesture towards the musicality of nature, or the implication of a pathetic sympathy between the subject and the natural environment. Other sounds, however, take place both as aural background and as foreground, becoming literary *topoi* in and of themselves. Such sounds may become the focus of the textual scene, conveying cultural resonances and containing greater complexity in signification.

It is a particular — and indeed, one might say, peculiar — sound that is the focus of this essay: the sound of the donkey's bray (*lü ming* 驢鳴, *lü sheng* 驢聲, or *lü si* 驢嘶).[1] Donkeys are well known within traditional Chinese textual and visual

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[1] "Bray" is, of course, the standard way in which donkey vocalizations are rendered in English. The Chinese term *ming* 鳴 is closer to "cry" or "call," whereas *sheng* 聲 denotes the production of a sound generally. The term *si* 嘶 is the most equine of terms relating to animal sounds. I use

representations, serving as familiar mounts and beasts of burden.[2] There is, however, no traditional discourse on medieval braying that awaits scholarship; traditional encyclopedias (*leishu* 類書) do not recognize donkey brays as a topical category, and representations of the sound in this period are few. Still, where braying appears, one finds an unexpected set of associations that relate the donkey's sound to themes of friendship, mourning, and ritualism. The following essay examines braying throughout the early medieval period, following the thematic echoes of the bray within anecdotes, dynastic histories, religious texts, and polemical essays from the second to the fifth centuries. There are no strong causal relationships or intentional allusions that forge necessary connections among these textual incidents of braying, but taken as a whole, these examples reconstruct the semiotic range of what braying could have signified during this period.

By way of explaining why anyone would undertake the scholarly study of such a topic, I will begin with what is perhaps the best known example of braying within Chinese literature: the memorable story from the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (*Recent Anecdotes and the Talk of the Age*), in which friends of the poet Wang Can 王粲 (177–217) come to mourn his passing:

> Wang Zhongxuan [Can] loved donkey brays. After he was interred, [Wei] Wendi [Cao Pi] came in person to mourn. He turned to his companions and said, "Wang loved donkey brays, so it would be permissible for each of us to give a bray to send him off." So all of the guests performed donkey brays.
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> 王仲宣好驢鳴。既葬，文帝臨其喪，顧語同遊曰："王好驢鳴，可各作一聲以送之。"赴客皆一作驢鳴。[3]

This is the opening anecdote of the *Shishuo xinyu*'s chapter "Shang shi" 傷逝 ("Mourning the Departed"), and we are presented with a rather strange scene. Wang Can was one of the famous "Seven Masters of the Jian'an" (*Jian'an qizi* 建安七子), the group of leading writers who enjoyed the patronage of the powerful Cao 曹 family at the end of the Han dynasty. Nowhere in his brief biography in the *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (*Record of the Three Kingdoms*) is Wang's fondness for donkey brays mentioned, though this is not surprising, given the tendency of dynastic histories to focus on the public

"bray" in order to distinguish the sound from lowing, whinnying and the like, though the original texts are not so consistent.

[2] See, for example, Peter C. Sturman, "The Donkey Rider as Icon: Li Cheng and Early Chinese Landscape Painting," *Artibus Asiae* 55.1–2 (1995): 43–97.

[3] Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–44), comp., *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 世說新語校箋, annot. Yang Yong 楊勇, 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 17.1.636. Also see Richard B. Mather, trans. and ed., *A New Account of Tales of the World*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2002), p. 346.

careers of their biographical subjects.[4] Thus, whereas Wang's "ugly appearance and sickly body" 貌侵而體弱 is mentioned in the biography because it has a direct bearing on a career setback, his enjoyment of braying is not, since this is a matter of personal taste.[5] The anecdote makes clear that the princeling Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226; presented anachronistically here as Wei Emperor Wen 魏文帝, r. 220–26) leads the other mourners in a chorus of donkey brays to commemorate their deceased friend, though nothing is said of what the donkey bray might signify in the greater cultural contexts of medieval China.[6] That is, if Wang Can could hear Cao Pi's performance of the bray, what would he have heard?

