

THE EPISTOLARY WORLD OF A RELUCTANT 17TH CENTURY CHINESE MAGISTRATE: YUAN HONGDAO IN SUZHOU

DUNCAN CAMPBELL¹
Victoria University of Wellington

Translator's Introduction

As to [Yuan Hongdao's] personal letters, their each word and every line dashes spontaneously from his hand, giving full and direct expression of what he wanted to say, and each one of them is excellent in its own way... The longer ones are several hundred words in length, the shortest a mere dozen or so, but in sum they all flow forth from authentic emotions and real situations (*zhenqing shijing* 真情實境).

Jiang Yingke, "Second Preface", *Deliverance Collection*

Having spent the first twenty years of his life preparing himself for the official career expected of a man of his social status, Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道, the noted late Ming dynasty man of letters and leader of the Gong'an 公安 School of prose and poetry, embarked upon it with a decided ambivalence.² Posted

¹ Duncan Campbell (Duncan.Campbell@vuw.ac.nz) is Senior Lecturer in the Chinese Programme of the School of Asian and European Languages and Cultures of Victoria University of Wellington. His research focuses on the literary and material culture of late imperial China. His translation of Qi Biaojia's (1603-45) "Footnotes to Allegory Mountain" was published in *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* (1999), 19 (3/4): 243-71.

² Yuan Hongdao (zi Zhonglang 中郎, Wuxue 無學, Liuxiu 六休; hao Shigong 石公, Shitou jushi 石頭居士; 1568-1610), from Gong'an County, Huguang Province. For short biographies of Yuan Hongdao in English, see L. Carrington Goodrich & Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368-1644* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1970), Vol. 2, pp. 1635-38 (by C.N. Tay); and W.H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 955-56 (by Ming-shui Hung). Ren Fangqiu 任訪秋, *Yuan Zhonglang yanjiu* 袁中郎研究 [Research on Yuan Hongdao] (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1983) includes a useful chronological biography (*nianpu* 年譜). For English language studies, see two articles by Jonathan Chaves, "The Panoply of Images: A Reconsideration of the Literary

to the bustling and prosperous city of Suzhou in the 23rd year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1595) as Magistrate of Wu County, Yuan's personal letters (*chidu* 尺牘)³ to his friends and relatives provide an eloquent insight into the increasing and almost pathological distaste he developed for the various tasks now required of him.

Almost 250 of Yuan Hongdao's personal letters were included in the various collections of his writings that he published during his lifetime: *Jinfan ji* 錦帆集 [Brocade Sails Collection] (1596) (102 letters); *Jietuo ji* 解脫集 [Deliverance Collection] (1597) (30 letters); *Pinghuazhai ji* 瓶花齋集 [Vase Studio Collection] (1606) (62 letters); and *Xiaobitang ji* 瀟碧堂集 [Jade Green Bamboo Hall Collection] (1606) (50 letters).⁴ In addition, another

Theories of the Kung-an School” , in Susan Bush & Christian Murck, eds., *Theories of the Arts in China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 341-64 and “The Expression of Self in the Kung-an School: Non-romantic Individualism” , in Robert E. Hegel & Richard C. Hessney, eds., *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 123-50; two articles by Richard John Lynn, “Tradition and the Individual: Ming and Ch'ing Views of Yüan Poetry” , in Ronald C. Miao, ed., *Studies in Chinese Poetry and Poetics* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1978), pp. 321-75 and “Alternative Routes to Self-Realization in Ming Theories of Poetry” , in Susan Bush & Christian Murck, eds., *Theories of the Arts in China*, pp. 317-40; and the full-length study by Chih-p'ing Chou, *Yüan Hung-tao and the Kung-an School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For English translations of a selection of the prose and poetry of Yuan Hongdao and his brothers, see Jonathan Chaves, trans., *Pilgrim of the Clouds: Poems and Essays by Yüan Hung-tao and His Brothers* (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1978).

³ For a succinct discussion of the origins of this archaism (lit. “foot-long tablet”), see Endymion Wilkinson, ed., *Chinese History: A Manual* (Revised & Enlarged ed. Cambridge Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 444-47.

⁴ Three of the collections of his writings that Yuan Hongdao published in his lifetime contain no letters: *Biqie ji* 敝篋集 [Battered Trunk Collection] (containing Yuan Hongdao's earliest poems, covering the years 1584-91, but only published in 1597); *Guangling ji* 廣陵集 [Guangling Collection] (1597); and *Poyanzhai ji* 破研齋集 [Cracked Inkstone Collection] (1606). Qian Bocheng 錢伯城, “Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao fanli” 袁宏道集箋校凡例, *Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao* [The Complete Works of Yuan Hongdao: Annotated and Collated] (hereafter *YHDJJJ*), 3 vols. (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1981), Vol. 1, pp. 1-6, provides a succinct account of the textual history of Yuan Hongdao's writings. Any student of Yuan Hongdao (or for that matter his two brothers, Yuan Zongdao 袁宗道 (1560-1600) and Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道 (1570-1624)) is deeply indebted to the excellence of the editorial work of Qian Bocheng and it is his *YHDJJJ* that I have relied upon in my work on these translations. Firstly, through exhaustive reference to the numerous early editions of Yuan Hongdao's writings, Qian provides a list of textual variants. Secondly, rather than arranging his collection in terms of genre, he does so in accordance with the collection titles under which Yuan Hongdao's writings were published in his own lifetime. And thirdly, he ascribes a date to each letter, provides biographical information on both the addressees of the letters and other people mentioned in the text of the letters, and includes also the commentaries on Yuan Hongdao's prose and poetry found in a number of late-Ming editions. Three of the letters translated below were included in an edition compiled by the Hangzhou writer and publisher

thirty or so of his uncollected letters were subsequently uncovered and published soon after his death. Translated below are the twenty-two letters that can reliably be dated to the year 1595, the year in which he took up office in Suzhou.

Yuan Hongdao's adult life fell entirely within the long reign of the Wanli Emperor (r. 1573- 1620). His own repeated epitaph for this age was the gloomy Buddhist term "Latter Days of the Law" (*moji* 末季). Indeed, the late Ming period proved a most unsettling time for China's ruling elites. Rapid economic development, fuelled by the growth of commodity markets and the monetisation of silver, undermined existing status relationships and roles and led to higher levels of urbanisation and social mobility. A commercialised publishing industry fed off and into an expansion of literacy and educational opportunity and a flourishing popular culture that displayed an ever greater willingness to question Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Accompanying such socio-economic changes were those age-old and unmistakable signs of dynastic decline; incompetent and extravagant emperors, the expansion of eunuch power, both at court and in the provinces, factionalism and corruption at the centre, increasing disaffection amongst the literati, and the increasingly obvious inability of the political and economic mechanisms available to the state to deal effectively with threats, both internal and external. The disordered circumstances of the times induced among the Chinese literati the most intense anxieties about self-definition and worth, status, learning and money.

If no man gave more eloquent expression to the various tensions and anxieties of the age than did Yuan Hongdao, then no city perhaps better exemplified its ambiguities than did Suzhou.⁵ Despite never having served as

Lu Yunlong 陸雲龍, entitled *Cuiyuge pingxuan Yuan Zhonglang xiansheng xiaopin* 翠娛閣評選袁宏道先生小品 [A Collection of the Minor Pieces of Master Yuan Hongdao, Selected and Commentated upon by the Master of the Belvedere of Halcyon Pleasures] and published in the 5th year of the reign of the Chongzhen emperor (1632), and I have included (in italics) his interlinear commentary to the letters in my translations. There is a bitter irony in the fact that just as Yuan Hongdao's collected works were banned during the Qing dynasty, so too did Qian Bocheng's edition of Yuan Hongdao's works suffer at the hands of the state censor; although Qian completed his editorial work on this collection in 1965, political circumstances meant that he had to wait almost twenty years before being able to publish (see "Qianyan" 前言, *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, p. 13). I have also had frequent recourse to the more detailed annotations to the letters found in Fan Qiao 范橋 & Zhang Minggao 張明高, eds., *Yuan Zhonglang chidu* 袁中郎尺牘 [Letters of Yuan Hongdao] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1991). On the influential but somewhat obscure figure Lu Yunlong, see Xia Xianchun 夏咸淳, "Lu Yunlong kaolue" 陸雲龍考略 [A Brief Study of Lu Yunlong], *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究 (1988), 4: 83-89; and Chan Hing-ho, "Un Recueil de Contes Retrouvé après Trois Cent Ans: Le 'Xing shi yan'", *T'oung Pao* (1995), 81(1): 81-107.

⁵ Fortunately, we are now relatively well served in terms of English language studies of the history of this city. For which, see F.W. Mote, "A Millennium of Chinese Urban History:

an imperial capital, the city, founded in the late 6th century BCE, was at the very hub of the increasingly vital Jiangnan region. Connected with the south by a maze of rivers and waterways and to the north by the Grand Canal, surrounded by some of the most productive rice-growing land, Suzhou was ideally situated to capitalise on its location when, from the 9th century, the economic and demographic heart of the empire slipped south of the Yangtze River. The development of the city had not been without setbacks, however. Devastated by warfare towards the end of the Yuan dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-98), the founder of the Ming, sought to punish the city for its support of a rival to the Mandate of Heaven by means of onerous tax levels and the enforced deportation of large numbers of its population to the then capital of Nanjing. Yet by the mid-Ming the city had fully recovered, and Suzhou Prefecture alone provided on average about 10% of the state's total annual tax revenue. It was a wealth based on rice, on trade, and above all on textile manufacture, both cotton and silk, and in his brilliant recent study of the city, Yinong Xu argues that: "By the sixteenth century, Suzhou had emerged as the economic and cultural centre of China's richest, most urbanized and most advanced region".⁶ For administrative purposes during the Ming, Suzhou Prefecture lay within the Southern Metropolitan Region and comprised of seven counties, the city itself divided between two of these counties, Yuan Hongdao's Wu County to the west, and Changzhou County to the east. A late 16th century estimate of the populations of these two counties gives figures of over 300,000 for Wu County and slightly less than this figure for Changzhou. Assuming that about half the population of each of these counties lived within or close to the city walls, we are left with an urban population of well over a quarter of a million during the years that Yuan Hongdao served in the city.

With its immense wealth and sophistication, Suzhou continued to produce throughout the Ming a disproportionate number of successful examination candidates; it was the book production capital of the empire, and a leader in the fine arts of calligraphy, painting and garden design. At the same time, however, in the minds of the moralistic critics of the time, the city became also something of a byword for profligacy and luxurious ease on the one hand, and a city "full of want and distress" on the other, the seemingly inevitable results of rapid economic growth. In short, then, Suzhou was a city

Form, Time, and Space Concepts in Soochow" , *Rice University Studies* (1973), 59(4): 35-65; Michael Marmé, "Heaven on Earth: The Rise of Suzhou, 1127-1550" , and Paolo Santangelo, "Urban Society in Late Imperial Suzhou" , both in Linda Cooke Johnson, ed., *Cities of Jiangnan in Late Imperial China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 17-45 & 81-116 respectively; and, most recently, Yinong Xu, *The Chinese City in Space and Time: The Development of Urban Form in Suzhou* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

⁶ Yinong Xu, *The Chinese City in Space and Time: The Development of Urban Form in Suzhou*, p. 16.

notoriously difficult to administer. One contemporary historian has expressed the paradoxical circumstances of the city in the following manner:

Yet the city – urban, commercialised, alienated from and critical of the polity though it was – could thrive only because a symbiotic relationship successfully embedded the urban aberration in a world of landlords and peasants, emperors and bureaucrats.⁷

By his own account, as exemplified in the letters translated below, Yuan Hongdao hated his time in Suzhou as Magistrate, and in a sense the symbiotic relationship between this city and the centre serves to symbolise the ambivalence of Yuan's own problematic relationship with office-holding. In 1598, shortly after he had returned to Peking to take up the lowly ranked post of Instructor, in a letter to a friend, he offered this comparison between his circumstances when serving as Magistrate and those of more recent times:

Indeed, the advantages of serving as an Educational Official are just as you describe them in your letter, except that you don't go far enough and much more can be said of the matter. I think back to that time when I was serving in Wu County and although one could say that I had a sufficiency of wives and concubines, fine clothes and rich food, I often didn't get to see the former for months on end, and as to the last, even the yellow croachers of Tiger Hill that once I dined off tasted no better than mud. By contrast, the apple cakes and sweetmeats that are now my simple fare seem as if they come from the kitchen of an immortal. And, although living within the confines of a temple affords one little by way of peace and quiet, far better it is than living in that hall of endless litigation; although the monks prove poor conversationalists, more elegant by far are they than prisoners and Yamen runners. All men strive for wealth and power, always to be dissatisfied with what they achieve. Once one has really found a place of retreat, however, nothing there is that one does not have enough of.⁸

With some considerable degree of exaggeration, Yuan Zhongdao tells us that his brother served in office for a total of nineteen years altogether.⁹ Closer

⁷ Michael Marmé, "Heaven on Earth: The Rise of Suzhou, 1127-1550", p. 45.

