

## Contradiction and Balance between Entering Government Services and Seclusion in Xie Tiao's Poetry

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**Abstract:** The contradiction between government service and seclusion ran through Xie Tiao's whole life. Also, Xie Tiao's poems reflect that such contradiction in thinking changed from emergence to outbreak and eventually to the dynamic balance of coexistence during his stay in Xuanzhou. Xie Tiao's seclusion mode differs from the traditional concept of opposition between government service and seclusion and the prevailing thinking of breaking off the boundaries between government service and seclusion during the Southern Dynasties. Xie Tiao's exploration in this balanced state provides future scholars with a new channel for solving the contradiction. It is of profound significance for future officials to develop seclusion concepts and create landscape poetry.

### 1. Introduction

Seclusion is the thought occurring most frequently in numerous works created by Xie Tiao. For one thing, it was undoubtedly affected by social custom. For another, tremendous personal differences can be found in Xie Tiao. In the study of Xie Tiao's thoughts, Chen Qingyuan pointed out that Xie Tiao's poems embody the thoughts of longing for "great strategy" and fearing for disasters and slanders. Ge Xiaoyin put forward that Xie Tiao's achievements in creating "prefecture study" poems and his impact on future poets. Zha Zhengxian analyzed seclusion-related thoughts in Xie Tiao's poems and put forward that Xie's works provide a poetry pattern for future generations to create seclusion and landscape poems. Based on the above research findings, this paper analyzes the process where the contradiction between government service and seclusion in Xie Tiao's works shifted from emergence to outbreak and eventually to reach a balance during the stay in Xuancheng. It then discusses the impact of this process on the development of seclusion thoughts and Xie Tiao's creation of landscape poetry.

### 2. Emergence and Outbreak of Xie Tiao's Contradiction between Government Service and Seclusion

Born in an aristocratic family, Xie Tiao had abundant social resources and an ideological foundation for entering government services. Also, the popularity of seclusion atmosphere in the Southern Qi Dynasty created more opportunities for Xie Tiao to contact and think about seclusion. These two factors are sources where Xie Tiao's seclusion thoughts came from and the foundation for the paper to discuss the government service-seclusion contradiction in Xie Tiao's poetry. Xie Tiao was born in the Xie Family located in Chen Prefecture. It is one of the highest esteemed families in the east of the Yangtze River during the Xie An period of Eastern Jin Dynasty. The Book of Jin said: "The Xie Family is the only one that has generals at home and abroad, relies on the imperial court for survival, spend personal savings to have clean administration, and dug wells for the masses". When Xie Yao was born, however, the family was no longer as prosperous as it once was. "(Xie Tiao) was the governor of Wuxing. His father Wei served as Sanqishilang". After Xie Tiao died, Emperor Wu broke the pledge of marriage to his son Xie Mo with the excuse that Xie "suffered in one's estate". In the meantime, however, Xie Tiao had outstanding personal abilities. "Xie was an assiduous learner while young and enjoyed a high reputation. His articles were all elegant". As a young man with a declined family yet outstanding talent, Xie Tiao naturally hoped to help the masses and restore fame to his family by being entering government services. While

recalling the past events, Xie also said straightforwardly: “I have great longings for “great strategies” throughout my life.” (*Wrote on Bagong Mountain Together with Wang*) Xie Tiao’s great expectations found expression in many works created in the early stage, such as “If you do not sit under the eaves, who will show pity to Xiao Ai?” (*A Reply to Prince Wang*)

The atmosphere of pursuing seclusion prevailed in the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern dynasties. There are two reasons. For one thing, it was considered that “seclusion is noble itself and a carefree life consistent with nature.” For instance, Xiao Ziliang, Jinling Prince, evaluated Liu: “Liu Zigui from Pei State had excellent scholarship yet didn’t enter government service. His deeds are near, yet his heart is remote. Keeping promises and showing benevolence, he has virtues from the ancient time”. Xie Tiao and Shen Yue et al., also responded with poems. For another, some people attempted to eliminate the boundaries between government services and seclusion to achieve spiritual consistence. Xie Wan put forward that “coming from and going back to the same place”, which means “there is no distinction to mediate the contradiction between government services and seclusion”. Wang Kangju created *A Poem on Opposing Recruiting Hermits*: “Common hermits seclude in the mountains. Capable hermits find shelter in cities. Sage hermits seek seclusion in the imperial court. Thus Bo Yi became a hermit on Leishou Mountain, while Li Er served as a clerk of archives”. “It unifies the problems concerning seclusion and flaunting from the perspective of achieving satisfaction.”. In this way, men of letters could be contented with government services and enjoy spiritual comfort without enduring the poverty, destitution, and loneliness of a seclusion life. For instance, Yuan Can said: “Although my footprints are confined in the garden, my heart is abandoned to Cangzhou”.

