

From "Men of Integrity" to "Loyal Ministers": An Interpretation of the "Remonstrating Against the Expedition and Death by Starvation" in Records of the Grand Historian: The Biography of Boyi and Traditional Reclusive Culture

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ABSTRACT

The episode of "remonstrating against the military campaign and choosing death by starvation" in Records of the Grand Historian: The Biography of Boyi has long been controversial. Historically, its interpretation has followed two distinct approaches: one continues the praise of Boyi and Shuqi found in pre-Qin philosophical texts, regarding their actions as exemplifying "men of integrity." However, the "integrity theory" faced interpretive challenges due to its impracticality for emulation and its conflict with the "benevolence and righteousness" embodied by King Wu's conquest of Tyrant Zhou. The alternative approach interprets them as "loyal ministers." Compared to the "integrity theory," the later-emerging "loyalty theory," extensively debated by Tang and Song literati, gradually became the authoritative interpretation of the episode's significance. As timeless exemplars of recluses, tracing the transformation of their image from "men of integrity" to "loyal ministers" offers a glimpse into how traditional reclusive culture acquired new interpretive possibilities under the influence of political discourse, scholar-official mentality, and other multifaceted factors.

KEYWORDS

Boyi and Shuqi; The biography of Boyi; Reclusive culture; Men of integrity; Loyal ministers

1 Introduction

As exemplary figures of early reclusive culture, the accounts of Boyi and Shuqi originated in various pre-Qin philosophical texts before taking their definitive form in Records of the Grand Historian: The Biography of Boyi. In terms of narrative structure, the most notable innovation in The Biography of Boyi lies in its incorporation of the "remonstration against the military campaign and death by starvation" episode - absent from pre-Qin texts - along with the appended "Song of Gathering Ferns," which collectively serve as Sima Qian's crucial entry points for questioning the Mandate of Heaven and extolling moral purity. However, this fervent remonstrating against "subjects assassinating their ruler" appears somewhat incongruous with their image of integrity, particularly when contrasted with the earlier episode of "relinquishing the state and fleeing," as astutely questioned by Zhu Xi:

"Are the two acts of Boyi and Shuqi - relinquishing their state and fleeing, then remonstrating against the military campaign and starving to death - truly interrelated? Some argue that having already abdicated their state, they should consequently have refrained from consuming Zhou's provisions. If so, they need not have joined Zhou in the first place, nor waited to witness the Battle of Muye before remonstrating and subsequently departing. Moreover, if they had previously acted in such manner, how could they now behave contrarily? How does this accord with the principle of 'timely moderation' (shizhong)? All these points trouble my humble understanding, and I earnestly seek your instruction."^[1]

Zhu Xi astutely discerned the irreconcilable contradiction that emerged in the portrayal of Boyi and Shuqi following the addition of the "remonstrating against the expedition and starving to death" episode. This contradiction can be essentially reduced to the incompatibility between the "integrity" demonstrated through relinquishing their state and the "loyalty" manifested in their remonstrating, thereby compelling later readers to reinterpret and explicate the underlying significance of this episode. Since the publication of Sima Qian's The Biography of Boyi, the reception of the "remonstrating and starving" episode has bifurcated into two distinct interpretive approaches: the "theory of men of integrity" and the "theory of loyal ministers." The inherent logic and evolutionary trajectory of these two interpretive traditions merit serious scholarly attention and further investigation.

2 The "theory of men of integrity": image formation and interpretive dilemma

The "theory of men of integrity" originates from Mencius-Wan Zhang II: "Boyi would not look upon what was unseemly, nor listen to what was unseemly. He would not serve a ruler whom he did not approve, nor command a people whom he did not approve... During the reign of Tyrant Zhou, he dwelt by the shore of the Northern Sea, waiting for the world to be

cleansed. Therefore when men heard of the character of Boyi, the corrupt became pure, and the weak acquired determination.^[2]

Regarding the phrase "the corrupt became pure," Zhao Qi of the Eastern Han dynasty annotated it as "greedy men become more inclined toward integrity."^[3] In contrast, Zhu Xi interpreted it as "'corrupt' means lacking moral perception; 'pure' means possessing discernment."^[2] Differing from Zhao Qi, Zhu Xi regarded "integrity" as a spiritual virtue rather than merely material "non-greed for profit." Correspondingly, "men of integrity" possess discerning wisdom, act appropriately according to circumstances, and maintain steadfast principles. Examining the original text in Mencius - "He would not serve a ruler whom he did not approve, nor command a people whom he did not approve. In times of good government, he would take office; in times of misgovernment, he would withdraw" - this precisely exemplifies the highly self-aware "discerning" character of scholar-officials. Zhu Xi's interpretation aligns more closely with Mencius's original intent^[4].