⁸ "Da Mei Kesheng" 答梅客生 [In Reply to Mei Guozhen], *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 2, p. 748.

⁹ Yuan Zhongdao, "Libu yanfengsi langzhong Zhonglang xiansheng xingzhuang" 吏部驗封司郎中中郎先生行狀 [An Account of the Conduct of Master Yuan Hongdao, Director of the Bureau of Honours of the Ministry of Personnel], Qian Bocheng, ed., *Kexuezhai ji* 珂雪齋集 [Jade White Studio Collection] (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1989), Vol. 2, p. 763.

examination of Yuan Hongdao's official career, however, reveals a somewhat different story. Having become an Advanced Scholar in the 20th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1592), at the age of twenty-five, Yuan Hongdao had immediately sought permission to return home to join his elder brother Yuan Zongdao, then on leave from his post in the Hanlin Academy in Peking. Notice of his appointment to Wu County as District Magistrate reached him in the 12th month of 1594, by which time he had returned to the Capital, at his father's insistence. He travelled to Suzhou by way of the water route and assumed office there during the 3rd month of the succeeding year. His first petition begging for leave to quit his post is dated 3rd day of the 3rd month of 1596, less than a year after he arrived in Suzhou. He next took up office, in the Capital, serving as an Educational Official as we have seen, in 1598. In 1600 he became Secretary in the Bureau of Ceremonies in the Ministry of Rites, only to take leave from this post after a few months. In the summer of 1608, he was again back in the Capital to serve as Director of the Bureau of Honours of the Ministry of Personnel. Promoted to Vice-Director of the Bureau of Evaluations in the same ministry in 1609, he oversaw the provincial examinations in Shaanxi. By the spring of the next year, having resumed his former post in the Bureau of Honours, he took his final leave from office to return home. In actual total, therefore, he spent little more than five years serving in office.

To all accounts, Yuan Hongdao proved a talented and successful official, despite his distaste for the tasks it imposed upon him.¹⁰ Even if we discount as somewhat exaggerated the praise lavished on his abilities in this respect found in his younger brother's biography of him, the comment made by Shen Shixing 申時行 (1535-1614), one time Grand Secretary and Junior Preceptor to the Emperor, to the effect that: "A magistrate such as this appears only once in every two hundred years",¹¹ is found often repeated. To better understand the development of Yuan Hongdao's attitude to his official career,

¹⁰ Yuan Hongdao's distaste for office was a feeling shared by many men of his age. Nelson Wu, "Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636): Apathy in Government and Fervor in Art", A.F. Wright & D.C. Twitchett, eds., *Confucian Personalities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 269-70, captures something of the dilemma faced by the educated man of the age: "Of these two realms of activity [art and office], creative work in the arts was safe while government service brought one daily into danger ... In retirement one was much more secure, less suspected by one's enemies, and free to enjoy the full privileges of the official class. While eagerly preoccupied with the arts, one was not deaf to the murmurs from Peking, and would welcome the news of the next more attractive appointment".

¹¹ This comment is found both in Yuan Zhongdao's biography of Yuan Hongdao, and repeated in most subsequent traditional biographies of the man. It seems to derive from a preface to one of the editions of Yuan Hongdao's collected works written by Qian Xiyan 錢希言 wherein he claims that Shen had made the comment to Qian himself in person, for which, see "Jinfan ji xu" 錦帆集序 [Preface to Brocade Sails Collection], *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 3, p. 1687.

perhaps we should seek to recover something of the reality of his day-to-day official life in Wu County. As District Magistrate, Yuan Hongdao found himself at the very bottom of the elaborate imperial bureaucracy. As one of the approximately 1,500 such officials at this period of Chinese history, he was, in Charles Hucker's phrase, "the all-purpose local representative of the Emperor, directly responsible for governing everyone in his geographic jurisdiction".¹² With a rank somewhere between 6b to 7b,¹³ the District Magistrate was usually expected to serve in a particular post for about seven years. His every action was overseen by a variety of supervisory agencies, and every three years he had to undertake a review of his performance of his various duties.

What were these duties? The chapter titles of the most influential handbook for magistrates, the splendidly entitled *Fuhui quanshu* 福惠全書 [A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence] written by Huang Liuhong 黃六鴻 (1633-?1705) and completed in 1699, allow us some insight into this phase of Yuan Hongdao's life.¹⁴ After dealing first with the Selection and Appointment of the magistrate, and his assumption of office on the appropriately auspicious day, the book then deals successively with, amongst other things, Tax Collection (including the various miscellaneous taxes), the supervision of the local census and Cadastral Survey, the Administration of Justice, the undertaking of the annual cycle of Rites and Ceremonies, the maintenance of the local Education system, the distribution, when required, of Famine Relief, and the administration of the Courier Service.

Little wonder, then, that Yuan Hongdao found his duties onerous! In specific terms, what he seems to have objected to most, as a man of some considerable belief in his own talents, was the demeaning nature of his tasks.¹⁵ And as the superior, world-weary tone of his letters from Wu County makes clear, his interests lay elsewhere and increasingly he resented the extent to which his official duties prevented the indulgence in his "obsession with the rivers and mountains". His brother tells us that during his tenure in Suzhou, Yuan Hongdao "wrote nothing of his own and the dust began to settle thick upon his papers". This contrasts with the extraordinary productivity of the

¹² C.O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), p. 78.

¹³ Hucker, *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5, provides a convenient summary of this nine-fold system of ranking.

¹⁴ See, Djang Chu, trans., *A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence: A Manual for Local Magistrates in Seventeenth-Century China* (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1984).

¹⁵ Speaking of the contrast between his two elder brothers, Yuan Zhongdao tells us that whereas Yuan Zongdao, the most successful brother in terms of his official career, was far more prepared to make compromises, Yuan Hongdao "argued that just as the phoenix did not nest with ordinary birds, nor the Qilin stable itself with the common horse, so too should the real hero (*da zhangfu* 大丈夫) come and go as he pleased", see "Libu yanfengsi langzhong Zhonglang xiansheng xingzhuang", *Kexuezhai ji*, Vol. 2, p. 756.

period that immediately follows.¹⁶ Yuan Hongdao, it seems, a man who increasingly defined himself in terms of the text he produced, could only embark upon the construction of his literary persona once he was upon his travels, free from the pressures of both office and family. Service in Suzhou did not entirely preclude travel, but his comments about an official tour he made whilst there prove particularly revealing: “I passed through the area around [Mt. Heng] whilst inspecting flood damage and had time merely to ascend the heights, with no leisure to appreciate the beauty of the place. Alas, the green paddy fields of yesterday have become the white crested waves of today, and bemoaning the situation with the local elders, how could I find the time to doff my magistrate’s robes and act out the affairs of the true man of taste (*zuo renjian fengya shi* 作人間風雅事)? This occasion alone is enough to reveal the real suffering of the common minor official!”¹⁷ Not a word here about the plight of the common people whose livelihood had been destroyed and whose well-being Yuan Hongdao was responsible for!

Some decades ago, Lionel Trilling spoke of “all the buzz of implication which always surrounds us in the present”. And if some of the charm of the past, he continues, derives from the quiet that falls about us once this “great distracting buzz of implication has stopped”, then “part of the melancholy of the past comes from our knowledge that the huge, unrecorded hum of implication was once there and left no trace”. “From letters and diaries”, however, “from the remote, unconscious corners of the great works themselves, we try to guess what the sound of the multifarious implication was and what it meant”.¹⁸

Yuan Hongdao’s personal letters allow us to hear again something of the “hum of implication” that was so much a feature of his life; his relationships with friends and family, his network of official colleagues and fellow writers, his studied expression of the extent to which his present circumstances were out of keeping with his authentic self. They also provide us with a privileged position from which we can observe the development of both his literary praxis and the theory that underpinned it. If, as Stephen Owen has argued, Yuan Hongdao is the first Chinese literary theorist “to suggest the essential historicist position that the past is ‘superseded’”,¹⁹ then his awareness of his own contemporaneity derived surely from his close

¹⁶ “Libu yanfengsi langzhong Zhonglang xiansheng xingzhuang”, *Kexuezhai ji*, Vol. 2, p. 756.

¹⁷ “Heng Shan” 橫山 [Mt. Heng], *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, p. 173. In Yuan Hongdao’s account of his various visits to Tiger Hill, just beyond the walls of Suzhou, he complains that when he turned up there in his magistrate’s robes, “all the singing girls, hearing that the magistrate had arrived, fled into hiding”, see “Huqiu” 虎丘 [Tiger Hill], *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, p. 158.

¹⁸ Lionel Trilling, “Manners, Morals, and the Novel”, in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1951), p. 206.