To answer this, one might turn to other examples of donkey braying in texts from around the same era. An anecdote in the fourth century *Shiyi ji* 拾遺記 (*Record of Gathered Anecdotes*) purports to represent an earlier instance of braying, though as a telling detail and not the thematic focus. The anecdote describes the Han Emperor Ling 漢靈帝 (r. 168-89) and his leisure activities, and the narrative culminates with a visit to the "Manor of Naked Roaming" (*Luoyou guan* 裸遊館):

> At the height of summer the emperor went to escape the heat in his "Manor of Naked Roaming," and drank and feasted all night long. The emperor sighed, saying, "If only it could be like this for ten thousand years and then I would ascend to become an immortal." Palace women between the ages of fourteen and eighteen were all to be gorgeously made up. They took off their upper garments and wore only underwear, or at times went bathing together naked. The *yinchi* incense that the Western Regions sent as tribute was boiled in a liquid [for the bath].[7] When the palace women finished bathing, he let the leftover liquid flow into the canal, which was then named "Flowing Incense Canal." Also he ordered the young eunuchs to make donkey brays. North of the manor he had built the "Hall of Chicken Cries," and he raised many chickens there. Each time he was still in a drunken stupor at daybreak, the eunuchs would compete to make chicken cries, mixing their sounds with the real chicken sounds. Only when candles were set before the hall [in the evening] would the emperor then come to his senses. When Dong Zhuo sacked the capital region [in 190], he dispersed the emperor's beauties and burned down the palaces and manors.[8] During the Wei dynasty Xianxi reign [264-65], where the candles were once placed, night after night there were lights like stars. Later people believed these to be spirit lights and constructed on the spot a small building, the

[4] For Wang Can's biography, see Chen Shou 陳壽 (233–97), comp., *Sanguo zhi*, annot. Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (372–451), 5 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 21.597–99.

[5] See *Sanguo zhi*, 21.598.

[6] Cao Pi was not yet emperor at the time of Wang Can's death. However, he is appears as Wei Wendi in accordance with the *Shishuo xinyu*'s tendency to identify figures by the highest rank achieved in their careers.

[7] This is possibly *yinchen* 茵陳 (*Artemisiae scopariae* or "redstem wormwood") which was burned for its aromatic qualities.

[8] See Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445), *Hou Han shu*, 12 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 9.370; and *Sanguo zhi*, 6.176.

> name of which was "Shrine of Lingering Light." They would pray there for good luck. Only at the end of Wei Mingdi's reign did the light begin to gradually fade.
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> 帝盛夏避暑於裸遊館，長夜飲宴。帝嗟曰："使萬歲如此，則上仙也。"宮人年二七已上，三六以下，皆靚妝，解其上衣，惟著內服，或共裸浴。西域所獻茵墀香，煮以為湯，宮人以之浴浣畢，使以餘汁入渠，名曰"流香渠"。又使內竪為驢鳴。於館北又作鷄鳴堂，多畜鷄，每醉迷於天曉，內侍競作鷄鳴，以乱真声也。乃以炬燭投於殿前，帝乃驚悟。及董卓破京師，散其美人，焚其宮館。至魏咸熙中， 先所投燭處，夕夕有光如星。後人以為神光，於此地立小屋， 名曰"餘光祠"，以祈福。至魏明末，稍掃除矣。[9]

The brief mention of the young eunuchs making donkey brays may seem insignificant on its own, but taken in the historical context of Emperor Ling's eunuch-dominated reign, it forges a connection between emperor's amusements and the political corruption in the court.[10] The eunuchs' performance of the donkey brays may serve to goad the emperor on when he is rutting among his palace ladies, the sound becoming the perfect auditory accompaniment for the emperor's bestial activities. However, when coupled with the details about the imperial chicken coop and the eunuchs' imitations of cock crowing that fail to wake the emperor, his sensual excess shades into ridiculousness. Unlike tales of other decadent emperors, there is no romance to be found in this account of Emperor Ling's drunken excursions, and certainly nothing that might become fodder for later poetic compositions. The anecdote concludes by leaping ahead to the destruction of the capital region by the warlord Dong Zhuo 董卓 (d. 192), metaleptically showing how imperial self-indulgence results in the dynastic ruin. In the end, the site where the emperor once took his pleasure becomes a haunted site with ghostly lights and then a shrine; the memory of imperial decadence is replaced by prayers for luck as the lights gradually fade away.

If the donkey's bray resonates with problems of political failure in the *Shiyi ji* anecdote, one finds a more metaphysical problem in an early Buddhist sutra, the *Mayi jing* 罵意經 (*Sutra on Castigating Deluded Thoughts*). This is a work that carries an uncertain attribution to the Eastern Han Parthian monk and translator An Shigao 安世高 (fl. 2nd cent.).[11] The problem of dating this text has to do with the tendency of early sutras over time to gain false attributions to famous translators. The earliest extant catalogue, the *Chusanzang jiji* 出三藏記集 (*Collection of Records on the Translation*

[9] Wang Jia 王嘉 (fl. late 4th cent.), comp., *Shiyi ji*, ed. Xiao Qi 蕭綺 (fl. 6th cent.), annot. Qi Zhiping 齊治平 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 6.144–45.