Certainly, interpreting "lian" (integrity) as "non-greed" has had its adherents throughout history. An early example can be found in *Strategies of the Warring States*: "As incorruptible as Boyi, who would not take unearned sustenance, who rejected King Wu's righteousness and refused to serve as his minister, who relinquished his position as lord of Guzhu and starved to death on Mount Shouyang."^[5] Here, the concept of integrity incorporates the materially-oriented connotation of "not taking unearned sustenance," which somewhat diverges from the spiritual pursuit of "moral discernment." During the Han dynasty, it was not uncommon to contrast Boyi and Shuqi's integrity with "greed," as seen in Jia Yi's "Lament for Qu Yuan": "The worthy and sage are dragged backwards,/The upright and square are planted upside down./The world calls Sui and Yi greedy,/And says Zhi and Jue are incorrupt."^[6] Wang Chong's *Discussions Weighed in the Balance* states: "Boyi abandoned his state and starved to death, never suspected of coveting even a knife or hook."^[7] While their refusal to cooperate with the Zhou regime and their retreat to Mount Shouyang inherently involved rejecting material benefits like titles and emoluments, this "non-greed" for official privileges constituted merely one superficial manifestation of their "discernment," not their ultimate spiritual pursuit. The subtle distinction between these two aspects must be carefully noted. Thus, regarding the conceptualization of lián, pre-Qin and Han readers developed two distinct interpretive approaches: one emphasizing material conduct, the other spiritual aspiration, reflecting the inherent tension between regulating official behavior and expectations of scholarly virtue during that period. Nevertheless, it remains undeniable that lián, as Boyi and Shuqi's most prominent virtue, was widely recognized and documented throughout the pre-Qin and Han eras.

As a renowned text embodying "the ineffable beauty of subtle melancholy and restrained grievance,"^[8] *Records of the Grand Historian: The Biography of Boyi* presents two layers of antithetical value constructs. On the political level, this manifests as the opposition between benevolence-righteousness (renyi) and incorruptible yielding (lianrang). While King Wu's conquest of Tyrant Zhou represented "benevolence-righteousness" that complied with heavenly will and human sentiment, it ultimately constituted a violent seizure of power that benefited from the former dynasty's legacy, thus inviting the criticism of "replacing violence with violence." As Sima Qian records: "The rustic saying goes: 'How can one know benevolence-righteousness? He who has profited from it is deemed virtuous.' Therefore Boyi detested Zhou and starved to death on Shouyang Mountain."^[9] Boyi's non-cooperative stance toward this so-called "benevolence-righteousness" in the biography precisely reflects the Grand Historian's implicit critique of those who pursued profit under the guise of moral virtue. On the personal level, the opposition appears between the Mandate of Heaven (tianming) and moral purity (qingjie). While Sima Qian questions the justice of the Mandate of Heaven, he does not thereby negate the value of virtuous conduct. As the saying goes, "When the whole world is turbid, the pure scholar becomes visible" - Boyi's actions exemplify moral purity as a highly conscious choice, unwavering in the face of external praise or censure.