¹⁹ Stephen Owen, “Ruined Estates: Literary History and the Poetry of Eden”, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (1988), 10: 33.

engagement with the details of his own rapidly changing age and the “authentic emotions” that only flow from “real situations”.²⁰ Yuan Hongdao gives explicit statement of his tenor of mind in his account of “The Imperial Training Ground”, written in 1597 whilst he was touring Hangzhou:

[My friend] Shikui²¹ laughed at me for never having climbed Pagoda for the Protection of Qian Chu. I responded that the scenery of the West Lake becomes ever more excellent the closer

²⁰ As Jonathan Chaves, “The Panoply of Images: A Reconsideration of the Literary Theory of the Kung-an School”, p. 359 points out, a similar formulation (*zhenjing shiqing* 真境實情) as that used by Jiang Yingke 江盈科 to describe Yuan Hongdao’s letters (see the epigraph to this article) was used by Yuan Zhongdao in a 1618 preface to his own writings. One can also trace a somewhat more purely literary genealogy to Yuan Hongdao’s views on literature. The main focus of his early training was of course the “Examination Essay” (*shiwén* 時文), perhaps better known as the “Eight-Legged Essay” (*baguwen* 八股文). In 1596, whilst serving in Wu County, Yuan Hongdao, whose own examination essays were said to be: “forcibly written, terse of diction but profound of meaning” (Wang Yining 王一寧, “Du Zhonglang shiyi ba” 讀中郎時藝跋 [Colophon to a Reading of Yuan Hongdao’s Examination Essays], cited in *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, p. 185), discussed the aesthetics of this much maligned form of prose. He bemoans the fact that the “contemporaneity” of the form had been lost through the overemphasis upon imitation of ancient prose models, for which see “Zhu dajia shiwén xù” 諸大家時文序 [Preface to the Examination Essays of Various Masters], *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, pp. 184-87. This constitutes Yuan Hongdao’s first major statement arguing the necessity for continual literary evolution. Yuan returns to the topic in 1599 when, in his “Shiwén xù” 時文敘 [Preface to a Collection of Examination Essays], *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 2, p. 703, he tells us: “... I became aware that in terms of the development of the Examination Essay, not only does the mind of the various authors change [over time], but the criteria for judging the essay too constantly alter”. Wang Mian 王勉 argues convincingly that Yuan Hongdao’s analysis of the Examination Essay had a very considerable influence upon the development of his wider views on literature, for which see his “Yuan Zhonglang de zai pingjia” 袁中郎的再評價 [A Re-appraisal of Yuan Hongdao], *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢 (1987), 2 & 3: 373-88. Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, for his part, believes that Yuan Hongdao, for all his stated distaste for Confucianism and pronounced predilection for Chan Buddhism, was nonetheless quite orthodox in his belief that reference to Zhu Xi’s interpretation of the Confucian Canon was *de rigueur*, for which see his *Tanyi lu* 談藝錄 [On the Art of Poetry] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), p. 354. The preface upon which Qian bases this argument, Yuan Hongdao’s “Shaanxi xiangshi lu xù” 陝西鄉試錄序 [Preface to a Record of the Provincial Examinations of Shaanxi Province], written in 1609, can be found in *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 3, pp. 1530-32. Yuan Hongdao’s views on the Examination Essay echo to a large extent those of his mentor, Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602), for whose opinions see both his “Tongxin shuo” 童心說 [On the Child-Heart] and his “Shiwén houxù” 時文後序 [Latter Preface to a Collection of Examination Essays], both in *Fenshu* 焚書 [The Book to be Burnt] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), pp. 98-99 & 117, respectively. Li Zhi believed the Examination Essay to represent the acme of contemporary literary achievement.

²¹ Tao Wangling 陶望齡 (*zi* Zhouwang 周望; *hao* Shikui 石簀; 1562-1609), one of Yuan Hongdao’s closest friends and a frequent travelling companion.

you are to it, for when standing on the heights the trees appear spindly, the mountains emaciated, the grass thin and the rocks bare. The thousand *qing* hue of the lake shrinks to the size of a teacup. The view to be had from the top of North Tall Peak and the Imperial Training Ground are examples of this. However wide the vista before one, I am no more than six foot tall and even straining my eyes I can see no further than 10 *li* into the distance; what use have I for such a large chunk of land? Shikui had no response to my retort.²²

Much research remains to be done on this marginalised genre of Chinese literature, the *chidu* or personal letter as I have chosen to translate it.²³ As David Pattinson points out in a recent treatment of the topic, although the origins of the genre can be traced back to the Western Han dynasty (206-25 BCE), its inclusion in the collected works of Chinese men of letters only began with the Song dynasty (960-1279) and increased in popularity towards the end of the Ming (1368-1644) and the beginning of the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.²⁴ Despite this development, however, the genre remained somewhat non-canonical and Chinese understandings of what constituted a *chidu* remained more a matter of tacit consensus than clear definition.

In the spring of the 25th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1597), after repeated request, Yuan Hongdao was finally granted leave to quit his post in Suzhou. Thus released from the fetters of office, Yuan Hongdao borrowed some money for the upkeep of his wife and child and placing them in the care of a friend in Zhenzhou until his younger brother Zhongdao could turn up to look after them,²⁵ embarked on an extended tour of some of the most scenic

²² “Yujiaochang” 御教場, *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, p. 435.

²³ One aspect of the genre in particular appears not to have been discussed in traditional Chinese sources, nor to have been addressed by contemporary scholarship, either Chinese or English; the material conditions of the existence of the letters included both in the collected works of various individuals or published in collection of letters. How were they collected, by and from whom, the writer of the letters or the various addressees? In the case of Yuan Hongdao’s letters, one assumes that he retained drafts of all letters he wrote, and that these were retained by his friend and secretary Fang Wenxun, the man responsible for the publication of a number of early editions of Yuan’s writings. This raises the associated questions of the percentage of letters deemed suitable for inclusion in Yuan’s published works, and the extent to which they were edited, and the criteria applied in both cases. Zhao Shugong’s 趙樹功 otherwise excellent recent treatment of the genre, *Zhongguo chidu wenxue shi* 中國尺牘文學史 [A Literary History of the Chinese Personal Letter] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1999), as implied by its title, does not treat with such aspects at any length.

²⁴ David Pattinson, “Zhou Lianggong and *Chidu xinchao*: Genre and Political Marginalisation in the Ming-Qing Transition”, *East Asian History* (2000), 20: 61-82.

²⁵ Yuan Hongdao had married in 1585, at the age of eighteen. He complains about the burdens of family life in the account of his visit to Solitary Hill near Hangzhou, for which

and historically resonant sites of the circumscribed world of the late Ming man of letters.²⁶ Accompanied by his friend Tao Wangling, then back in Shanyin on leave from his post in the Hanlin Academy, Yuan Hongdao visited West Lake, the sacred site *par excellence*, for the first time, to sit drinking in Lake Heart Pavilion as the autumnal rains washed the lake red with peach blossoms. He paid calls upon the celebrated monk Zhuhong 祜宏 (1535-1615) at his Cloud Perch Monastery. In Wuxi, he sat for hours in the evenings, wearied by a day with his books or out on some excursion or another, listening to Old Storyteller Zhu recite episodes from the *Shuihu zhuan* [Water Margin]. In Guiji he sought out the “true” site of the famed Orchid Pavilion where, more than a thousand years earlier, in 353, Wang Xizhi (307-65), the greatest of all calligraphers, had brushed his immortal “Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection”.²⁷ He boated upon Mirror Lake, tasted the famed water mellow of Lake Xiang, and climbed Yellow Mountain. Sitting one evening in his friend Tao Wangling’s study in Shanyin he came across a tattered edition of the poetry of the eccentric poet and playwright Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521-93); he later immortalised this moment in a biography of this man that served as something of a literary manifesto.²⁸ It is in the poems, travels records and

see “Gushan” 孤山, *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, p. 427. Jonathan Chaves, trans., *Pilgrim of the Clouds: Poems and Essays by Yüan Hung-tao and His Brothers*, p. 98, provides a translation of this essay, the relevant section of which reads: “Such people as myself and my friends, precisely because we have wives and children, let ourselves in for all kinds of problems. We cannot get rid of them, and yet we are tired of being with them – its like wearing a coat with tattered cotton padding and walking through a field of brambles and stickers that tug at your clothes with each step”.

²⁶ Nelson Wu, “Tung Ch’i-ch’ang (1555-1636): Apathy in Government and Fervor in Art”, p. 262, describes this world in the following terms: “As illuminated by the writings and traced by the travels of late Ming intellectuals, this world emerges as a dumbbell-shaped area superimposed on the map of China. The northern end, having as its center the national capital of Peking, was the political arena for all, where prizes in fame, riches, and posthumous titles were given as frequently as severe punishment was meted out. Punitive measures included everything from the immediate clubbing to death of the individual to the stripping from one’s family of all accumulated honors and privileges, a punishment sometime more painful than death to the traditionally trained Confucian gentry, followed by the thorough liquidation of all members of the family. Connected to this political nerve center by a narrow passageway roughly paralleling the Grand Canal was the cultural land of the lower Yangtze valley, with such illustrious towns as Soochow, Ch’angchow, Sungkiang, Kashing, Hangchow, and the southern capital of Nanking. This area nurtured Ming developments in Chinese painting and most of the important movements in the intellectual history of the period”.

²⁷ Or had he? See Pierre Ryckmans, “The Chinese Attitude to the Past”, The Forty-Seventh George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1986).

²⁸ On this biography, see my “Madman or Genius: Yuan Hongdao’s ‘Biography of Xu Wei’”, in Dov Bing, S. Lim & M. Lin, eds., *Asia 2000: Modern China in Transition* (Hamilton: Outrigger Publishers, 1993), pp. 196-220. In a letter to his friend Wu Hua 吳化

letters of this period of his life that we can observe the realisation of his ideas about literature, the second prevailing theme of his personal letters to friends and family.

Letters

To My Fellow Society Members 寄同社:²⁹

I have now taken up my post as Magistrate of Wu County!³⁰ To become magistrate of this county is like becoming the sovereign of the Five Lakes, lord of the Grotto Hall mountains,³¹ wine master, tea connoisseur, and elder to the rock to which Abbot Zhu Daosheng of the Liang dynasty preached the scriptures.³² And yet I fear that the Tax Captains of this county of five

(js 1595), dated 1597, Yuan Hongdao was to say: “The most pleasing aspect [of my recent trip] was that passing through Zhejiang I ... unearthed Xu Wei, a man who must, I feel, rank as the foremost poet of our dynasty”, see “Wu Dunzhi” 吳敦之 [To Wu Hua], *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, p. 506.

²⁹ Yuan Hongdao established the Southern Literary Society in Gong'an in the 11th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1583) at the age of sixteen, soon after he had entered the District School. He headed the society, despite the fact that it included men at least twice his age. His younger brother Zhongdao was a member, as was their brother-in-law Li Xueyuan 李學元. On the society, see Yuan Zhongdao, “Libu yanfengsi langzhong Zhonglang xiansheng xingzhuang”, in *Kexuezhai ji*, Vol. 2, pp. 755. Known as Duke Beard, Li Xueyuan (*zi* Yuanshan 元善; *hao* Ziran 子髯) became an Advanced Scholar in the 28th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1600) and later served as Subprefectural Magistrate of Jinzhou Prefecture, Northern Metropolitan Region. Yuan Hongdao's collected works contains four letters addressed to this man, the first dated 1596 and the others 1599. In one of his later letters, Yuan Hongdao inquires after the fate of the society.

³⁰ Having returned to the Capital in the autumn of the 22nd year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1594) to await selection, Yuan Hongdao received notice of his posting to Wu County in the 12th month. He departed the Capital in the 2nd month of the next year, arriving in Suzhou to take up his duties in the 3rd month.

³¹ Five Lakes is an alternative name for Great Lake, situated about twenty kilometres to the southwest of Suzhou. The Western and Eastern Grotto Hall mountains are the two largest islands of the lake, and Yuan Hongdao's collected works contain an account of each of them, for which see “Xi Dongting” 西洞庭 [Western Grotto Hall] and “Dong Dongting” 東洞庭 [Eastern Grotto Hall] in *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, pp. 161-64.

³² A reference to Tiger Hill, situated beyond the walls of the city to the west. Legend had it that during the Liang dynasty (313-76) the eminent monk Zhu Daosheng (355-434) lectured on the *Nirvana Sutra* in the monastery upon Tiger Hill and when his audience seemed unaffected by what he had to say (“Lay down your butcher's knife and you can become a Buddhist on the spot”) he had a rock placed there to listen to him. During his tenure in Wu

hundred *li* will prove to be oafs.³³ How the way of the official shackles a man. I have no idea how things will turn out for me here! This is by way of a first report.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Gong Zhongan 寄散木:³⁴

What has your recent writing been like? How can anyone go through life without achieving excellence in one art at least! If you fail to achieve excellence in poetry then you should devote your energies to playing chess, like those two grandmasters of the age Little Fang and Little Li. If excellence in chess too proves beyond you, then why don't you turn your feet to football like Taoist Guo or your fingers to playing the lute like Eighty Zha?³⁵ Whenever one becomes highly skilled in a particular art, then fame is sure to follow, and whatever it happens to be, this is surely a hundred times better than simply floating around in the world of letters. I trust that you will not

County, Yuan Hongdao visited the hill at least six times and wrote an account of it, for which see “Huqiu”, *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, pp. 157-59. This account has been variously translated; see Jonathan Chaves, trans., “Tiger Hill”, *Pilgrim of the Clouds: Poems and Essays by Yüan Hung-tao and His Brothers*, pp. 93-95; “Tiger Hillock”, *Chinese Literature* (1981), 2: 120-22; Richard Strassberg, trans., “Tiger Hill”, *Inscribed Landscapes: Travel Writing from Imperial China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & Oxford: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 305-307; and David Pollard, trans., “Tiger Hill”, *The Chinese Essay* (Hong Kong: Renditions Books, 1999), pp. 96-97.

