The ruin theme is a recurring one in classical Chinese literature. It is a topic that is usually treated in a type of poem the Chinese designate *huai gu* 懷古, which has been variously translated as “meditation on the past,” “contemplating the past,” “recalling the past,” or even “lamenting the past.” The late Hans H. Frankel (1916–2003) was the first Western scholar to write about this theme, in an article published in 1973. He included an expanded version of this study in his book *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry*, published in 1976. A decade later Stephen Owen published a short book titled *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* which contains a chapter on Chinese poems about ruins. Recently, several scholars in China have published short books on *huai gu* poetry.

In some *huai gu* poems the poet writes about his visit to an ancient site that has been long abandoned and is now in ruins. The poet reflects on the scene and is moved by the thought that what had once been a place of glory and prosperity has now become a site of decay and destruction. The poet more importantly reflects on the past and sees in it a lesson or mirror to the present.

In 2012 Wu Hung published *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture*. I was eager to consult it to find visual images that illustrated a ruin. I could not have been more disappointed, for in Wu Hung’s first chapter which covers traditional Chinese art, he informs us that he had undertaken a survey of traditional Chinese paintings from the fifth century

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Knechtges

BCE to the nineteenth century to find a depiction of a ruin, and in all of this material, “only five or six depict ruined buildings.” Although Wu Hung refers to visual materials in his study, much of his information about the traditional Chinese depiction of ruins comes from poetry.

There are two words in classical Chinese that mean “ruin”: qiu 丘 and xu 虛. According to Wu Hong qiu originally designated a “natural mound or hillock” and then acquired the extended meaning of “the ruined site of a village, town, or dynastic capital.” The Shuowen jiezi writes xu 虛 as xu 虛, and explains it as da qiu 大丘 “large mound.” Wang Li suggests that qiu and xu come from the same word family. W. South Coblin lists qiu 丘 (Later Han *khjwəh) and xu 虛 (Later Han *khjah) among the paronomastic sound gloss equivalents of the Shuowen jiezi. A basic sense of xu is “empty” or “void,” and thus one important concept of a ruin in traditional China is it is a space that was once full but has been emptied of most of the structures that had once occupied it. The Zuo zhuan (Ding 4), for example, refers to the Xia xu 夏墟 (Xia Ruins) and the Yin xu 殷墟 (Yin Ruins) as the sites of the former “capitals” of the Xia and Yin dynasties respectively.

The Yin xu is the subject of the first reputed Chinese ruin poem, the “Mai xiu ge” 麦秀歌 (Song of barley in bloom). The author of this song has been identified as either Jizi 箕子 or Weizi 微子. Jizi was the younger brother of the Shang ruler Di Yi 帝乙, and the uncle of Zhou 紂, last ruler of the Shang. The

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6 Ibid., 13.
7 Ibid., 19.
9 Wang Li 王力, Tongyuan zidian 同源字典 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan 1982), 85. However, Axel Schussler, without stating any reasons, rejects Wang Li’s equation between qiu and xu. See ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 434.
10 Coblin, A Handbook of Eastern Han Sound Glosses (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. Press, 1983), 180, #810.
12 The word zi 子 in these names is usually construed as the title “viscount.” However, at least in the case of Jizi, Zi may be his surname. See Chen Puqing 陳蒲清, “Lun Jizi de ‘zi’ bushui juewei” 論箕子的“子” 不是爵位, Hunan shifan daxue shehui kexue xuebao 32.2 (2003): 92–93.