[10] On the reign of Emperor Ling and the problem of the eunuchs, see B. J. Mansvelt Beck, "The Fall of Han," in Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, gen. eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 1, *The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.–A. D. 220*, ed. Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 317–76.

[11] See T732:17.530a–34c, in Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 (1866–1945) and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭 (1872–1932), et al., comps., *Taishō shinshū dai zōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, 100 vols. (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–35).

of the Tripiṭaka) by Sengyou 僧祐 (445–518), does not ascribe the sutra to An Shigao, though it does include it among the anonymous scriptures in circulation during the late fifth or early sixth century, when the catalogue was compiled.[12]

The *Mayi jing* is concerned primarily with the laws of karma and metempsychosis, and contains statements such as, "The reason why fish and soft-shell turtles are mute is because in a prior life, they interrupted other people" 魚鱉無聲者，前世斷人語頭故. However, in the same section, the sutra goes on to state,

> If one delights in beating others, in the next life one will be reborn as a donkey. The reason why it has long ears is because the person delighted in pulling other people's ears; and why it is a domesticated beast is because the person delighted in boxing other people's ears. Or perhaps, in a former life, one was a foot-soldier on campaign. What is the reason for this? When one foot-soldier relays [an order], the remaining soldiers all sound out; when one donkey brays, the other donkeys also bray.
>
> 好捶人，後世作驢。所以長耳者，好挽人耳；畜生好搏人耳。或故世征卒。何以故？一卒傳餘卒皆作聲，一驢鳴餘驢亦鳴。[13]

Clearly there is little good to be said about being reborn as a donkey and even less about what it means for one's conduct in a past life. The *Mayi jing* provides two possibilities for how one might end up as a donkey. The first is rather straightforward, exemplifying the iron law of karmic retribution, which seems to delight in ironic reversals of fortune. That is, the habitual abuse of other people's ears leads to a suitably poetic fate in the next life: being reborn as an animal marked by long ears (which would presumably be more vulnerable to abuse). The second, which does not involve the bullying or abuse of others, is somewhat more complicated. Here, the focus is not on the meaning of the donkey itself, but rather on the explanation of why donkeys bray, tracing the consequence back to the karmic cause of the soldier who unthinkingly leads his fellow men into battle and death. While this is hardly a fair representation of the soldier (or of the donkey), the sutra is asserting an equivalence between the donkey's foolish habit of joining a chorus of brays with the campaigning soldiers' disciplined relay of messages.

Neither of the above two examples remark in any way on the aesthetic qualities of the donkey's bray, but it is this criticism that is raised in the essay, "Refuting Daoist Gu's 'Discourse on the Chinese and the Barbarians'" ("Bo Gu daoshi 'Yixia lun'" 駁顧道士《夷夏論》). This is a piece composed by the monk Huitong 惠通 (fl. 5th cent.) as a polemical response to the Daoist Gu Huan 顧歡 (420–83 or 428–91). Gu Huan's

[12] See Sengyou, comp., *Chusanzang jiji*, T2145:55.28a. The *Mayi jing* was attributed to An Shigao in the Sui dynasty catalogue *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶紀; see T2034:49.51b. The *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄, completed in 730, accepted this attribution, as did later bibliographies. See T2154:55.616c; and also Chen Shiqiang 陳士強, *Dazangjing zongmu tiyao: jingzang* 大藏經總目提要：經藏, vol. 3 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), pp. 438–40.

[13] See *Mayi jing*, in T732:17.532b–32c.

original essay had argued that Śākyamuni was none other than the reincarnation of Laozi, thus giving Buddhism and Daoism a common origin, and then went on to criticize Buddhism as a foreign faith incompatible with Chinese traditions.[14] In Huitong's response, he begins as follows:

> I had some leisure at the start of summer, and being neglectful of business and time, I took up Master Gu's discussion. It brought illumination as if "dispelling childish ignorance,"[15] and for me, it distinguished the basis for difference and sameness and clarified the scope of truth and falsity. Its language was fecund and its significance revealing; its patterning was ornate and its mood was profound. Each time that I read and studied it, I forgot my fatigue; it comforted me as if it was a day-lily.[16] Truly, [Gu Huan] could be termed "a gentleman of the magnificent brush," and [this piece] a composition worth cherishing. However, when one investigates its essential point, I fear there is much that is laughable. It is like a blind fellow wanting to harvest pearls, only to turn home clutching red adzuki beans, believing he has gotten treasure. Or it is like a deaf person wanting to hear music, only to be delighted with hearing a donkey's bray, thinking that he is 'one who knows the tone'.
>
> 余端夏有隙，亡事忽景，披顧生之論。昭如發蒙，見辨異同之原，明是非之趣。辭豐義顯，文華情奧。每研讀忘倦，慰若萱草。真所謂洪筆之君子，有懷之作也。然則察其指歸，疑笑良多。譬猶盲子採珠，懷赤菽而反，以為獲寶。聾賓聽樂，聞驢鳴而悅，用為知音。[17]

Huitong charges Gu Huan with being both blind and deaf, and as a result, taking beans for pearls and donkey brays for music. Yet, even worse, being unable to perceive things are they truly are, Gu Huan thinks of himself as having great insight into matters of religious truth when in fact he is unable to make accurate distinctions or judgments. Thus, the Daoist's skill in rhetorical argument and literary composition merely conceals a superficial understanding and has no value beyond its surface appeal.

[14] This is preserved in Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯 (489–537), *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書, 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 54.931–32; and in Li Yanshou 李延壽 (fl. 618–76), *Nan shi* 南史, 6 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 75.1875–77. For a discussion of the essay and a partial translation, see Walter Lieberthal, "Chinese Buddhism during the 4th and 5th Centuries," *Monumenta Nipponica* 11.1 (1955): 44–83. Also see Livia Kohn, *Laughing at the Tao: Debates among Buddhists and Taoists in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 161–69.
[15] The phrase *fameng* 發蒙 is used in the explanation of the hexagram *Meng* 蒙 ("Childlike Ignorance"). See *Zhou yi zhengyi* 周易正義, 1.8b, in Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849), ed. and annot., *Shisanjing zhushu fu jiaokanji* 十三經注疏附校勘記, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), p. 20.
[16] The *xuancao* 萱草 (*Hemerocallis fulva*) reputedly had the power to soothe grief. For example, Xi Kang 稽康 (223–62) in his "Yangsheng lun" 養生論 ("Discourse on Nurturing Life") states that "the day-lily allows one to forget sorrow" 萱草忘憂. See *Wen xuan*, 53.2289.
[17] This is preserved in Sengyou, comp., *Hongming ji* 弘明集, T2102:52.45c.

The phrase that Huitong uses, *zhiyin* 知音 or "one who knows the tone," alludes to the story of the legendary Boya 伯牙 and Zhong Ziqi 鍾子期. As recounted in the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (*Annals of Master Lü*), Boya was talented at playing the *qin* 琴 ("zither"), and whenever he did so, Zhong Ziqi could discern what was on his friend's mind. When Zhong Ziqi died, Boya cut the strings on his zither and never played again, believing that there was no one left in the world who could understand his music.[18] If Boya may be considered the model of a perfect musician, then Zhong Ziqi represents the perfect listener, one whose appreciation and understanding reveals him to be an ideal critic. The theme of the *zhiyin* would be developed during the early medieval period in relation to both musical and literary aesthetics, most notably in the chapter entitled "Zhiyin" in *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and Dragon Carvings*).[19] Though Huitong's invocation of the *zhiyin* in regard to the donkey's bray is meant ironically, the notion of the *zhiyin* becomes critical to an understanding of the bray insofar as the figure of the *zhiyin* is not only that of the critical appreciator, but comes to connote that of the true friend (*zhiji* 知己, "one who knows the self") and the discerning patron (*zhiren* 知人, "one who knows [the talents] of others").

It is in this context that we may return to Cao Pi and his act of braying at Wang Can's funeral. If the reason why Wang Can enjoyed performing the donkey bray is now unknowable, the reason why Cao Pi performs the bray at Wang's funeral can now be understood as the knowing gesture of Wang's *zhiyin*. Cao Pi's critical appreciation of Wang Can's tastes is affirmed by the other mourners, who join him in making donkey brays. That this unusual community of mourning is called into being by Cao Pi is not insignificant. Cao Pi was no mere friend of Wang Can; he was Wang Can's patron as a member of the Cao clan. Moreover, by 217, the year of Wang Can's death, he was the recently named crown prince. Cao Pi, in the end, plays a triple role at the funeral, serving as Wang Can's perfect listener in the guises of critic, friend, and patron.