³³ On this occasion, I have chosen to adopt the variant reading of this letter suggested by Li Jianzhang 李建章, for which see his *Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao zhiyi: Yuan Zhonglang xingzhuang jiaozheng: Bingzhu ji* 袁宏道集箋校志疑·袁中郎行狀校證·炳燭集 (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1994), pp. 14-15.

³⁴ Gong Zhongan 龔仲安 (*zi* Weijing 惟靜; *hao* Sanmu) was Yuan Hongdao's maternal uncle. A year younger than Hongdao, he was to become a Raised Man in the 31st year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1603). In his diary, Yuan Zhongdao tells us that it was this uncle who in 1608 lent him his junk in order that Zhongdao could go off travelling, for which see “Youju feilu”, *Kexuezhai ji*, Vol. 3, p. 1105. For a translation of this item from the diary, see Duncan Campbell, trans., “Notes Made Whilst Travelling and at Repose (Book One)”, *Asian Studies Institute Translation Paper # 2* (1999), p. 3.

³⁵ Qian Bochong (*YHDJJJ*, Vol. 1, p.203) suggests that Taoist Guo is a mistake for Taoist Han and cites the following passage from Jiang Yikui's 蔣一葵 *Changan kehua* 長安客話 [Notes of a Visitor to Changan]: “Han Chengyi was a Taoist monk at the Monastery of the Manifest Numinous who was skilled in the art of football. He could balance the ball on his shoulders, on his back and on his chest and stomach. He could compete against several opponents at the same time, and on his own he could have the ball circle his body for the whole day without it once falling to the ground”. Eighty Zha served as palace musical instructor for some time during the mid-Ming.

prove a failure at all that you devote yourself to, dissipating your energies on this and that.

I know you, my revered relative, to be a man of very considerable talent, and thus do I seek to encourage you in this way. Please make your best efforts in this respect.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

A Bulletin to My Family 家報:³⁶

Your son has already carefully scrutinised all the remarkable men assembled in the Capital. In general terms, those who pursue advantage are as many as the grains of sand, those who pursue fame as numerous as shingle. Those who pursue a Buddhist understanding of man's nature and destiny are as rare as the beauty of a bright moon shining in the night sky, and in every hundred thousand one encounters only one or two such men. Even with such men, only a small part of them is like this.

Third brother Zhongdao has quickly won the approval of our contemporaries, and his scholarship is making progress I feel. In recent times he has received repeated invitations from the Vice Minister of War Mei Guozhen 梅國楨 to join him on his staff at the frontier, but because the weather there is presently so bitterly cold he hasn't set off yet.³⁷ Mei is a real

³⁶ Both the Yuan Zhongdao and the Wu Commandary editions of Yuan Hongdao's collected works give Gong Daqi 龔大器 (*zi* Rongqing 容卿; *hao* Chunsuo 春所; 1514-96), Yuan Hongdao's maternal grandfather, as the addressee of this letter. Gong Daqi was a native of Gong'an and became an Advanced Scholar in the 35th year of the reign of the Jiajing Emperor (1556). Having served in a variety of posts in Guangxi, Jiangxi and Zhejiang Provinces, and in the Southern Metropolitan Region, he rose to become Provincial Administration Commissioner of Henan Province. He was over seventy when he finally retired and returned home. In his biography of this man, Yuan Zhongdao tells us that: "So reasonable and unaffected a man was he that the populace nicknamed him 'Buddha Gong'" (see "Gong Chunsuo gong zhuan" 龔春所公傳 [Biography of Gong Daqi], *Kexuezhai ji*, Vol. 2, p. 697).

³⁷ Mei Guozhen (*zi* Keshang 客生; 1542-1605), from Macheng in Huguang Province, became an Advanced Scholar in the 11th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1583). At the time of this letter he was serving as Right Assistant Censor-in-Chief on tour in Datong Prefecture in Shanxi Province. He later rose to the rank of Vice Minister in the Ministry of War and Supreme Commander in charge of the military affairs of Xuande and Datong Prefectures in Shanxi Province. In his biography of Mei Guozhen, Yuan Zhongdao describes him in the following terms: "With his large nose and full beard, he was the very image of a Taoist swordsman" ("Mei dazhongcheng zhuan" 梅大中丞傳 [Biography of Grand Coordinator Mei Guozhen], *Kexuezhai ji*, Vol. 2, p. 712). Yuan Zhongdao wrote an account of his trip north to join Mei Guozhen's staff, entitled "Sai you ji" 塞遊記 [A

hero and I regret not yet having met him. Although Third brother has plenty of insight, he is still somewhat lacking in courage. I believe that now is precisely the time for him to be coming into contact with a greater range of people and for pursuing enlightenment more widely. If he does so, then our little native place will truly have produced a unicorn or phoenix or two, and there is certainly no need to keep him at home with you.³⁸

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Master Gong Zhongqing 龔惟長先生.³⁹

My few years of idleness and dissipation have resulted in my present bout of busyness! What can you expect to happen when you place a man such as me in a place such as this and to ask him to do a job such as the one at hand? [Lu Yunlong comments: “The use here of the expression ‘such as’ three times in quick succession occasions considerable reflection”.] Alas! As transitory as a flash of lightening across the night sky or the bubbles that float upon the surface of a pond, are the brief few years destined us. I bustle around amidst the dust of this corporal world and not a single pleasure of human life is any longer afforded me. Although in name I merely serve as an official, in actual fact I have become totally transmogrified into one. [Lu Yunlong comments: “No achievements to speak of; simply transmogrified into an official”.]

Your way of life, my revered sir, is a rich and satisfying one, for you lack nothing it appears and your days and years pass by with all the splendour of a flower. What joys *you* can speak of. To my mind, however, the true joys of the world are but fivefold, and of this you must be aware. To see with

Record of My Trip to the Border], in which he tells us that he set off from the Capital towards the end of the 4th month (*Kexuezhai ji*, Vol. 2, pp. 528-29).

³⁸ Yuan Hongdao’s collected works contains thirteen letters addressed to Mei Guozhen, the first of which is dated 1596.

³⁹ Gong Zhongqing 龔仲慶 (*zi* Weichang; *hao* Shouting 壽亭, Dun’an 遯菴; 1550-1602) was the third son of Gong Daqi and Yuan Hongdao’s maternal uncle. He became an Advanced Scholar in the 8th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1580). Whilst serving as Censor, Gong Zhongqing displeased the Emperor by his defence of the memory of the late Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525-82) and was demoted to be Assistant Prefect of Cizhou in Henan Province. At the time of this letter, Gong was back living in Gong’an, but he was later to be promoted to be Vice Director in the Ministry of War. A bibliophile of some note, Gong Zhongqing assembled a library of immense proportions. Yuan Hongdao’s collected works contains three further letters addressed to this man, dated 1595 (translated below, pp. 189), 1596 and 1599. For an earlier translation of this letter, see David E. Pollard, trans., “Yuan Hongdao: Letter to Gong Weichang”, *Renditions* (1994), 41 & 42: 94-97.

one's eyes all the most sensuous sights of the world, to hear with one's ears all its most beautiful sounds, to taste all the world's greatest delicacies and to join in all the most interesting conversations; this is the first of the true joys afforded us. Within one's hall, to have food-laden vessels arrayed in the front and music being played in the background; to have one's tables crowded with guests and the shoes of men and women scattered everywhere; for the smoke of the lanterns to rise to the heavens and for jewellery to be strewn across the floor; when one's money is exhausted one sells off one's fields; this is the second joy.

To have secreted in one's book trunks ten thousand volumes, all of which are rare and precious; to have a studio built besides one's residence and to invite into this studio a dozen or so true friends and to appoint as master of them someone with the extraordinary insight of a Sima Qian, a Luo Guanzhong or a Guan Hanqing;⁴⁰ [*Lu Yunlong comments: "Not easy to find, men such as this!"*] to then divide them into groups and to have each group compose a book, the prose of which will be far removed from the faults perpetrated by those pedantic Confucian scholars of the Tang and Song dynasties and to have recently completed some masterpiece of the age; this is the third joy.

To buy a junk worth a thousand taels; to invite on to this junk a musical troupe along with a courtesan and a concubine or two and a couple of idle travellers; to have a floating home and mansions afloat; to be able to forget the approach of old age; this is the fourth joy.

If one were to indulge oneself in this manner and to this degree, however, before a decade had passed by one would find one's money exhausted and one's fields sold. [*Lu Yunlong comments: "The four earlier joys would result in this last joy, surely?"*] But then, in a state of total penury and living hand to mouth, to ply the brothels with one's begging bowl in hand, to share one's meals with the orphaned and the infirm, to live off the favour of one's friends and relatives, all without the slightest pang of shame; this is the fifth great joy.

For a Man of Letters to experience just one of these joys is to be able to live without shame and die without regret. To live in idle seclusion, never doing a single thing, just passing the days one by one, this is to be the most contemptible type of person in the world and we must not model ourselves upon them. All the wise sages down from antiquity, men such as Gongsun Zhaomu, Xie An and Sun Yang all truly understood this ruse, and thus it was

⁴⁰ Sima Qian (c.145 – c.85 BC), the great Han dynasty historian; Luo Guanzhong, traditionally attributed with a number of historical novels such as the *Sanguo zhi yanyi* [Romance of the Three Kingdoms]; and Guan Hanqing (c.1240 – c.1320), the greatest of the Yuan dynasty playwrights. For short biographies of these men, see W.H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, pp. 720-23; 594-96; and 507-9, respectively.

that they indulged themselves throughout their lives.⁴¹ To be otherwise would be to resemble old so-and-so, our neighbour to the east, forever “lift[ing] up weary eyes, worrying over the ills of the world”.⁴² [*Lu Yunlong comments: “In exhausting the nature of happiness and extreme joy, this letter bears comparison with Mei Sheng’s ‘Seven Stimuli’; reading it brings one sublime pleasure”.*]

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Qiu Tan 丘長孺:⁴³

I heard that you have been gravely ill, and I have been most worried about you. If you were to die, all the elegance and sophistication of the Southeast would expire with you. How then could I not be worried?

As for me, serving as Magistrate of Wu I have found myself forced to strike all the ugliest attitudes imaginable, such as are quite beyond description. To give you some impression of my torment, however, I’ll try to do so now; when I encounter my superiors I am forced to grovel like a slave; entertaining passing guests I act the harlot; whilst managing the government treasury, I’m like an old granary keeper; seeking to instruct the populace under my charge in their rightful duties, I become an old maid! Blowing hot and then cold all in the space of a single day, one minute I’m *yin* and the next I’m *yang*. As magistrate, I have tasted all the worst flavours of this world. How bitter!

⁴¹ The first of these figures remains unidentified; Xie An (320-85), the great statesman and quintessential image of the refined romantic; Sun Yang, an official from the Southern Dynasties period (420-589), known for his benevolence and his romantic flair.