It becomes evident that within these two sets of opposing values - where both benevolence-righteousness (Ren Yi) and the Mandate of Heaven (Tian Ming) represent mainstream political ideologies of ancient culture - "integrity/purity" (Lian/Qing) is consistently posited and affirmed as the antithesis to mainstream thought. In essence, this constitutes a form of non-cooperation, a subtly resistant "heterogeneous" element opposing dominant cultural norms. This concept of "integrity" that refuses to conform to political currents or contemporary opinions precisely reflects Sima Qian's fundamental purpose in composing this biography and his general preface to the seventy biographies. Consequently, interpreting this "integrity" as loyalty to a particular dynasty would be tantamount to "keeping the glittering casket while returning the pearls to the seller" - missing its essential value. Even explaining it simply as "non-greed" fails to capture its comprehensive meaning. As stated in *The Grand Historian's Postface*: "In an age of decadence where all contend for profit, only they pursued righteousness; relinquishing their state and starving to death, they were praised throughout the land. Therefore I made *The Biography of Boyi* the first."^[9] Indeed, the Grand Historian's praise of Boyi and Shuqi's "righteousness" resonates profoundly with Mencius's concept of "integrity" as discerning judgment guiding appropriate political engagement. Compared with the episode of "relinquishing their state and starving to death," their "remonstrating against the expedition and starving to death" presents this precious quality of "men of integrity" through

more intense conflict and opposition, which explains why it has attracted greater attention and discussion from later generations.

However, the act of "remonstrating against the military campaign and starving to death"^[7] was ultimately too radical for conventional sensibilities. As Wang Chong observed, "Such conduct of incorruptible purity is what ordinary men cannot practice." Not only was this standard of integrity difficult for later generations to emulate, but its constant conflict with the Confucian values of "benevolence and righteousness" inevitably led the "theory of men of integrity" into interpretive difficulties. According to the Book of Later Han's "Biographies of Zuo, Zhou, and Huang," when Li Gu sought to persuade the recluse Huang Qiong to enter government service, he cited Boyi and Shuqi as negative examples, reiterating Mencius's criticism from "Gongsun Chou I": "Boyi was narrow-minded, and Liuxia Hui was wanting in reverence. Narrow-mindedness and want of reverence are what the superior man does not cultivate." Here, the reclusive Boyi became the antithesis of the scholar's ideal of "assisting government to benefit the people."^[10] Such dissenting voices gradually increased after the Cao-Wei period. The Tang dynasty statesman Li Deyu expressed bewilderment at Boyi and Shuqi's choice to starve while gathering ferns, bluntly declaring that "the conduct of Boyi and Shuqi has truly misled later generations!"^[11] This criticism was further amplified by later accretions to their story, such as the tale of the rustic woman cited in Li Shan's commentary to the Selections of Refined Literature, which used satirical humor to deconstruct their moral purity, presenting their starvation as demonstrating the impracticality of such extreme integrity^[12]. Thus we may say that this form of uncompromising integrity bordering on "narrow-mindedness" gradually became incomprehensible to later scholars, for whom entering government service to benefit the people held far greater appeal than impoverished reclusion aimed at personal moral perfection.

In summary, the "theory of men of integrity" that emerged during the pre-Qin period became concretized and formalized through the narrative in Records of the Grand Historian: The Biography of Boyi. However, this interpretation gradually encountered explanatory difficulties from the Han-Wei period onward, creating an urgent need to establish a new value system that could justify the continued relevance of Boyi and Shuqi. Consequently, the "theory of loyal ministers," which had its origins in the Later Han dynasty, gained gradual acceptance among scholars following intense debates during the Tang and Song periods.

3 The "loyal minister theory": from historical inquiry to ethical understanding

As previously discussed, interpreting the "remonstration against the military campaign and death by starvation" episode as exemplifying the "Loyal Minister Theory" was never Sima Qian's original intention in writing The Biography of Boyi. In early texts, "loyalty" was not praised as a virtue of Boyi and Shuqi; but the opposite was often true. The Mencius describes how Boyi retreated to the shores of the Northern Sea to avoid Tyrant Zhou, and upon hearing that the Earl of the West excelled at caring for the elderly, actively abandoned the corrupt Shang to support the virtuous Zhou - making him a staunch "pro-Zhou, anti-Shang" figure, certainly not a "loyalist to Shang." The Hanfeizi further criticizes them from a ruler-subject perspective, condemning them as "ineffectual ministers" who refused to serve their sovereign^[13]. Although Sima Qian included the "remonstration and starvation" episode to highlight Boyi's qualities as a "man of integrity," the historical context of dynastic transition and the rhetorical challenge in their protest - "Can regicide be called benevolent?" - inevitably led to later misinterpretations and forced readings, thus gradually giving rise to the "Loyal Minister Theory." The reception and interpretation of Boyi and Shuqi's supposed "loyalty" can be broadly categorized into three types, as follows:

The first type simplistically interprets Boyi and Shuqi's remonstration as loyalty to the Shang dynasty and even to Tyrant Zhou himself. As recorded in the Book of Later Han's "Biographies of Yu, Fu, Gai, and Zang," during the Yellow Turban Rebellion, Han general Fu Xie, facing the advancing rebel forces from Xiliang, chose to fight to the death, citing Boyi's story as exemplar: "The sage achieves moral perfection, while the worthy maintain their integrity. Though Tyrant Zhou was brutal, Boyi refused to eat Zhou's grain and died, yet Confucius praised his virtue. Today's court is not as cruel as Zhou's, nor is my virtue superior to Boyi's. In these chaotic times when nurturing noble aspirations is impossible, how can I, while enjoying official emoluments, shirk this calamity? Where should I go? I must die here."^[10] The similar circumstances of dynastic transition led scholars to focus more on Boyi and Shuqi's political role. Around the same time, Cai Yong's "Stele Inscription for Boyi and Shuqi" states: "They once assisted Shang's rulers, displaying loyalty and filial piety; relinquishing state and rank, they remonstrated against the dying kingdom."^[14] Thus "loyalty" was literally carved onto the stele at Boyi's temple, gradually gaining acceptance among scholars. However, the flaws in this crude interpretation are evident: regarding Boyi and Shuqi as ministers loyal to a particular dynasty not only diverges sharply from their image as "discerning" men of integrity, but more importantly, since the object of their supposed loyalty was the tyrannical Zhou, such claims were inevitably rejected by mainstream political discourse.

While another interpretation attempts to cast doubt on the authenticity of the "remonstration against the military campaign and death by starvation" episode in The Biography of Boyi by examining historical sources, thereby seeking to

obscure the logical inconsistencies inherent in the "Loyal Minister Theory." In his Discussion on the Great Declaration, Ouyang Xiu of the Song dynasty drew evidence from the Book of Documents to challenge the reliability of the later Records of the Grand Historian: The Biography of Boyi:

In composing "The Annals of Zhou," Sima Qian states that King Wu, nine years after his accession, sacrificed at King Wen's tomb before marshaling troops at Mengjin; yet in writing "The Biography of Boyi," he records the claim that King Wu did not bury his deceased father - both accounts cannot be considered credible. Therefore I do not adopt them, but rather place my trust in the Documents ^[15].

In contrast, Huang Tingjian focused on the historical sources of The Biography of Boyi, arguing that its accounts derived from Zhuangzi and were therefore unreliable due to their fantastical nature ("Temple Record of Boyi and Shuqi"). Wang Anshi, known for his revisionist arguments, attempted to demonstrate through logical reasoning that Boyi and King Wu never actually interacted, thereby reconstructing the "remonstration and death by starvation" episode to resolve the dilemma of Boyi's supposed "loyalty" ("Discussion on Boyi"). This skeptical approach continued through the Ming and Qing dynasties, with representative works including Wang Zhi's Ten Critiques of Boyi and Shuqi, Cui Shu's Evidential Analysis of Feng and Hao, and Liang Yusheng's Doubts on the Records of the Grand Historian. Compared to Song dynasty scholars, Qing scholars criticized more vehemently, with Liang Yusheng bluntly declaring: "All accounts in The Biography of Boyi are unreliable!" It is evident that beyond their pursuit of historical truth, scholars' vehement rejection of the authenticity of the "remonstration and starvation" episode also stemmed from ethical considerations: acknowledging its authenticity would inevitably require addressing the thorny issue of justifying Boyi and Shuqi's loyalty to the Shang - so the simplest solution appeared to be disproving its authenticity and omitting it from discussion.

While the first interpretation's attempt to substantiate the "loyal minister" identity suffers from oversimplified logic, and the second approach's strategy of denying historical facts to circumvent discussion appears somewhat heavy-handed, most scholars tend to present the narratives of "Boyi and Shuqi as loyal ministers" and "King Wu's punitive expedition against Zhou" as parallel accounts. In such discourses, their "loyalty" becomes divorced from the specific historical context of devotion to a particular dynasty, transforming instead into a transhistorical ethical principle with universal applicability across generations.