While the *Shishuo xinyu* is often considered to exemplify anti-ritualistic behavior, the figures of the *Shishuo xinyu* are neither simply engaged in the negation of accepted norms of behavior, nor are they (all) opposed to Confucian ideology and practices.[20] For Cao Pi, his unusual behavior at a funerary occasion is not precisely *anti-ritual*, but rather counter-conventional. When Cao Pi leads the guests of a funeral in a chorus of donkey brays and momentarily unites them as a community, he is displacing the

[18] See Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (d. 265 BC), *Lüshi chunqiu xin jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋新校釋, ed. Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 14.2.744–45. Another version, though with a different ending, is found in Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, ed., *Liezi jishi* 列子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 5.178.

[19] Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–522), *Wenxin diaolong yizheng* 文心雕龍義證, ed. and annot. Zhan Ying 詹鍈, 3 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), 48.1835–64..

[20] On this, see Donald Holzman's discussion of "anti-ritualism" in the case of Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–63), in his *Poetry and Politics: The Life and Works of Juan Chi (A.D. 210–263)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 73–87.

ritual funeral wail with a different, though programmatically equivalent, sound. Yet unlike the impersonal and ritually conventional wail, the bray is a singular tribute to Wang Can, who seems to have loved this sound. We thus see what Donald Holzman characterizes as "le retour à l'homme, le renouveau de l'intérêt pour l'homme individuel, considéré en lui-même et non plus comme un simple élément dans la machine de l'Etat, machine mue par les rites du confucianisme."[21] Cao Pi and his companions are mourning Wang Can not in a way indistinguishable from the mourning of others, but in a way that would have had a singular, individual significance for Wang Can.

The Wang Can and Cao Pi anecdote raises a key problem in the concept of ritual. That is, while ritual may provide exemplary models for behavior in everyday life and for special occasions, the very nature of propriety may work against the sincere expression of emotions. The donkey's bray is ritually incorrect — or at the very least ritually unattested — but Cao Pi recognizes it as the perfect send-off for Wang Can. The aptness of Cao Pi's act is confirmed by the other guests, who function as an approving audience and shape the extra-textual reader's own response. Where the narrative is silent, however, is in the broader justification for how such an incongruous sound may befit the solemn ritual occasion of mourning. This is a quality exemplified by the *Shishuo xinyu*, which often prefers the oblique strategies of gesture and suggestion to the pedantry of exegesis. Where one does find an explanation for unorthodox mourning — one that also involves donkey braying — is in a *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (*History of the Later Han*) anecdote that has strong thematic similarities with those found in the *Shishuo xinyu*. The following is cited from the biography of the recluse Dai Liang 戴良 (fl. 2nd cent.):

> When Dai Liang was young, he was unconstrained by propriety. His mother was fond of donkey brays, so Liang constantly imitated the sound in order to please and delight his mother. When his mother died, his elder brother Boluan lived in the mourning hut eating gruel; if it was not according to ritual, then he would not do it. Liang alone ate meat and drank wine, and when sorrow came, he would then cry. Both men were completely haggard in appearance. Someone asked Liang, "The way in which you observe mourning, is it according to ritual?" Liang said, "It is. Ritual is the means by which one controls the release of emotions, and if emotions are not released, then why bother discussing ritual? Now as for 'eating what is delicious yet not finding it sweet', it is thus that one arrives at the fact of a haggard appearance.[22] If the flavor does not remain in the mouth, then to eat it is permissible." The one who disputed this could not catch Liang out.

[21] That is, "the return to man, the renewal of interest in the individual man, judged for himself and not as a simple cog in the machine of the State, a machine driven by the rites of Confucianism." See Holzman, "Les Sept Sages de la Forêt des Bambous et la société de leur temps," *T'oung Pao* 44.4–5 (1956), pp. 336–40.

[22] See the discussion of this quotation, from *Analects* 17.21, in the following pages.

> 良少誕節，母意驢鳴，良常學之以娛樂焉。及母卒，兄伯鸞居廬啜粥，非禮不行，良獨食肉飲酒，哀至乃哭，而二人俱有毀容。或問良曰：“子之居喪，禮乎？”良曰：“然。禮所 以制情佚也，情苟不佚，何禮之論！夫‘食旨不甘’，故致毀容之實。若味不存口，食之可也。”論者不能奪之。[23]

Here it is Dai Liang's mother who loves the sound of donkey brays, and her son imitates the sound in order to amuse her.[24] After her death, his older brother, identified here only by his style-name of Boluan 伯鸞, attends to mourning in the ritually prescribed manner. Dai Liang, however, who was unconventional in his youth remains unconventional after their mother dies. While the mother's love of donkey brays does not lead to Dai Liang braying during the mourning period, it nonetheless serves as preamble to his argument with a convenient interlocutor who questions him as to the correctness of his behavior.