⁴² This seems to be an allusion to the “Webbed Toes” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: “Nowadays the benevolent men of the age lift up weary eyes, worrying over the ills of the world, while the men of no benevolence tear apart the original form of their inborn nature in their greed for eminence and wealth” (see Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 100).

⁴³ Qiu Tan 丘坦 (*zi* Tanzhi 坦之; *hao* Changru) was a native of Macheng in Huguang Province. As a Government Student, he took first place in the Provincial Military Examinations of the 34th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1606). He was later to become Assistant Regional Commander of Haizhou. A skilled poet and calligrapher, he was regarded by contemporaries as belonging to the “Gongan School”. In his “Moqi” 墨畦 [Ink Plots], Yuan Hongdao tells us that so handsome was Qiu Tan in his youth that during his stay in Wu County the singing girls all took to calling him “Duke Guan in monochrome” (*YHDJJJ*, Vol. 3, p. 1433). When comparing the drinking styles of his various friends in the same diary, Yuan Hongdao says of Qiu Tan that he was “like a Suzhou water buffalo eating grass; not fast but with an enormous capacity” (*YHDJJJ*, Vol. 3, p. 1434). Yuan Hongdao’s collected works contains one other letter written to this man, dated the year after this one.

How very poisonous is my existence! [*Lu Yunlong comments: "Such precise similes! Another case of 'appearing simultaneously at all four quarters in order to preach the Dharma'"*.]

Sometime this autumn, my younger brother Zhongdao will be passing through Wu. I say this knowing all too well that things will not be as they once were for us as all we will be able to do will be to sit shivering together in the Yamen Office reading, and no longer will we be able to go off climbing Tiger Hill with the gibbons as once we did.⁴⁴

Has the urge to travel stirred within you in recent days? Although I, your Master of Flourishing Garden,⁴⁵ have no cash with which to reward his guests, I do still have some wine we can get drunk upon, however, some tea we can sip together, the spoon-full of water that is Great Lake to go boating upon and that slab of stone that is Grotto Hall Mountain to climb. So my circumstances are not altogether too depressing after all. [*Lu Yunlong comments: "Difficult to satiate the sponger, I fear!"*] What about it?⁴⁶ [*Lu Yunlong comments: "This truly is a case of 'Golden Gates being a most bustling and prosperous place whilst the Magistrate suffers most bitterly'"*.]

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Mao Taichu 毛太初:⁴⁷

Your brother has already taken up his post as Magistrate of Wu and it is a post that is proving both bothersome and bitter, a world away from the simple pleasures of drinking wine and playing chess that are the lot of the rustic gentleman. My two nephews become more intelligent by the day, I'm sure. Where are they studying? The banks of Butcher River, the entrance to Three Crossroads Lane, is not, I fear, a place that will forge a Raised Man or an Advanced Scholar. Why don't you have them shift into the county seat to continue their studies?

Speaking generally, in terms of the education of one's sons, selecting the right place is of first importance, paying the appropriate salary to the teacher is

⁴⁴ Both the Wu Commandery and Yuan Zhongdao editions of Yuan Hongdao's collected works make the reference to the gibbons of Tiger Hill explicit.

⁴⁵ An alternative name for Changzhou which, although it had become a separate county by Yuan Hongdao's time as magistrate, had once belonged within Wu County.

⁴⁶ An earlier translation of this letter may be found in Stephen Owen, ed. & trans., *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 814.

⁴⁷ Mao Taichu, Yuan Hongdao's brother-in-law, was a native of Gong'an and appears to have remained there much of his life, making his livelihood from the land. Yuan Hongdao's collected works contains one further letter addressed to this man, dated 1599.

next. Make sure that you don't mix copper cash with the silver, or add linen to the silk. This is a matter of the utmost importance.

I guess that by the time you receive this the fields will have turned a lovely emerald green. If you really wish to become rich then you must plant your fields honestly – don't just fool around. How can a man reach his thirtieth year and find himself with no extra cash in his purse, no surplus grain growing in his fields, no high towers and grand mansions to live in, no fine wine to drink or pork to eat. Such would be a most shameful state of affairs!

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Wang Yiming 王子聲:⁴⁸

Counting on my fingers, I realise that in my life so far I have only really experienced the sorrow of parting three times. The first occasion was when saying goodbye to a young lass besides the river when I was but a youth. The second time was bidding an old man farewell besides the lake last year. This present parting, from you, is the third. Love caused the parting from the young lass, illness from the old man. This occasion is caused neither by love nor by illness, but seems even harder to bear for all that. I don't know what to do. I, your "East Conquering General", now find myself without my "Master Surprise", and thus am servantless. Oh how pitiable is the general's lack of fortune!

Reading your poems written on the fan, each word brings tears to my eyes. When shall we meet again? I am heartbroken.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

⁴⁸ Wang Yiming 王一鳴 (zi Zisheng, Bogu 伯固) became an Advanced Scholar in the 14th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1586). Having served for some time as Magistrate of Great Lake, he was posted as magistrate to Linzhang in Henan Province in the year in which this letter was written. He died at his post the very next year.

To My Paternal Uncles Yuan Lanze & Yuan Yunze 蘭澤雲澤叔:⁴⁹

Golden Gates⁵⁰ may well be a most bustling and prosperous place, and yet here the Magistrate suffers most bitterly. [*Lu Yunlong comments: “Where is this not so?”*] How could this possibly be so?

All those painted junks with their pipes and drums, those singing boys and dancing girls, these are the concerns of the rich visitor, not those of the Magistrate. The extraordinary flowers and rare plants, the precarious rocks and lonely peaks are the vistas of the recluse, not those of the Magistrate. The drinking clubs or the poetry societies, the vermilion gates and purple paths, shaking off one’s robes upon the summit of Mo Li’s Peak⁵¹ or bathing one’s feet in the stones of Tiger Hill, these are the pleasures of the traveller, not those of the Magistrate.

By contrast, what the Magistrate is forced to face each day are the tax captains in their worn and tattered clothes, the folk with their plausible tales and sharp tongues, the lice-infected prisoners. [*Lu Yunlong comments: “Only an upright official would prove willing to face such things”*]. What does Suzhou have to offer the Magistrate that he finds himself thus confined here? Sitting in the village square conversing with a group of friends, a cup and spoon in hand, this is joy enough; not being made of wood and stone, how can my body endure this ceaseless bowing and scraping, this avoidance of what I enjoy for the sake of that which I detest? My every sentence is true and not one word of what I say is exaggerated. If you still refuse to believe me, then just wait and see if by next spring there remains a trace of the footprints of Magistrate Yuan within the Wu County Yamen hall! [*Lu Yunlong comments: “No harm in Golden Gates being bustling and prosperous whilst the Magistrate suffers bitterly; were Golden Gates to suffer and the Magistrate to become prosperous, this would be a calamity. In its cataloguing of bitterness and joy this letter is as a seal imprinted upon sand”*].

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

⁴⁹ Little is known about the first of these paternal uncles, Lanze. Yunze’s name was Jin 錦 and his closeness in age to the Yuan brothers meant that they treated him more as their brother than as an uncle. In his “Shu Yunze xiansheng yishi” 書雲澤先生遺事 [A Note of Master Yunze’s Last Wishes], Yuan Zhongdao tells us that Yunze “loved pines and bamboo and was fond of his cups, becoming happily drunk whenever the dawn broke stormy or the evening was moonlit” (see *Kexuezhai ji*, Vol. 2, p. 916). In old age, Yunze became a devoted Buddhist. Yuan Hongdao’s collected works contains one further letter addressed to these men, dated 1598.

⁵⁰ A reference to the Chang Gate in the northwestern corner of the walls of Suzhou, here used as synecdoche for Suzhou. Easy access from this gate to the Grand Canal had resulted in the development, beyond the walls, of Suzhou’s most prosperous commercial district.

⁵¹ The summit of Eastern Grotto Hall Mountain, named after General Mo Li of the Sui dynasty (581-618) who was reputed to have lived here.

To Jiang Yingke, Magistrate of Changzhou 江長洲:⁵²

Although I am forever complaining about how bothersome and bitter is this posting of mine as Magistrate of Wu, it does at least provide the opportunity for meeting up with good friends and this indeed is a pleasure. Who can say, but it may well be that in future a fine tale will be told about the two of us and our meeting here upon the pile of stones that is Tiger Hill, or out upon the spoon-full of water that is Great Lake.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Pang Shiyong, Magistrate of Dantu 龐丹徒:⁵³

What thing is this that I have seen, jutting so abruptly into the river like a fist of stone! I have already had an overall view of its magnificence, but as yet I owe Jiao's Mountain the debt of a day's excursion. As dusk has already fallen, I cannot enter the town and so will now have to wait until tomorrow morning before I pay my respects to you. Your town is surrounded by mountains and I will await, at your pleasure, a cup of wine, and plate of food and a servant to accompany me there.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Zhenjiang]

⁵² Jiang Yingke (*zi* Jinzhi 進之; *hao* Luluo shanren 淥蘿山人; 1556-1605), from Taoyuan County in Huguang Province. Jiang became an Advanced Scholar in the 20th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1592), the same year as Yuan Hongdao. Jiang's posting as Magistrate of Changzhou coincided with that of Yuan Hongdao to Wu County, and the two men departed the Capital and travelled to their respective posts together. Their Yamen offices were not far from each other, both within the city walls of Suzhou, and it appears that they spent much time together, becoming the closest of friends. Jiang Yingke became the most enthusiastic proponent of Yuan Hongdao's literary ideas and wrote prefaces for Yuan Hongdao's first three collections, *Biqie ji* [Battered Trunk Collection], *Jinfan ji* [Brocade Sails Collection], and *Jietuo ji* [Deliverance Collection], for which see *YHDJJJ*, Vol. 3, pp. 1685-86, 1686-87, and 1690-91, respectively. Yuan Hongdao's collected works contains eight further letters addressed to Jiang, and Yuan Zhongdao wrote a moving biography of him, for which see "Jiang Jinzhi zhuan" 江進之傳 [Biography of Jiang Yingke], *Kexuezhai ji*, Vol. 2, pp. 725-28.

⁵³ Pang Shiyong 龐時雍 (*zi* Jinghe 景和) was a native of Wenshang County in Shandong Province. Having become an Advanced Scholar in the 20th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1592), the same year as Yuan Hongdao, he was appointed as Magistrate of Dantu County in the Southern Metropolitan Region. He was later to serve as Secretary in both the Ministries of Revenue and of War, before being demoted and posted to the border regions for his opposition to the Grand Secretary Shen Yiguan (1531-1615).

To Yang Tingyun 楊安福:⁵⁴

Feasting together in the capital we experienced the ultimate in elegance and sophistication, and yet we never had the opportunity to fully disclose to each other our gut feelings. Caught at the back of my throat like something that needs spitting out, in my mind I continue to brood about such thoughts.

My posting here as Magistrate of Wu is proving a most bitter experience for me. I am bitter about how thin I have become, how busy it has kept me, bitter that my knees are all but worn through, my waist seems about to snap and my neck about to break. Alas! This spell as magistrate has used up all my reserves of culture and elegance, it seems, and I wonder if it is I that have brought bitterness to the post or the post that has brought bitterness to me. In ancient times there were those who were able to play their lute, ride their flying slippers, cultivate their flowers and plant their willows whilst serving as officials.⁵⁵ How ever did they find the intellectual energy for such idle pastimes? How inferior we contemporaries are in comparison to the ancients, how unworthy of following in their footsteps!