Although living in such a social custom, Xie Tiao failed to achieve inner consistency like many other men of letters in his era. In fact, the contradiction between entering government service and seclusion had emerged in his early works. For instance, Xie wrote in *Guarding Langya City Together With Jiangcheng in the North*: “Don’t I want to join the army? Unfortunately, there is no means”. Although Xie had longings for making military achievements, he expressed his concern and worries for the current situations and personal fate in the former sentence “The capital is covered by frequent mist and frost. I want to pass the river yet is scared of dangerous waves”. After returning to the capital because of slanders, Xie Tiao wrote a famous poem titled *A Temporary Service as Scholar at Jinzhou and A Letter to Colleagues of the Western Mansion on the Way from Xinlin to the Capital at Night*. The poet even said frankly: “Often I’m scared of attacks from the eagles. Sometimes chrysanthemums yield to chilling frost”, which expressed his inner concerns. Subsequently, Xie Tiao wrote the poem named *Journey of Cattail Leaves*. Comparing himself to a cattail leaf, Xie sadly lamented over his fate. “Every creature has its fate. The differences are in intelligence and power. How can I float on the cloud and open my wings together with you?” It perfectly reflected the poet’s doubts over entering government services and longings for seclusion. According to the analysis above, the seclusion of dining and drinking at banquets failed to meet Xie Tiao’s mental demands: He needs a clearer path.

The outbreak of contradictions between government services and seclusion in Xie Tiao’s poems are concentrated in the works created between the autumn of the first year in Jianwu Reign and the second year. After Xiao Luan ascended the throne, Xie Tiao worked at the Central Secretariat, where he changed from emotional struggles to rational thinking and from being sentimental to reasonable.

Among all works, the poem of *Leaving the Department of State Affairs for the First Time* reflects the fiercest emotional struggles amid contradictions between government service and seclusion. Also, it reflects the poet’s mixed feelings of fear and despair in a dilemma. However, the poet suddenly changes his tone regarding his promotion and reflects heaviness and sadness. “The village is wild, while cold streams are pure. The willows grow prosperously, while dew makes the path muddy”. This poem portrays the stern and chilling late autumn, which faithfully mimics the poet’s real feelings. “Lamenting over friends during loneliness and entertaining friends in times of happiness.” In fact, the poet only wished to express “lamenting over friends during loneliness”. Considering his identity, however, he ambiguously added “entering friends in times of happiness”.

In fact, this addition reflects the poet's silence, yet great fears and indignation. The ending of "Thus I become unrestrained and stuck the pole at the end of the deep ravine" shows the destination truly expected by the poet for his life in such a dilemma.

Xie Tiao had deeper thoughts in the poems of *Watching Morning Rain* and *Duty in the Department of the Central Secretariat* and honestly analyzed his dilemmas. He hoped to regard seclusion as the way out amid fears and concerns. In *Watching the Morning Rain*, Xie wrote: "I long for entering government service during seclusion, yet fear for dangers while being an official." These verses faithfully reflect the poet's understanding of his dilemma—"could not be satisfied in both ways". Although Xie desired to enter government services, he was scared of disasters. Wishing to return, he was not allowed. Stuck with such a dilemma, the poet eventually came up with the thought that seclusion outweighs government services, wishing to get rid of current fears through seclusion. The *Duty at the Central Secretariat* more directly reflects the poet's expectation of "Although it is indeed beautiful, it is not the perfect place for me. I still want to rest in the garden." Thus it can be seen Xie Tiao's thought had changed from government services to seclusion amid contradictions.