Even though this episode is not included in the *Shishuo xinyu*, Dai's response speaks to one of the anecdotal collection's central concerns: it is not the exterior form of the ritual that matters, but what the ritual actually signifies — its emotional content. This is supported by Dai's reference to an exchange in the *Analects* between Confucius and his disciple Zai Yu 宰予 (b. 522 BC; appearing in this passage as Zai Wo 宰我) concerning proper mourning behavior. Zai Yu complains to Confucius that the three years prescribed for mourning is too long, citing the pressing needs of ritual, music, and agriculture, which would be neglected during this term. The disciple proposes that one year should be sufficient. When Confucius asks Zai Yu if he would, after one year, be "at peace" (*an* 安) with eating fine rice and wearing brocade, Zai Yu replies that he would. Confucius then declares that,

> If you would be at peace in this then do it! But as for how the superior person observes mourning, even when he eats what is delicious, he does not find it sweet; and when he hears music, he is not delighted; and in his daily life he is not at peace — thus he would not do this. But now you are at peace with this, then by all means do it!

[23] *Hou Han shu*, 83.2772–73. In his discussion of this, Aat Vervoorn mistakenly reads Dai Liang's mother as using donkey brays as an attempt to remind her son not to be arrogant. See Vervoorn, *Men of the Cliffs and Caves: The Development of the Chinese Eremetic Tradition to the End of the Han Dynasty* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1990), p. 298n109. Unfortunately, Rafe de Crespigny follows Vervoorn in his *A Biographical Dictionary of Later Han to the Three Kingdoms (23–220 AD)* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 106.

[24] Dai Liang's continued imitation of the donkey bray to please his aging mother recalls the exemplary filial tale of the legendary Daoist figure Lao Laizi 老萊子 (fl. late 6th–5th cents. BC), who, despite his advanced age, wore motley clothes and behaved like a child in order to amuse his parents. See Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641), *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 20.369.

> 女安則為之！夫君子之居喪，食旨不甘，聞樂不樂，居處不安，故不為也。今女安，則為之！[25]

Confucius explains here the reason underlying the full three years of mourning observances, which are not simply a matter of rote conformity to codified behavior but the sincere outward expression of inner emotional turmoil. From the context of the passage, it is clear that Confucius is not advocating that the mourner eat fine food and listen to music while not enjoying himself; rather, he is making the point that even were the mourner to do so, he would find no enjoyment in it. What Dai Liang does is to intentionally misconstrue Confucius's comment by taking it literally: he eats and drinks without regard to the ritual protocols of mourning, and grows haggard and worn because he takes no pleasure in anything. What Dai understand is that if one suffers while mourning one's deceased parent, then it does not matter how one expresses this sorrow, just that sorrow is expressed. In terms of ritual, if one performs a rite without feeling, then it is as if the rite never took place.

While Cao Pi's donkey bray may then be justified by Dai Liang's defense of counter-conventional mourning, this is not a defense of all acts of donkey braying at funerals. Ritual acts are successful or "felicitious" (to borrow the philosopher J. L. Austin's terminology) only insofar as they are acknowledged as ritual acts by a community.[26] Moreover, when an attempted ritual act fails, then there is a kind of corresponding failure of community. This is the case in the only other *Shishuo xinyu* anecdote to feature donkey braying at a funeral — which also happens to follow almost immediately after the Cao Pi anecdote as the third anecdote in the very same chapter on mourning. This time, the story revolves around the funeral of Wang Ji 王濟 (fl. 3rd cent.), to which the writer Sun Chu 孫楚 (d. 293) comes to pay his respects. Sun Chu is now perhaps best known as the grandfather of the famous poet Sun Chuo 孫綽 (314–71), though he was a skilled writer in his own right.[27] Despite his grandfather and father having served in prominent positions, Sun Chu began his public career rather late, after the age of forty. Wang Ji was a member of the prominent Taiyuan Wang 太原王 clan and was married to a daughter of Jin Wudi 晉武帝 (r. 265–90; Sima Yan 司馬炎, 236–90). Lastly, it is important to note that Wang, while he was alive, had acted as Sun Chu's patron. The anecdote reads:

[25] Cheng Shude 程樹德, ed., *Lun yu jishi* 論語集釋, 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 35.1236.