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Wu Mo 吳因之:⁵⁶

I have just spent a most pleasurable evening conversing with Gu Tianjun 顧天峻.⁵⁷ We spoke of Chan and discoursed about Confucianism, and then we viewed some albums of calligraphy that I had never seen before. The evening occasioned in me thoughts of earlier times, and if you had been with us, I'm

⁵⁴ Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠 (*hao* Qiyuan 淇園) was a native of Renhe County, Hangzhou. He became an Advanced Scholar in the 20th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1592), the same year as Yuan Hongdao. At the time of this letter, he was serving as Magistrate of Anfu County in Jiangxi Province.

⁵⁵ The historical references here are to Mi Zijian of the Spring and Autumn Period, Wang Qiao of the Han, Pan Yue of the Western Jin dynasty and Chen Yaozuo of the Song respectively

⁵⁶ Wu Mo 吳默 (*zi* Yinzhi; 1554-1640), from Wu County, became an Advanced Scholar in the 20th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1592), the same year as Yuan Hongdao. At the time of this letter, Wu was serving as Secretary in the Bureau of Sacrifices in the Ministry of Rites. He later rose to the rank of Aide in the Seals Office.

⁵⁷ Gu Tianjun 顧天峻 (*zi* Shengbo 升伯; *hao* Zhan'an 湛菴), from Kunshan in the Southern Metropolitan Region also became an Advanced Scholar in the 20th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1592). At the time of this letter, he was serving as Junior Compiler in the Hanlin Academy, along with Yuan Hongdao's elder brother Yuan Zongdao. He was later to be sent as an envoy to Korea and served for some time as Right Advisor to the Heir Apparent. Yuan Hongdao's collected works contains two further letters addressed to Gu, dated 1600 and 1603.

sure that you would have come up with a *bon mot* or two to liven up the proceedings. Alas, such was not our fate.

What have you been up to in recent days? And how are you going to end up in future? A high official or a mendicant monk? If you don't have a firm foothold in life at the age of forty, when are you going to get one? As for myself, all I wish for is to be a beast of burden among men, a demon in Heaven or a sage of the Great Method. Although I have no idea how this accords with the Great Way, this I fear is all that I can hope for. The present age is without an Overlord of the Ocean, and so the Lord of the River becomes arrogant and self-satisfied.⁵⁸ I beg you for whatever instruction you may be able to offer me.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Tang Xianzu 湯義仍:⁵⁹

Serving here as Magistrate of Wu County I have experienced to the fill all of life's most bitter aspects. I wonder what sort of interest in life the immortal Magistrate of Suichang County can still speak about? As the common saying

⁵⁸ An allusion to the "Autumn Waters" chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: "The time of the autumn floods came and the hundred streams poured into the Yellow River. Its racing current swelled to such proportions that, looking from bank to bank or island to island, it was impossible to distinguish a horse from a cow. Then the Lord of the River was beside himself with joy, believing that all the beauty in the world belonged to him alone. Following the current, he journeyed east until at last he reached the North Sea. Looking east, he could see no end to the water. The Lord of the River began to wag his head and roll his eyes. Peering far off in the direction of Ruo [the Overlord of the Ocean], he sighed and said, 'The common saying has it, "He has heard the Way a mere hundred times but he thinks he's better than anyone else." It applies to me. In the past, I heard men belittling the learning of Confucius and making light of the righteousness of Bo Yi, though I never believed them. Now, however, I have seen your unfathomable vastness. If I hadn't come to your gate, I should have been in danger. I should forever have been laughed at by the masters of the Great Method'" (see Burton Watson, trans., *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 96); romanisation altered).

⁵⁹ Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (zi Yireng; hao Ruoshi 若士, Hairuo 海若, Qingyuan daoren 清遠道人; 1550-1616), from Linchuan County in Jiangxi Province, was the greatest playwright of the age. For short biographies of Tang Xianzu, see A.W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period, 1644-1912* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), pp. 708-9; and W.H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, pp. 751-54. On Tang more generally, see C.T. Hsia, "Time and the Human Condition in the Plays of T'ang Hsien-tsu", in Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 249-90. For an English translation of his most famous play, see Cyril Birch, trans., *The Peony Pavilion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

has it: “White the crane, black the crow”, so I assume that you too have not been spared. Short the days granted us in this life; why then is it not to the tall forests and lush grasses that we turn our hearts, rather than seeking out this sort of bitterness? Whenever I think about the poet Tao Qian⁶⁰ I realise that it was not that he did not either desire office or hate poverty; it was simply a matter that his wish to follow the dictates of his heart’s own desires proved stronger than his desire for office, his dislike of work outweighed his hatred of poverty. Thus did he write the line: “Return home”, for he faced indigence without regret.

I have become aware that from time immemorial it has been those who seek out convenience and gratification that are the best type of people, and it is by reason of this that Master Zhuang of the Lacquer Garden began his work with a chapter entitled: “Free and Easy Wandering”. So large is the Peng that its wings extend across Heaven and man can never hope to trap it, for were this possible then the Peng would be of a type with the goose, the duck, the chicken and the dog, simply a beast of burden like the horse and the ox.⁶¹ Why would this be so, I ask? It would be so by virtue of the fact that it could be put to use by man. Is it the case then that the Great Man, in the final analysis, proves to be of no use?⁶² In a “gourd big enough to hold five piculs” one can “go floating around the rivers and lakes”, a tree that stretches all the way to Heaven can be “free and easy” in the “field of Broad-and-Boundless”,⁶³ the usage to which the Great Man may be put is simply like this.

⁶⁰ Tao Qian (365-427), the quintessential Chinese image of the poet-recluse, on whom see W.H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, pp. 766-69.

⁶¹ The “Free and Easy Wandering” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* begins: “In the northern darkness there is a fish and his name is Kun. The Kun is so huge I don’t know how many thousand *li* he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is Peng. The back of the Peng measures I don’t know how many thousand *li* across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like the clouds all over the sky” (see Burton Watson, trans., *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, p. 23; romanisation altered).

⁶² The use of the term Great Man here seems to derive from the “Xu Wugui” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: “The sage embraces all heaven and earth, and his bounty extends to the whole world, yet no one knows who he is or what family he belongs to. For this reason, in life he holds no titles, in death he receives no posthumous names. Realities do not gather about him, names do not stick to him – this is what is called the Great Man” (See Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 272).

⁶³ Again, an allusion to the “Free and Easy Wandering” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: “Huizi said to Zhuangzi, ‘The king of Wei gave me some seeds of a huge gourd. I planted them, and when they grew up, the fruit was big enough to hold five piculs. I tried using it for a water container, but it was so heavy I couldn’t lift it. I split it in half to make dippers, but they were so large and unwieldy that I couldn’t dip them into anything. It’s not that the gourds weren’t fantastically big – but I decided they were of no use and so I smashed them to pieces’. Zhuangzi said, “...Now you had a gourd big enough to hold five piculs. Why didn’t you think of making it into a great tub so you could go floating around the rivers and

Moreover, does the *Book of Change* not match the Great Man with the dragon?⁶⁴ What manner of creature is the dragon that when it flies it ascends to the ninth layer of Heaven, when it dives it descends to the ninth level of Earth, man never proving able to put it to use?

From this we can see that long has the Great Man escaped the usages of man. The antithesis to the Great Man, of course, is the Inferior Man, and being an Inferior Man myself, it is your brother's fate therefore to be thus harried and harassed. What complaint can I have?

From what I have written thus far you will be able to gain an inkling of my present circumstances. I await instruction from you who understands me so well.⁶⁵

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

lakes, instead of worrying because it was too big and unwieldy to dip into things! Obviously you still have a lot of underbrush in your head!' Huizi said to Zhuangzi, 'I have a big tree named ailanthus. Its trunk is too gnarled and bumpy to apply a measuring line to, its branches too bent and twisty to match up to a compass or square. You could stand it by the road and no carpenter would look at it twice. Your words, too, are big and useless, and so everyone alike spurns them!' Zhuangzi said, '...Now you have this big tree and you're distressed because it's useless. Why don't you plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village, or in the field of Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it? Axes will never shorten its life, nothing can ever harm it. If there's no use for it, how can it come to grief or pain?'" (see Burton Watson, trans., *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, pp. 28-30; romanisation altered).

⁶⁴ The "Wenyan" explanation of the 1st Hexagram (*Qian*) of the *Yi jing* [Book of Changes] reads: "Nine in the second place means: 'Dragon appearing in the field. It furthers one to see the great man'. What does this signify? The Master said: This means a man who has the character of a dragon and is moderate and correct. Even in ordinary speech he is reliable. Even in ordinary actions he is careful. He does away with what is false and preserves his integrity. He improves his era and does not boast about it. His character is influential and transforms men" (see *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, the Richard Wilhelm translation, rendered into English by Cary F. Baynes (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 380).

⁶⁵ Tang Xianzu had become an Advanced Scholar in the 11th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1583) and at the time of this letter was serving as Magistrate of Suichang County in Zhejiang Province. Yuan Hongdao's collected works contains two further letters addressed to this man, the first of which is also dated 1595, the second 1596. Tang Xianzu's collected works contains two letters addressed to Yuan Hongdao, the first of which bears an obvious relationship to the letter translated above: "The few days since I left the pass have been atrocious. Thinking back to when we were all together, five or six of us including you and your brothers, sitting facing each other and smiling, it seems already, so suddenly, to have been but a chimera. All along my way I have been waiting for you to join me, but now I know that you have already taken charge of Wu County. How are you going to manage this county? When Qu Ruji turns up you will be able to have a good chat with him about things." ("Yu Yuan Liuxiu" 與袁六休 [To Yuan Hongdao], in Xu Shuofang 徐朔方, ed., *Tang Xianzu shiwen ji* 湯顯祖詩文集 [A Collection of the Prose and Poetry of Tang Xianzu] (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1982), Vol. 2, p. 1274).

To Xu Dashen 徐漢明:⁶⁶

Like the veritable “rustle of a human footfall” in the deserted valley was your letter,⁶⁷ and from it I have gained some inkling of the excellence of your recent writings. Now more than ever do I believe that my brother Zhongdao’s praise for you was not at all exaggerated.

In my observation, the scholars of this present age of ours may be categorised as belonging to one of four types: the Hedonists who treat the world as their plaything, the Eremites who seek to escape from the world, the Stoics who rub along with the world, and the Epicureans who care not a jot about the affairs of the world. Amongst the Hedonists, one would list Master Sanghu,⁶⁸ Bocheng Zigao,⁶⁹ Yuan Rang,⁷⁰ Master Zhuang, Master Lie, Ruan

⁶⁶ Xu Dashen 徐大紳 (*zi* Hanming; *hao* Chongbai 崇白) was from Jianning County in Fujian Province. He was a fellow examination candidate of Yuan Hongdao’s, both becoming Advanced Scholars in the 20th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1592). At the time of this letter, he held the post of Judge in Jiaying Prefecture, Zhejiang Province. Yuan Hongdao’s collected works contains one further letter addressed to this man, dated 1597.

⁶⁷ The *locus classicus* of this expression is the “Xu Wugui” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: “A man who has fled into the wilderness, where goosefoot and woodbine tangle the little trails of the polecat and the weasel, and has lived there in emptiness and isolation for a long time, will be delighted if he hears so much as the rustle of a human footfall” (see Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 262).

⁶⁸ In “The Great and Venerable Teacher” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* we read: “Master Sanghu, Mengzi Fan, and Master Qinzhong, three friends, said to each other, ‘Who can join with others without joining with others? Who can do with others without doing with others? Who can climb up to heaven and wander in the mists, roam the infinite, and forget life forever and forever?’ The three men looked at each other and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts and so they became friends” (see Burton Watson, trans., *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, p. 82; romanisation altered).