Why would Xie Tiao have such complex feelings? Some reasons can be found from Xie Tiao's personal life and the situations of the Southern Qi Dynasty. Firstly, Xie Tiao was terrified with the cruelty of political struggles. Xie Tiao's friend Wang Rong advocated placing Xiao Ziliang on the throne, yet failed. "Wang was ordered to be put in prison and sentenced to death." According to *History As a Mirror-Records of Qi*: "In April of the summer, Wang Ziliang, Prince Wenxuan of Jingling, died of worries." "On the tenth day of September, (Luan) killed Zilong... Thus Luan particularly feared the tenth day." In such a situation, Xie Tiao wasn't happy for his promotion, but became increasingly aware that one can hardly achieve ambition and was likely to be killed in difficult situations. Secondly, the Emperor of Ming was suspicious. Although Xie Tiao was placed on an important position, he trod as if on ice. Xiao Luan, Emperor of Ming, was prone to suspicion. *Book of Southern Qi Dynasty · Record of Emperor Ming* said: "Ming was prone to suspicious and worried too much. Thus he resorted to urgent killing." Every time Xie Tiao mentioned Emperor Ming's appreciation of him, he was with reverence and awe, as if "I was terrified when receiving the emperor's warning, worrying that his grace may change." (*Setting Off to the Capital at Night*)

### 3. Xie Tiao's Mode of Dynamic Balance between Government Services and Seclusion

Xie Tiao faced such a complex reality that he could not ease his anxieties through the seclusion attitudes of "seeking satisfaction and being completely unrestrained" like his contemporaries. It wasn't until Xie Tiao left Xuanzhou did his government service-seclusion contradiction reach a balance. In such a state, Xie Tiao was an official regarding identity, yet imitated traditional hermits behaviorally, thus achieving a perfect spiritual balance between both pursuits. Xie Tiao's seclusion mode was characterized by a unique identity, behaviors, and spirit. The following part offers a detailed introduction to such characteristics.

Regarding identity, Xie Tiao was "the governor of Xuancheng" and took charge of "teaching etiquette to the poor and guiding them to know their nature. Soils are examined to find the source of springs. Stars are observed to guide agricultural practice. The millet should be cultivated on high land, while wheat needs to grow in low land" (*An Ode to Poor Pheasants' Fields*). "Fortunately the mild breeze descends, while surprising storms seldom occur. Farmers rest in four seasons. There is no invasion in three provinces" (*Service in Xiangzhou and Bid Farewell to Xuancheng Clerks and Pheasants*). Thus it can be seen Xie Tiao cared much about politics. Unlike reputed common scholars who paid no attention to worldly affairs, Xie was an honest and dedicated official.

Regarding behaviors, Xie Tiao strove to imitate the behaviors of traditional hermits, wishing to escape the vortex of political struggles. Thus he appreciated the scenery in the prefectural study on mountains in search of delight and comfort. For instance, "Opening the window, I'm expecting of wilderness. Raising the curtain, I'm waiting for the scenery" (*Having Nothing to Do at the Northern Window*). "Wait till I embrace the scenery, the river will be as long as this" (*Planning to Visit Xiang River in Search of Ju Stream*). Also, Xie Tiao mentioned in his poems for several times that he lived

a simple life as if a hermit to avoid chaos and struggles. For instance, “I put away sacrificial vessels to return to simple flavors. Riding on carriages, I no longer walk” (*Viewing from the High Study*). “My high study is often covered by books. With no one set foot on stairs, there are few arguments” (A Letter to Minister Shen during Illness at the Residence). Although Xie Tiao could not assign for seclusion for various reasons, he no longer had spiritual belongings for seclusion. Instead, Xie strove to live like a hermit physically.

It was just because Xie Tiao faced his identity as an official that he could implement his expectations for the life of seclusion. Thus Xie eventually achieved a balance between government service and seclusion spiritually. It was just like “I not only have great longings for being an official, but also take delight in farming” (*Exiting Xuancheng Prefecture to Xinlin and the Ban Bridge*). The outline of such a mental state can be found in other works. For instance, “Being bored with Langya administration, I have a rest at Luoyang Association” (*A Melancholy Look under the Setting Sun*). “I could always remember what I desire. Now I can select scenic spots to appreciate. I have some words for visitors-It is a good thing to know your character” (*A Sightseeing Tour*).