[26] Austin argues that the kind of speech act he terms "performative" cannot be deemed true or false, but "felicitious" or "infelicitious," which is to say, successful or unsuccessful. See his *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisá, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 12–24.

[27] Sun Chu's "Wei Shi Zongrong yu Sun Hao" 為石仲容與孫皓 ("Letter on Behalf of Shi Zhongrong to Sun Hao") is anthologized in the *Wen xuan* and reproduced in his *Jin shu* biography. There are, however, significant differences between the two versions. See *Wen xuan*, 43.1931–38; and *Jin shu*, 56.1540–42.

> Sun Zijing [Chu], on account of his talents, rarely deferred to others. He treated only Wang Wuzi [Ji] with courtesy and respect. During Wuzi's funeral, every one of the famous gentlemen all attended. Zijing came after them, and facing the corpse, wept inconsolably. Of the guests, none did not shed tears. When he finished weeping, he said to the spirit bed, "You, sir, always loved how I made donkey brays, so now I will bray for you." It was just like the real sound, and the guests all laughed. Sun raised his head and said, "If your sort is allowed to live, how could this person have been allowed to die!"
>
> 孫子荊以有才，少所推服，唯雅敬王武子。武子喪時，名士無不至者。子荊後來，臨屍慟哭，賓客莫不垂涕。哭畢，向靈牀曰："卿常好我作驢鳴，今我為卿作。"體似真聲，賓客皆笑。孫舉頭曰："使君輩存，令此人死！"[28]

Similar to the first anecdote, one finds the formation of a momentary community that coalesces around the shared memory of a departed friend. However, once Sun Chu performs the bray, the mourners who had been united by his more conventional tears now find themselves dissolving into laughter, thus forming a different kind of community — one that undoes the occasion of mourning and remembrance.

Why Sun Chu fails while Cao Pi succeeds has in part to do with differences in status and character between the two figures, and in regard to this, how they each relate to their respective deceased. Cao Pi, after all, was a princeling of the Cao clan and a leading patron of the day; there is a sense in which the mourners at Wang Can's funeral could not *not* obey Cao Pi's suggestion to make braying noises. By contrast, however close Sun Chu was to Wang Ji, he was still simply a client, and perhaps envious of Sun Chu's relationship to his former patron, the other guests are not willing to acknowledge this symbol of the two men's close friendship.

Yet the unsuccessful braying is also connected to the matter of Sun Chu's character, which is how the anecdote begins. Sun is described as being possessed of both talent and a unwillingness to defer to others. In fact, the only person to whom Sun Chu showed respect was Wang Ji, who, in turn, was the only person to recognize Sun's talents. In other words, Sun Chu, who fails to acknowledge others, is not acknowledged in return. He does not intend his braying for the community of "famous gentlemen" (*mingshi* 名士) mourning Wang Ji, but addresses the sound to Wang Ji alone, and because his *zhiyin* is no longer alive to appreciate him, the sound that he makes cannot but be misunderstood. The irony is, if Sun Chu wanted to reperform the story of Boya, he should have sworn never again to make the donkey bray. Sun would then have fully realized the part of the master zither player, whose final silence was a testimony to the singularity of Zhong Ziqi's critical understanding.

[28] *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian*, 17.3.637–38; and Mather, trans. and ed., *A New Account of Tales of the World*, pp. 346–47. Mather also translates the version of the anecdote found in the slightly earlier *Yulin* 語林 (*Grove of Anecdotes*). For another discussion of this story, see Mei Jialing 梅家玲, *Shishuo xinyu de yuyan yu xushi* 世說新語的語言與敘事 (Taibei: Liren shuju, 2004), p. 214.

The story of Boya and Zhong Ziqi emerges as the unspoken theme for both *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes on braying, as what informs both acts is the relationship between the talented man and the one who recognizes talent, between client and patron. It is the patron who can discern the hidden capacities of men and promote them within the socio-political sphere, and without the patron's *zhiyin*, there is no way for the client's zither-player to be heard. It is this situation in which Sun Chu finds himself after his patron's death, lacking the person who would know how to understand and thus appreciate one's talents. And if it is difficult to demonstrate one's talents without a *zhiyin*, as Sun would find, it can also be difficult to know when the sound of donkey braying is more than a barnyard sound. Much depends upon one's premises, and if one begins incorrectly, one can be led into the thickets of one's own error.