From the perspective of the interpretive history of Boyi and Shuqi, Han Yu's Discourse on Boyi represents a comprehensive synthesis ^[16]. On one hand, it dedicates considerable space to extolling their character as "scholars of singular integrity, acting solely in accordance with righteousness," directly inheriting the perspectives of Mencius's "men of integrity" and Sima Qian's "commitment to righteousness." On the other hand, it concludes abruptly with the statement: "Nevertheless, without these two men, traitorous officials would have proliferated in later ages." Since Boyi's conduct could intimidate treacherous ministers, he naturally embodied a "loyal" character worthy of emulation. Yet Han Yu deliberately avoids situating this loyalty within specific historical contexts, thereby circumventing the problematic implications of advocating loyalty to tyrannical rulers. His focus remains fixed on "later generations," amplifying "loyalty" as an abstract ethical value that became a standard for ministerial conduct - an interpretative compromise of considerable merit. As a leading figure in Confucianism and the Classical Prose Movement, Han Yu's conceptual framework profoundly influenced the Song dynasty, and it may be said that Song scholars' preoccupation with Boyi and Shuqi's "loyalty" essentially originated from this seminal essay.

Song scholars, while perpetuating Han Yu's conceptualization of "loyalty" as an ethical principle, demonstrated greater enthusiasm for incorporating King Wu's punitive expedition against Zhou into this ethical discourse, thereby establishing not contradiction but rather complementarity between the two concepts:

Su zhe remarks: "King Wu attacked Shang on grounds of supreme righteousness, yet Boyi and Shuqi likewise challenged him on grounds of righteousness - these two positions seem irreconcilable. Why then did Confucius praise them both? The royal achievements of Kings Wen and Wu were not actively sought but naturally attained, as all under Heaven followed them inevitably. Tyrant Zhou's survival or demise no longer affected this outcome. King Wen's restraint demonstrated his understanding that the Mandate of Heaven could not be anticipated; King Wu's military action showed his recognition that the Mandate could not be delayed. Yet Tang felt remorse after conquering Xia, and Confucius declared Wu's achievement imperfect - how then could Boyi's righteousness be dismissed?" ^[17]

The Book of Changes states: "The revolutions of Tang and Wu responded to Heaven and accorded with men." Confucius said: "Boyi and Shuqi sought benevolence and attained benevolence - what complaint could they have?" Though these two positions differ fundamentally in meaning and orientation, the sage praised them both. Essentially, mentioning Tang and Wu serves to caution future rulers, while citing Boyi and Shuqi admonishes future ministers. Though their paths diverged, they converged in moral instruction, creating a teaching without flaw for ten thousand generations ^[18].

As a minister attacking his sovereign, King Wu's action constituted an "extraordinary" deviation from orthodox hierarchical principles, yet his conduct accorded with benevolence-righteousness (renyi) and complied with the Mandate of Heaven (tianming), thereby serving as a warning to later rulers. Conversely, Boyi and Shuqi's adherence to ministerial duty represented the "constant" norm of these principles. Even when contemporary tyrants oppressed the people, the

ethical framework of "benevolent ruler and loyal minister" required perpetuation and emphasis. Thus, their remonstrance against King Wu transcended loyalty to any particular dynasty, instead reinforcing fundamental ruler-minister ethics. In this sense, they jointly completed the theoretical construction of these ethical norms with King Wu. This transition from concrete historical analysis to recognition of ethical values gradually resolved the interpretive dilemma surrounding "loyalty." Boyi and Shuqi consequently completed their transformation from "men of integrity" to "loyal ministers," gaining rapid acceptance in both official and popular discourse, while their pre-Qin and Han characterization as heterodox "men of integrity" disappeared entirely from this new paradigm.

An analysis of the three types of "loyal minister theory" demonstrates a profound transformation in the image of Boyi and Shuqi—from reclusive hermits to paradigmatic court loyalists. This shift can also be interpreted as the "co-optation" of a historically heterodox cultural figure by orthodox ethical and political discourse, a process that merits further examination within the broader framework of traditional reclusive culture in China.