⁶⁹ The “Heaven and Earth” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* includes mention of this man: “When Yao ruled the world, Bocheng Zigao was enfeoffed as one of his noblemen. But when Yao passed the throne to Shun, and Shun passed it to Yu, Bocheng Zigao relinquished his title and took up farming. Yu went to see him and found him working in the fields. Yu scurried forward in the humblest manner, came to a halt, and said, ‘In former times when Yao ruled the world, Sir, you served as one of his noblemen. But when Yao passed the throne to Shun, and Shun passed it to me, you relinquished your title and took up farming. May I be so bold as to ask why?’ Zigao said, ‘In former times when Yao ruled the world, he handed out no rewards and yet the people worked hard; he handed out no punishments and yet the people were cautious. Now you reward and punish, and still the people fail to do good. From now on Virtue will decay, and from now on penalties will prevail. The disorder of future ages will have its beginnings here! You had better be on your way now – don’t interrupt my work!’ Busily, busily he proceeded with his farm work, never turning to look back” (see Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 131; romanisation altered).

⁷⁰ An acquaintance of Confucius, for whom see *Lunyu* [Analects], XIV.43: “Yuan Rang sat waiting, with his legs spread wide. The Master said: ‘A youth who does not respect his elders will achieve nothing when he grows up, and will even try to shirk death when he reaches old age: he is a parasite.’ And he struck him across the shin with his stick” (see

Ji⁷¹ and so on; over the past several thousand years there have only been a few such men, and even they are now dead and gone, never to return it seems. As to the Eremites, one would have to list the Chan patriarchs Bodhidharma, Mazu, Linji, Deshan⁷² and so on; even a single glance or a momentary look from such men proved as sharp as a knife and with cruelty in their hearts they undertook acts of compassion. Although such men proved misanthropic in their behaviour, their determination is worthy of our emulation. Amongst the Stoics one would account all those pedantic Confucian scholars who have followed in the wake of the Master himself, former Minister of Punishments in the State of Lu. Taking a firm foothold in life, they are the ones who discourse endlessly about the Way, about Virtue, and Humanity, and Benevolence. Although their learning proves close enough to the true emotions of man, they nonetheless tend to be altogether too insistent and unrelenting, incapable of raising themselves beyond the set ways of doing things. It is by reason of this fact that they are the men that the world makes overmuch use of, and they lack any sense of transcendence. It is only the Epicureans who are the most extraordinary of men, being also the most hateful. When Chan Buddhists, they prove incapable of the asceticism required; as Confucians, they fail to speak of the learning of Emperors Yao and Shun, of Duke Zhou or of Confucius, nor do they themselves put into practice the virtues of shame at their own unworthy deeds or hatred of those of others, or of yielding and abdication. They manifest not a single ability with regard to the Great Vocation, and prove incapable of undertaking a single task on behalf of the world. In sum, then, they are the most unimportant of men under Heaven, and although they do not come into conflict with the ways of the world, the worthy and sagacious curse them roundly and fear only that they cannot keep them at too great a distance.

It is this last type of man, however, that I like most of all, secretly admiring the extent to which they pursue to the extreme their own pleasures.

Apart from these four types of man, there exists also a category of dilettante who floats across the surface of life; aping the manners of the ancients he adorns himself with the spittle of the sages and the worthies, becomes arrogant and self-satisfied, cheats himself as much as he does others. Within the world of Confucian scholarship, such men are like the court jester Meng, I believe, merely robbers and bandits dressed in robe and cap.

Simon Leys, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 73).

⁷¹ Ruan Ji (210-63), a major poet of the Wei dynasty and one of the “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove”, on whom see W.H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, pp. 463-65.

⁷² Bodhidharma, the Indian monk traditionally regarded as the founder of Chan Buddhism in the fifth century; Mazu Daoyi (709-88); Linji Yixuan (d. 867); and Deshan Xuanjian (790-865).

Although later generations may well continue to retell anecdotes about such men, I for one have no intention of becoming one.⁷³

Such, then, is my recent thinking; I dare express myself to you in this manner in the hope that you will favour me with your insightful opinion on what I have said.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To the Erudite Shen Cunsu 沈博士:⁷⁴

To serve as Magistrate of Wu County renders me no longer human, unconscious almost of the passage between dawn and dusk, the difference between heat and cold. How is this so? As many as the hairs on the hide of an ox are the taxes to be collected, as murky as shadows dancing in the wind are the natures of the people I have to deal with, my guests gather like mosquitoes, as severe as Yama himself seem my superiors. Thus it is that my tall frame has been wearied by the toil of life, my once ample waist has become as delicate as a weeping willow. Whenever I happen to catch sight of

⁷³ Meng is one of the jesters included in Sima Qian's "Huaji liezhuan" [Biographies of the Jesters], *Shi ji* [Records of the Grand Historian]: "More than a hundred years after this lived another jester of Chu named Meng who started life as a musician. Six feet tall, with a ready tongue, he often made the king see reason by means of jests Sunshu Ao, prime minister of Chu, knew Meng's ability and respected him. When he lay dying he told his son, 'After my death you will be poor. But go to Meng and tell him you are my son.' A few years later, when the young man was reduced by poverty to carrying firewood, he met Meng and said to him, 'I am Sunshu Ao's son. My father told me on his deathbed to come to you if ever I was in difficulties.' 'Stay in this neighbourhood,' was Meng's advice. He practised wearing Sunshu Ao's clothes and imitating his talk and behaviour. In a year or so, the resemblance was so close that neither the king nor his courtiers would be able to tell the difference. One day then, when the king was giving a feast, Meng entered to offer a toast. The king was amazed, imagining that this was Sunshu Ao returned to life. He wanted to appoint him as prime minister, but Meng said, 'Let me go and talk it over with my wife. I shall give you my answer three days from now.' To this the king agreed. Three days later Meng came back. 'Well, what does your wife say?' asked the king. 'My wife advises me not to accept. It is no good being prime minister of Chu, she says. Just look at Sunshu Ao! He worked loyally and honestly to make Chu a powerful state, yet now that he is dead his son is so poor that he owns not an inch of land. He is reduced to carrying firewood for a living. Suicide is preferable to such a fate' Then King Zhuang, having thanked Meng, summoned Sunshu Ao's son and enfeoffed him with four hundred households in Jinjiu, so that he might sacrifice to his ancestors. And his line continued for ten generations. This was surely a timely use of wit!" (see Yang Hsien-yi & Gladys Yang, trans., *Records of the Historian* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1974), pp.405-8).

⁷⁴ Shen Cunsu 沈存肅, from Jiading County in Sichuan Province. At the time of this letter, Shen was serving as Instructor in Jingzhou Prefecture Huguang Province.

myself in the mirror, the grey that now speckles both beard and eyebrows induces in me a sudden pang of self-loathing. The pines and chrysanthemums of my garden of old now seem to belong to another life altogether.

Liang Hong of the Eastern Han was a mere labourer and yet he nonetheless sought reclusion; Tao Qian was a beggar but yet felt it shameful to meet the Local Inspector; how much more this should be so of a simple rustic scholar intent upon his own pleasures?

It's simply a matter that serving here as an official I still have one or two things that I wish to get finished, thus do I delay my decision, perhaps also because my desire for fame has not been entirely eradicated. But just wait until next spring when the Peach Blossom Floods rise again and the minnows spore and I'll invite you to observe this fisherman plying his way home – how different will be my behaviour!

Alas, how could Scholar Yuan possibly claim still to be human? As I write this I become quite overcome and beg you, my revered sir, not to laugh at me or to suspect me of exaggeration.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Qu Ruji 瞿太虛:⁷⁵

Have you met up with Li Zhi yet?⁷⁶ “If you don't go to Hermitage Mountain to seek out his whereabouts/ Gajapati's trunk will seem as wide as Heaven itself”. Were Layman Infinity not to have kicked over the chamber-pot, he would, I fear, have forevermore regarded Joy of Tushita Monastery as simply a monk well versed in the literary arts.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Qu Ruji 瞿汝稷 (*zi* Yuanli 元立; *hao* Taixu, Dongguan 洞觀; 1548-1610), from Changshu in the Southern Metropolitan Region. The son of the noted Hanlin Academician Qu Jingchun 瞿景淳 (1507-69) and uncle of the late Ming loyalist and martyr Qu Shisi 瞿式耜 (1590-1651), Qu Ruji was an associate of Gao Panlong 高攀龍 (1562-1626) (on whom, see *DMB*, Vol. 1, pp. 701-10). On the basis of the Protection Privilege afforded him by his father's service, Qu served as magistrate of a number of prefectures before ending his career as Vice Minister of the Court of the Imperial Stud. Diminutive in stature, he was an acknowledged expert in the Buddhist sutras. Shortly before this letter was addressed to him, he had passed through Wu County on his way to Macheng to visit Li Zhi.

⁷⁶ For information on this man, see the translation of a letter addressed to him, pp. 188.

⁷⁷ In this letter Yuan Hongdao refers to an anecdote about the Northern Song Prime Minister Zhang Shangying (1043-1121) found in Puji's (1179-1253) *Wudeng huiyuan* 五燈會元 [Essentials of the Five Lamps]. In 1091, whilst serving as Transport Commissioner in Jiangxi Province, Zhang Shangying (Layman Infinity) paid a number of visits on various Chan Masters. To the last of these, Joy of Tushita Monastery, Zhang said: “I hear, Sir, that

To Li Zhi 李宏甫:⁷⁸

Although to serve as Magistrate of Wu County is proving a relatively easy task, it does however conspire to keep me forever on the run. My brother Zhongdao has entered the service of the Grand Coordinator Mei Guozhen and

you are well versed in the literary arts”, evoking the following response: “Transport Commissioner, you seem to have lost an eye. I, Following Joy, am a ninth generation disciple in the lineage of Linji, and for me to speak to you about the literary arts would be somewhat akin to you addressing me about Chan”. Later in their discussions, after the two men had disagreed over the evaluation of the learning of the East Forest Monastery on Hermitage Mountain, Zhang Shangying wrote a poem containing the couplet quoted above in order to satirise Joy’s denigration of this sect. Unable to sleep that night, Zhang Shangying rose from his bed and when he tripped over his chamber-pot he became instantly enlightened to the wisdom and correctness of what Joy had been telling him. See “Chengxiang Zhang Shangying jushi” 丞相張商英居士 [Layman Zhang Shangying, the Prime Minister], *Wudeng huiyuan* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), Vol. 3, pp. 1198-1202. Yuan Hongdao’s use of this anecdote in this letter is obviously intended as warning to Qu Ruji not to underestimate Li Zhi’s understanding of Buddhism.

⁷⁸ Li Zhi 李贄 (*zi* Hongfu, *Sizhai* 思齋; *hao* Zhuowu 卓吾, *Duwu* 篤吾, *Wenling jushi* 溫陵居士, *Baiquan jushi* 百泉居士; 1527-1602), from Quanzhou in Fujian Province, was perhaps the most iconoclastic scholar of his age. For short biographies of Li Zhi, see *DMB*, Vol. 1, pp. 807-18 (by K.C. Hsiao); and W.H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, pp. 533-34 (by Wilfried Spaar). For more general treatments of Li Zhi and his ideas, see Wm. Theodore de Bary, “Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought”, in Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, pp. 145-247; Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 189-221; and Jean-Francois Billeter, *Li Zhi, Philosophe Maudit (1527-1602)* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1979). For a translation of Li Zhi’s influential essay “Tongxin shuo” [On The Child-Heart], see Stephen Owen, trans., *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*, pp. 808-11. Li Zhi, whom Yuan Hongdao first met in 1591, had a profound influence on both Yuan Hongdao’s own personal literary style and the literary ideas he promoted. In his biography of his brother, Yuan Zhongdao describes the impact in the following terms: “It was when the Master [Yuan Hongdao] met Longhu [Li Zhi] that he first realised that if he continued polishing up long-standing clichés, holding fast to received opinions, doing himself to death at the feet of the sayings of the ancients, his own unique genius would never find expression. With the force of a rushing flood he rose like a wild goose upon the fair breeze only then to plunge the depths of a boundless ocean like a giant fish. He became the master of his own mind and was no longer mastered by it; he could turn the ancients on their heads and was no longer turned upside down by them. His matchless words flowed from his breast with an irresistible and eternal force like an elephant damming off a raging torrent, like a thunderclap summoning forth the hibernating insects from their nests” (see “Libu yanfengsi langzhong Zhonglang xiansheng xingzhuang”, *Kexuezhai ji*, Vol. 2, p. 756). At the time of this letter, Li Zhi, then 69, was living as a monk at the Hall of Buddha in Fragrant Iris at Dragon Lake in Macheng County, Huguang Province. Yuan Hongdao’s collected works contains four further letter addressed to Li Zhi, three of which are dated 1599 and the last 1600.