Xie Tiao’s balance state was actually a dynamic balance with repeated fluctuations, meaning Xie Tiao “failed to achieve his true state of mind”. Instead of eliminating the contradiction between government services and seclusion, Xie Tiao only found a balance point to achieve self-reconciliation. At this time, Xie Tiao’s heart was still fluttering with fears when he recalled the life of government service. “Throughout my life, I’ve longed for government services. Sadly, I have a poor fate”, “With wind and mist rising in four directions, I bathe myself in dews and frost day and night” (*Written on Bagong Mountain with Wang*). “Strong wind and thick frost occur at dusk and night. Orchids prosper without any fragrance” (*Interval between Evening Affairs on Winter Nights*). However, Xie still desired for resigning and living a secluded life. “How can I clean the bushes to get rid of my worries and illnesses?” (*Viewing from the High Study*) “I wish I could have outstanding talent and fondle autumnal chrysanthemums near the pond (*Interval between Affairs on Winter Nights*). Compared with previous deep worries and concerns, Xie Tiao indeed found temporary peace for his life.

The reason why Xie Tiao could create such a seclusion mode was objectively indispensable with the political and natural conditions of Xuanzhou. Regarding the political environment, Xuanzhou was away from the vortex of political struggles, and the governor was only in charge of simple political affairs. It was thus unnecessary for Xie Tiao to be in the state of mental anxieties. Also, Xie’s poems often mentioned: “If the state is small, there will be many free days. If common people were pure and kind, affairs would be away from the court.” (*Having Nothing to Do at the New Northern Window*) “After handling official correspondences, I have some free time. Thus I occasionally come to watch flowers and trees.” (*Interval between Affairs on a Winter Night*) Xuancheng is home to a wonderful natural environment, which has such scenic spots as Yangling Mountain, Jingting Mountain, Ju Stream, and Wan Stream. All of these provided external conditions for Xie Tiao to abandon himself to the landscape in imitation of previous hermits. While climbing mountains in the prefecture or going for an outing, Xie Tiao left behind a large number of verses that portray the picturesque scenery of Xuancheng, such as “the mountain stretches for hundreds of miles, overlapping with clouds in the distance.” (Visit Jingting Mountain) “The river gurgles into a long lake, running slowly towards streams” (A Trip to Visit Xiang River In Search of Ju Stream). Such a temperate political environment and the enchanting natural environment provide favorable objective conditions for Xie Tiao’s contradiction between government service and seclusion.

#### 4. Uniqueness of Xie Tiao’s Seclusion Mode and Its Impact

Xie Tiao’s seclusion mode somehow objectively resembled Xie Lingyun’s seclusion thoughts and achieved a balance between seclusion and government services on this basis. Compared with traditional opposition between government services and seclusion and the prevailing opinion of “The essence of being on official and seclusion is the same” in the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties, this mode appears to be unique. Besides, Xie’s seclusion mode had a tremendous impact on his creation of landscape poems regarding the form and contents.

Xie Tiao wasn't the first people expecting to achieve a balance between government services and seclusion. In fact, many contradictions between government services and seclusion and thoughts can be found in Xie Lingyun's works. For instance, Xie Lingyun stated his dilemma bluntly: "Holding up the halberd, I feel tired. How can farming be pleasant?" (*Reading in the Study*) Also, he pointed out his thoughts about the government service-seclusion balance in verses: "Cultivating virtues as an official, I find my wisdom deficient. After returning to farming, I feel incompetent." (*Ascend the Tower Above the Pond*). Meanwhile, he hoped to "take the countryside as the place of dwelling and substitute farming for humble office" (*Leaving the Prefecture for the First Time*). In Xie Lingyun's conception, government services and seclusion were two incompatible concepts. However, Xie Tiao mentioned "substitute farming for humble office", which shows he hoped to get away from the official position in the political center and lead a life similar to seclusion. It highly resembled Xie Tiao's government services-seclusion balance. On the other hand, Xie Tiao put forward and implemented the concept of "I'm happy for being appreciated by the imperial court, and also enjoy being a hermit at a remote place." Thus Xie Tiao not only inherited but also made a breakthrough in Xie Lingyun's seclusion thoughts.

