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TEACHERS IN TRADITIONAL CHINA:
A VIEW FROM SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FICTION

Introduction: The Eternal Licentiate

The possession of prestige,¹ political power, personal influence, functionally important occupation, substantial economic resources, advanced education, and leisure to engage in cultural pursuits may count as criteria for membership in the upper classes of any society.² In late imperial China the civil service examinations (keju 科舉) played a crucial role as the gateway into the 'sashed and gartered' upper class (shenjin 仕衿, or shenzhi 酉士, usually translated as ‘gentry’).³ Seventeenth-century Chinese citizens could gain the position of gentry through the acquisition of a title, grade, degree, or official rank which automatically made the holder a member of the governing class.⁴

Social historians of China have divided the gentry into three strata, i.e. the upper, lower and local gentry. This distinction is problematic however. The historian Jonathan Spence has pointed out that social upward or downward mobility often makes it difficult to draw clear lines between classes in

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²See Carlson 1958, pp. 11-12.


⁴Cf. Chung-li Chang 1955, p. 3.
traditional Chinese society. More recently Glenn Dudgeon in his analysis of Tang dynasty tales has warned against denying the complex, dynamic movement that all societies undergo in the course of time by describing society in terms of static structures such as layers or substrata.

The 'examination hell' leading into the privileged circles of the gentry represented the traditional ladder of success in late imperial China. Education and office holding placed political, economic, social and cultural power in the hands of the Chinese gentry. Following C. W. Mills's definition of élite in terms of 'the sociology of institutional position and the social structure these institutions form', the students, scholars, teachers and literati count as China's 'élite'. We understand the term in its broad sense as designating persons of social or political superiority within and outside of the bureaucratic system of late imperial China.

The term 'student', xuēshēng 學生, denoted within the Confucian schooling system of imperial China not only a person pursuing academic studies but also a candidate for officialdom. The examination system as the recruitment for civil servants existed from AD 587 mutatis mutandis until its abolition in 1905. In Ming 明 (1368-1644) and Qing 清 (1644-1911) times a student would have to pass through the three-step system of the shēngyuan 生員, juren 舉人 and jinshi 進士 examinations to qualify for public office. Those students who passed the first hurdle in the examination system belonged to the transitional group of licentiates. They held scholar status but not yet the qualification for taking up office in the civil service. While the population of China approximately doubled during the fifteenth and sixteenth

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* Spence 1966, p. 44.
* Cf. Bottomore 1964, pp. 8 and 12, using elite for 'functional, mainly occupational, groups which have high status (for whatever reason) in a society'. Cf. also the distinction of four elites in Qing China in Spence 1966, pp. 44-5. The most important distinction for the present purpose is that between official and local élite. See also Bennett 1972, pp. 3-37.
* Grimm 1960, p. 79.
* Miyazaki 1976, p. 137.

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centuries, the number of licentiates increased twenty times. By the late Ming this group had reached unprecedented numbers. Apart from the demographic factor political circumstances and new trends in intellectual thought contributed to this rise.

In the sixteenth century Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529) and his followers caused a revolution in education by appealing to the masses and fostering a general interest in learning. As Ho Ping-ti observes:

we find agricultural tenants, firewood gatherers, potters, brick burners, stone masons, and men from other humble walks of life attending public lectures and chanting classics. Not a few of these humble men eventually became famous. Never before and never afterward, in traditional China, were so many people willing to accept their fellowmen for their intrinsic worth or did they approach more closely the true Confucian ideal that "in education there should be no class distinctions."

Moreover the government no longer controlled the quotas for licentiates. Virtually no limits existed to the number of students who could pass the first examination and become licentiates. This new phenomenon in Chinese society however entailed new problems. The quotas for the juren and jinshi degrees remained strictly limited, producing congestion at the threshold into the élite of degree-holders and scholar-officials. The Japanese historian Miyazaki Ichisada has estimated that during the Ming and Qing only one out of a hundred licentiates would ever graduate while only one out of three thousand licentiates would succeed in getting the highest (i.e. jinshi) degree.

As a result, a large group of frustrated 'eternal licentiates' emerged.
As long-term degree candidates their greatest problem was how to pay for the years of preparing for higher examinations. Many of them came from poor or impoverished families. Their lack of financial resources reduced their options in seeking success to advancing via the regular route through the examination system. Their plight was how to make a living in the meantime.

The Novel

Aspiring and established members of the elite—students, licentiates, scholars and teachers—play an important part in the novel Xingshi yinyuan zhuan 興世姻緣傳 ("A Tale of Marriage Destinies that will Bring Society to its Senses"; hereafter: Yinyuan zhuan). A satirical novel of manners from seventeenth-century China, the Yinyuan zhuan is a major, if lesser known, work of vernacular Chinese fiction written in the tradition of the long prose chapter-linked narratives. The novel has not yet been translated in its entirety into any other language, but it has increasingly attracted critical attention. It contains detailed and panoramic depictions of local society and provincial life as seen through late imperial Chinese eyes. Critical analysis provides the modern reader with rare access to the image and current perceptions of teachers in traditional China. No previous study is known so far to have explored this aspect.