I hear that the two are getting along very well together.⁷⁹ A letter from Zhongdao informs me that he should be here in Wu County in a day or so and soon after that he will turn up at Dragon Lake to see you. There's nobody here in Wu County to speak with about such things but fortunately at my pillow I have a copy of your *Book to be Burnt*. It is a most powerful work; when worried, it brings a smile to my lips, when ill it restores my spleen, when confused it opens my eyes. At your convenience, I beg you to favour me with more of your excellent writings.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Master Gong Zhongqing:⁸⁰

How very true the saying: "Unburdened is the man without office"! Ever since I took up my post as Magistrate of Wu County it has been as if I have put on a thousand-layered suit of armour and I have no idea why it is that the office of magistrate so shackles a man. By contrast, the saying: "One testifies to the nature of deliverance only by not departing from the vexatious" is a lie perpetrated by some ancient gentleman. My awareness of the true flavour of officialdom is still far from complete, and yet with so few the days granted us in this life why is it that I exchange my endless pleasures for this causeless bitterness?

I plan to apply for leave next year, to sunder the arrowroot and to become the world's most carefree man. And if I will not serve as magistrate, neither shall I serve even as an educational official. These are the plain facts of the matter for how would I dare seek to fool you, my revered sir, with clichés? It is simply that the vexations and bitterness of my present circumstances have developed in me an extreme hatred of the black gauze magistrate's cap and I feel that I have no option but the path I have chosen. I don't know how you, my good sir, can save me from my plight.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

⁷⁹ It was to be Li Zhi's relationship with Mei Guozhen's widowed daughter that was alluded to in Li Zhi's impeachment in 1602 for, among other things, sexual laxity with the "wives and daughters of respectable people". For a recent re-examination of the local context of Li Zhi's impeachment, see Jin Jing, "Heresy and Persecution in Late Ming Society: Reinterpreting the Case of Li Zhi", *Late Imperial China* (2001), 22(2): 1-34.

⁸⁰ For information on this man, Yuan Hongdao's maternal uncle, see the translation of an earlier letter addressed to him on pp. 00.

To Wang Lu 王以明:⁸¹

Arduous indeed is this post of Magistrate of Wu County, but at least I now know what it means to serve as a magistrate. Nobody here in Wu County speaks with me about the Buddhist understanding of Nature and Life and it has proven impossible to find anyone who can hold a candle to you. How difficult it is to encounter friends in the *Dharma*.

Of those visitors here with whom I can discuss things only Tu Long 屠隆,⁸² “radiantly light, like dawn clouds rising”,⁸³ is entirely free of either prudery or vulgarity; the rest are merely commonplace. The poems and painting to be found here in Wu County are as many as the trees in a forest, the Men of the Hills as numerous as the mosquitoes, and the caps and carriages of high officialdom amass like clouds, and yet there is not among them a single man of any understanding.⁸⁴ How much longer can I, a solitary Yuan Zhonglang, endure being sautéed in this manner? Once the oil is mixed with the dough it can never be separated again but nor can it escape being dripped into the wok.

In recent days Jiao Langsheng⁸⁵ 焦郎生 passed through Wu County. He is a young man of profound insight and fearless in advancing his ideas in the face of the opposition of the age, to the extent that few can match him. Listing the giants amongst our contemporaries who perhaps do so I would have to place first my brother Zhongdao, and second Qiu Tan,⁸⁶ whilst this

⁸¹ Wang Lu 王輅 (*zi* Yiming) was a fellow townsman of Yuan Hongdao's who served as his preceptor whilst he studied the craft of the Eight Legged Essay. Sometime before this, at the age of forty, Wang Lu had resigned his post as Assistant Prefect of Fengxiang Prefecture in Shaanxi Province after serving for less than half a year and retired to Gong'an, occupying himself from then on with scholarship and teaching. Yuan Hongdao's collected works contains three further letters addressed to this man, dated 1596, 1599, and 1602.

⁸² For information on this man, see the translation of a letter addressed to him on pp. 192.

⁸³ This epithet is applied to Sima Yi, the Prince of Guji, in the “Appearances and Behaviour” chapter of the *Shishuo xinyu* [New Account of Tales of the World], for which see Richard Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), p. 316.

⁸⁴ Both the Wu Commandary and the Yuan Zhongdao editions of Yuan Hongdao's collected works give for the last clause of this sentence: “...and in both public hall and private chamber one hears nothing but bragging and flattery”.

⁸⁵ The son of the important scholar and bibliophile Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1541-1620), a short biography of whom (by Tu Lien-chê) may be found in A.W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period, 1644-1912* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), pp. 145-46. For a full-length study of Jiao Hong, see Edward T. Ch'ien, *Chiao Hung and the Restructuring of Neo-Confucianism in the Late Ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). Yuan Hongdao's collected works contains two letters addressed to Jiao Hong, both dated 1599.

⁸⁶ For information on this man, see the translation of an earlier letter addressed to him on pp. 175.

young man appears to be the spitting image of you – he knows also of your existence. Langsheng bemoaned the fact that the various Lunar Lodges of the present age seem to have lost their lustre somewhat, only those of the Wing and the Carriage⁸⁷ having any colour to them. Would you agree with this?

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

To Tang Xianzu.⁸⁸

There's nothing really all that difficult about serving as magistrate, but it does require a modicum of talent to be able to distinguish between the beneficial and the injurious. All those busybodies, if they don't actually create work for themselves then they prove quite incapable of the tasks at hand. Long has Wu had the reputation of being a county difficult to govern, but I maintain a policy of absolute simplicity in all respects and feel myself to be well on top of things. Its just that it keeps me so very busy rushing to and fro! You're an old hand at this sort of thing and I ask that you don't spare me any advice that may prove of benefit to me.

Tu Long⁸⁹ is a most remarkable man and I wonder how many pearls of elegant wisdom will flow from his brush during his trip to the east to climb Mt. Kuacang? If at all possible, favour me with one or two.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

⁸⁷ According to the “Fenye” 分野 [Field Division] system of correspondence between the twenty-eight Lunar Lodges and the territorial demarcation of the various states, these two Lunar Lodges correlated with the ancient state of Chu. Gonggan, Yuan Hongdao's birthplace, lay within this region. On the Lunar Lodges, see Sun Xiaochuan & Jacob Kistemaker, *The Chinese Sky During the Han: Constellating Stars & Society* (Leiden, New York & Köln: Brill, 1997), p. 106.

⁸⁸ For information on Tang Xianzu, see the translation of an earlier letter addressed to him, pp. 181.

⁸⁹ See note 90 for biographical details about Tu Long.

To Tu Long 屠長卿:⁹⁰

I had hoped to be able to bid you farewell in person but in the end this proved impossible; how fettered is the life of the vulgar official! Next year I intend hanging up my cap of office and will go off travelling with you. My mind is made up on this point and I would be grateful if, when you do meet up with Master Tang Xianzu,⁹¹ you would inform him of this.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

In Reply 答人:⁹²

Although my own calligraphy is not at all good I am however obsessed with calligraphy; being myself incapable of writing a decent poem I have the love of poetry in my guts; despite not being able to hold my drink I have the demeanour of a tippler. Thus it is that I insist on viewing any specimen of calligraphy I happen to encounter, declaiming whatever poem comes my way and sitting up all night drinking wine whenever it is offered me. How very pathetic!

⁹⁰ Tu Long 屠隆 (*zi* Weizhen 緯真; *hao* Chishui 赤水; 1542-1605), from Yin County in Zhejiang Province, became an Advanced Scholar in the 5th year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1577). Having risen, in 1582, to the rank of Secretary in the Ministry of Rites in the Capital, he was soon dismissed and never again held office. He was a prolific writer who appears to have lived much of his later life off the proceeds of his writings, and the generosity of his many friends. There has been some debate about the provenance of much of the text of his famous essay into connoisseurship and fine living, the *Kaopan yushi* 考槃餘事 [Desultory Remarks on Furnishing the Abode of the Retired Scholar]. Craig Clunas argues that much of this work derives from an earlier work by Gao Lian 高濂, the *Yashangzhai zunsheng bajian* 雅尚齋遵生八箋 [Eight Discourses on the Art of Living from the Studio Where Elegance is Valued] (1591), for which see his *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 29-32. For a brief biography of Tu Long (by Chaoying Fang), see *DMB*, Vol. 2, pp. 1324-27. For Yuan Hongdao's opinion of Tu Long, see his comments about him in the letter addressed to Wang Lu, translated above on pp.190, and in a letter addressed to Tang Xianzu, also translated above, pp. 191. Both Tu Long and Qu Ruji had earlier been disciples of Tanyangzi 曇陽子 (*DMB*, Vol. 2, pp. 1425-27), the young female visionary and daughter of the sometime Grand Secretary Wang Xijue 王錫爵 (1534-1611; *DMB*, Vol. 2, pp. 1376-79), for which see Ann Waltner, "T'an-yang-tzu and Wang Shih-chen: Visionary and Bureaucrat in the Late Ming", *Late Imperial China* (1987), 8(1): 105-33.

⁹¹ At the time of this letter, Tu Long was touring Mt. Kuacang in Zhejiang Province, on his way to Suichang County to visit Tang Xianzu, for information on whom see the translation of an earlier letter addressed to him on p. 181.

⁹² The addressee of this letter is unknown.

The poems which you, my good sir, have now favoured me with serve most precisely to feed my addiction and so how could I possibly refuse your request for a preface? And yet the recognition later accorded Zuo Si's [ca. 250-ca. 305] "Poetic Essays on the Three Capitals" did not in fact derive from the preface written for them by Huangfu Mi [215-82].⁹³ What danger is there really that your poems will languish in obscurity! Nonetheless, I shall certainly do my best on your behalf to ensure that they circulate.

[Wanli 23 (1595), in Wu County]

⁹³ The allusion here is to an anecdote found in the "Letters and Scholarship" chapter of the *Shishuo xinyu*: "When Zuo Si first completed his 'Poetic Essays on the Three Capitals', contemporaries joined in ridiculing and belittling them, and Zuo Si was quite unhappy about it. Later he showed them to Zhang Hua, and Zhang remarked, 'From now on, instead of "The Two Capitals", people may talk about "The Three"'. However, since your writings haven't yet found recognition in the world, you should have them introduced by some gentleman of eminent reputation'. Zuo Si accordingly sought help from Huangfu Mi. When Mi saw the essays he sighed in admiration, and proceeded to write a preface for them. After this all who had first attacked and belittled the essays now 'pulled their lapels' (in a gesture of obsequiousness) and sang their praises" (see Richard Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World*, p. 127; romanisation altered).