In the *Shishuo xinyu* account of Wang Ji's funeral, Sun Chu is given the last word, as he denounces the obtuseness of the guests who cannot recognize the significance of his final tribute to his patron. However, it is not immediately clear whether it is the guests who are foolish, or if it is Sun Chu himself. The history of the donkey bray reveals it as an ambivalent sound, one that is both loved and scorned. The way in which Sun Chu's relationship to Wang Ji is hinted at by the anecdote suggests that the ambiguity cuts deeper into Sun's own character, complicating the question of whether he himself is truly in control of his performance. Indeed, the anecdote's opening comment suggests that Sun is possessed of a self-serving desire for recognition, one that makes the formation of the funeral's temporary community impossible. That is, the laughter of the guests at Wang Ji's funeral, however, not only mocks the unorthodoxy of Sun Chu's mourning, but more importantly, undoes the possibility of the community's mourning — indeed, displaces it with a community of ridicule. By contrast, Cao Pi's chorus of brays may have been unorthodox, but it was understood by the community as performing a sincere act of mourning, and thus embraced. The second anecdote on braying thus becomes an ironic version of the first, as the audience is provoked into an inappropriate response, into laughter that flouts both the codified behavior appropriate to the funeral and the underlying significance of the funeral itself. Nevertheless, the *mingshi* who laugh at Sun Chu and ruin the solemnity of the occasion may have demonstrated an appropriate reaction to a person who has — as Huitong would charge Gu Huan — mistaken a donkey bray for music, hoping that the bray will be heard by a *zhiyin*, a perfect listener.

By way of conclusion, let me discuss one more example, a poem that was composed centuries after the texts discussed above and that might be said to belong to the afterlife of the medieval discourse on donkey braying. This is "He Ziyou Mianchi huaijiu" 和子由澠池懷舊 ("Matching [Su] Ziyou: Thoughts on the Past at Mianchi") by the great poet Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), which was composed in response to a poem by his brother Su Che 蘇轍 (1039–1112). Here, Su Shi constructs a

scene of ephemerality, the passage of time, and loss, and he ends with a now familiar sound:

Human life everywhere — do you know what it can be likened to?	人生到處知何似，
It's surely like the swan that trod on snow-covered mud.	應 似 飛 鴻 踏 雪 泥 。
Across the mud, by chance, it left tracks of its feet,	泥上偶然留指爪，
But since it's flown off, how can one tell which way it went?	鴻 飛 那 復 計 東 西 。
The old monk has died, they've finished the new pagoda,	老僧已死成新塔，
On the ruined wall one can no longer see the old inscriptions.	壞 壁 無 由 見 舊 題 。
Do you still recall the rugged mountain paths of days gone by?	往日崎嶇還記否，
The road was long, our persons tired, and my limping donkey brayed.[29]	路長人困蹇驢嘶。

Human lives are fleeting, and while a person may leave behind a trace of his former existence, it is often nothing more than a trace. In answer to the opening question of what human life is like, the first four lines elaborate the metaphor of a swan that has flown off, leaving only foot-tracks to prove it was ever there. From the realm of poetic imagery and philosophical rumination, Su Shi then turns to the present moment at Mianchi (located in modern Henan), where he and his brother had visited once before, lodging with an old monk and inscribing poems on his wall. Returning now, the scene has utterly changed: his former host is dead; the monastery's new pagoda recently completed; and the wall on which he and Su Che composed poems is in disrepair, the inscriptions no longer visible.

The poem closes on a bittersweet note, as Su Shi asks his brother to remember a scene that survives only in the memory of the two brothers. Their long and difficult journey is an experience that cannot be fully captured in mere words and descriptions, and yet it is nevertheless evoked within the sound of the pitifully limping donkey's bray, the sound with which Su Shi ends his poem. There is no great significance in the bray for anyone but Su Shi and Su Che; however, for Su Shi and Su Che, the sound of the bray crystallizes the shared memory of Mianchi between two brothers. Su Shi elevates the donkey's bray, in all of its ridiculousness and ordinariness, to a moment of great sublimity, for it is in the recollection of hearing the bray that the two brothers understand what has been lost and what remains, allowing them to serve as one another's perfect listeners.

[29] Feng Yingliu 馮應榴 (1741–1801), ed., *Su Shi shiji hezhu* 蘇軾詩集合注, 6 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), 3.90–91. I have consulted the translation in Stephen Owen, ed. and trans., *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 678.