4 From "men of integrity" to "loyal ministers": an interpretation of traditional reclusive culture

A close examination reveals that the evolutionary trajectory from "men of integrity" to "loyal ministers" is implicitly or explicitly reflected in the biographies of recluses found in official histories. As recorded in the earliest collection of recluse biographies in official historiography, the Book of Later Han's "Biographies of Recluses":

The Book of Changes states: "Great indeed is the significance of withdrawal in its proper time." It further declares: "They do not serve kings and lords, but keep their affairs sublime." Therefore, though Yao modeled himself on Heaven, he could not subdue the lofty principles of Yingyang's recluses; though King Wu achieved perfection, he ultimately preserved the purity of the solitary bamboo hermits^[10].

"Keeping their affairs sublime" by not compromising moral integrity due to political circumstances represents the defining characteristic of early reclusive culture. This perspective, inheriting the intellectual lineage of Mencius and Sima Qian, long remained the authoritative interpretation of reclusive culture in official historiography. During the turbulent transitions from late Tang to Five Dynasties and Song to Yuan periods, when the nation experienced numerous upheavals, some loyal ministers chose seclusion over service. Ouyang Xiu, compiling the "The Biography of Those Who Displayed Outstanding Behaviors or Virtues in The New Five Dynasties History" in the New History of the Five Dynasties as accounts of Five Dynasties recluses, lamented: "I maintain that since ancient times most loyal ministers and righteous men emerged during chaotic eras, yet strangely few are worth mentioning from this period - could there truly have been none?" Consequently, he included the biography of Cheng Fuyun, who "remained loyal though it brought him punishment," thereby subtly incorporating "loyalty" into the narrative of reclusive culture^[19]. Later works like the "Biographies of Recluses" in the New Yuan History and "Biographies of Remnant Worthies" in the Draft Qing History more explicitly categorized recluses into two types: those who "do not serve kings and lords but keep their affairs sublime," and those "yearning for their fallen state while refusing service to the new dynasty" - with Boyi and Shuqi naturally becoming paradigmatic examples of the latter.

Beyond official historiography, the cultural reinterpretation of individual recluses evolving from 'men of integrity' to 'loyal ministers' continued unabated, with the great recluse Tao Yuanming exemplifying this transformation. Tao, who upheld impeccable moral integrity, was first labeled as loyal to the fallen dynasty in Shen Yue's Book of Song. By the Song period, the perception of Tao as someone who 'despised serving two successive dynasties' gained widespread acceptance. As Gu Nong observed: "When reviewing Tao Yuanming scholarship, we cannot ignore how tradition has superimposed upon the poet and his works an extraneous mythology - the so-called 'loyal indignation' theory." This trajectory remarkably parallels that of Boyi and Shuqi. In representations of reclusive culture during dynastic transitions, the virtue of "loyalty" gradually attained parity with "integrity," prompting readers to retrospectively project, reconstruct, and even institutionalize the 'loyal' recluse archetype. This phenomenon was no isolated occurrence, but rather an undercurrent in traditional interpretations of reclusive culture, reflecting the interplay among political discourse, ethical norms, and the intellectual disposition of scholar-officials mentality in shaping reclusive cultural paradigms.

It can be argued that as early exemplars of reclusive culture situated at dynastic transitions, Boyi and Shuqi's transformation from "men of integrity" to "loyal ministers" was historically inevitable. Although the "loyal minister theory" substantially deviates from Sima Qian's original intent in composing The Biography of Boyi, this seemingly plausible yet ultimately flawed interpretation gained widespread acceptance after the Tang-Song period, inadvertently expanding the receptive audience for reclusive cultural values. Wen Tianxiang, the loyalist of the Southern Song, emulated Boyi and Shuqi in his Matching the Western Mountain Song of Boyi and Shuqi to express his grief for the fallen nation, and correspondingly, the History of Song: Biography of Wen Tianxiang drew explicit parallels between them. Furthermore, Li Tang, the painter who witnessed the Jingkang Incident, created the Gathering Vetch painting to symbolize unwavering loyalty, while Ming-Qing loyalists frequently invoked Boyi and Shuqi's story for inspiration - a phenomenon rich in historical significance. Within the traditional political ethos where "ministerial duty admits no escape between heaven

and earth," "loyalty" naturally garnered greater recognition among scholars and the populace than "integrity." Thus, through this transformation from "men of integrity" to "loyal ministers," traditional reclusive culture acquired both a broader reception base and more diversified interpretive possibilities.

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