Compared with the traditional concept of opposition between government services and seclusion, Xie Tiao reached a more inclusive balance at Xuanzhou and accepted both living states, which provided another means for future men of letters to achieve spiritual self-consistence. In the traditional concepts, government service and seclusion were two states entirely opposed to each other and unable to coexist. For instance, Ji Kang put forward in *Poems on Ambition Statement (II)*: "Why do I waste my life in worldly matters? That is what I will not spare a glance for." It shows Ji Kang has abandoned the conduct of being assimilated into the society. Similarly, Tao Yuanming wrote in the preface of *Ah, A Homeward Bound*: "My temperament is natural and unattainable through rectification and encouragement. Although hunger and coldness are urgent, I will be sick if I become an official against my will." Tao said frankly that his temperament was natural and could not abide by the life of government service. For Xie Tiao, however, he could not transcend the current social environment and had to accept his identity of the official. Also, Xie had to imitate from traditional hermits' behaviors to achieve a balance between government service and seclusion through constant compromises.

Xie's contemporaries attempted to eliminate the boundary between government services and seclusion through "catching meaning while forgetting forms" to achieve spiritual harmony. By comparison, Xie Tiao's government service-seclusion balance was on the precondition of opposition between government service and seclusion. By imitating traditional hermits' behaviors, Xie achieved coexistence of both spiritually. Unlike people that advocate "gaining satisfaction", Xie Tiao had a clearer and sincerer understanding of his life. Thus his "seclusion" was supported by concrete actions, which avoided empty talks.

Regarding poetry creation, plenty of studies on Xie Tiao's works mentioned that Xie made considerable development than predecessors in the form, contents, and artistic expressions. The development and revolution are considerably affected by the mode of dynamic balance between Xie Tiao's government services and seclusion.

Regarding the form of landscape poems, Xie Tiao ended his poems with seclusion, which was a major reform in Xie Lingyun's practice of ending with metaphysical speech. Regarding the theme, Xie Tiao added a relatively stable momentum to landscape poems and provided an exemplary poetry style for future generations to create poetry in a similar situation. On the one hand, Xie Tiao chose "seclusion" and could thus take delight in appreciating natural scenery at his study or during trips, which inspired him to create a large number of landscape poems. On the other hand, Xie remained an official and thus often exclaimed "I've never achieved the true state of my mind", hoping to have real seclusion. When these two situations coexisted, Xie Tiao could not help but abandon himself to nature and reveal his belongings for a secluded life. It thus formed the normal form of ending poems with longings for seclusion.

Regarding contents, Xie Lingyun's landscape works mostly portray the beauty of scenery with mountains and rivers. By comparison, Xie Tiao's poems contain a higher proportion of natural

scenery in the gardens and are more close to life. For instance, “Summer trees turn into curtains, while autumnal lotus leaves grow like canopies” (A Retrospect at the Back Study. “Chilling locust trees wither into branches, while autumnal chrysanthemums grow into a thick bundle “ (A *Disappointed Look under the Setting Sun*) Thus Ge Xiaoyin pointed out that Xie Tiao “put forward officials’ seclusion concepts of ‘I not only enjoy entering governmental services but also take delight in Cangzhou’ and enriched the contents and expressions of “prefectural study” poems. It is because appreciating natural scenery had been a part of his life in the balance between government services and seclusion. Without leaving home to search reputed mountains and rivers, Xie Tiao could take delight in being surrounded by scenery. “In the spare time after handling official correspondences”, Xie could “occasionally sit down to watch flowers and trees” (*Interval between Official Affairs on a Winter Evening*). Therefore, the official residence was also his landscape.

The concept of balance between government services and seclusion in his poems enabled Xie Tiao to achieve spiritual balance in the face of fierce contradictions and complex reality. Also, this pursuit has been accepted and imitated by increasing scholars in future generations, guiding them out of plights. It was also in this seclusion mode that Xie Tiao’s poetry creation gained a new image and played a non-negligible role in developing the contents and techniques of landscape poetry.

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