Not much is known about the author except for his pen-name—Xi Zhou sheng 西周生, scholar of the Western Zhou, which has been interpreted as an allusion to the Confucian ideal age of the Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 1050-770 BC). Modern scholars have proposed various writers from Shandong such as Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715), Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢 (ca. 1599-1670) and some lesser known literati as for example Jia Fuxi 賈應西 (1589-1675) as possible authors, but no such claims have been substantiated as yet.

It is tempting to assume that the author was one of late imperial China’s eternal licentiates but all we can say for sure is that he appears to have known much about such characters. He also seems to have been familiar with life in Shandong province and the capital Beijing in the 1630s and 1640s. Internal and external evidence suggests that the novel was composed between 1628 and possibly 1661. By 1681 the novel was already circulating in literati circles. So far it has proven impossible to determine whether the text is a product of the last days of the Ming dynasty or the early days of the Qing.

The novel appears engrossed in late Ming concerns and lacks any explicit reference to Qing rule. The author’s pseudonym may be interpreted as conveying a yearning for a utopian age of the past which traditional Chinese thought associates with the the Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 1050-770 BC). The Yinyuan zhuan frequently juxtaposes utopian characters with the dystopian ones that dominate the narrative present.

The Yinyuan zhuan may be counted among traditional China’s most detailed novels of growing up, charting the pangs of youth and the trials and tribulations of Confucian education as the young are trained for entry into the scholar-official elite. While the action of the Yinyuan zhuan is mainly set in Shandong province in the fifteenth century, details and rhetoric rather refer to the social milieu and political climate at the time of its composition during the last years of the Ming reign. The plot revolves around two provincial households while the main protagonists appear in two incarnations. Their

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1 See Hu Shi, repr. in YUZ, 3:1448-1495, who first proposed Pu Songling as the author, but this and other attributions of the novel have all been refuted, see, e.g., Chen Bingzao 1954a, pp. 64-70; idem 1953b, pp. 45-58; Yenna Wu 1986, pp. 19-58; Luo Daowei 1988, pp. 64-71; Zhang Qianji 1991, pp. 1-32; Xu Fuling 1993, pp. 56-76, Yuan Shigu 1993, pp. 1-5.

2 See Yenna Wu 1999, pp. 73-9.

3 For the early limit, see Sun Kaiyi, repr. in YUZ, 3:1521-2, for the late limit (a reference to two copies of the novel circulating among literati in the Yangzi delta area in 1681), see Yuan Shigu 1993, pp. 3-128-9.

4 See YUZ, 26:378; Yenna Wu 1986, p. 40.

5 See YUZ, 26:378; Yenna Wu 1986, p. 40.
domestic drama is set against the backdrop of the transformation of Mingshui 明水 in Shandong 山東 province from a rural village into a booming market town. The novel deals not only with marriages, destinies, reincarnation and retribution but depicts the moral fall of Mingshui Town and the systematic breakdown and disintegration of the traditional Confucian world. The story thrives on satire, irony and carnivalesque imagery. 26

Climbing the Ladder to the Clouds

The narrating voice in the Yinyuan zhuan holds a verbose satirical monologue on the issue of the eternal licentiate. As potential career options for the unemployed scholar the narrating voice proposes that one should become a book-dealer, a dung carrier and distributor of night-soil, a coffin salesman, or a sycophant to the mandarinate. In its typically earthy and burlesque style the narrating voice takes the reader on a tour to the latrines — the filthiest corners of society — and to those places in the state system most tainted by corruption and venality. The narrating voice concludes that after all the only viable option for the scholar is the teaching profession. But to achieve happiness the scholar must understand the way to teach. 27

Most licentiates in the Yinyuan zhuan on their way up the 'ladder to the azure clouds' (bushu qingyun 步歩青雲) 28 into officialdom supported themselves by teaching. So did many licentiates in late imperial China. As Chung-li Chang notes in his study of the late imperial Chinese gentry and their sources of income, teaching posts were readily available to licentiates looking for employment. 29 Teaching arrangements in traditional China limited the number of students per teacher. The great number of students studying for the civil service examinations ensured the demand for teachers. Emphasising the influence of the Wang Yangming school of thought, the historian William Atwell notes that more people were being exposed to basic Confucian education during late Ming times than ever before, and

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it would not be unreasonable to postulate that this increasing interest in learning, coupled with the pressure of the steadily growing population, eventually created an unprecedented demand for instruction above the elementary level. 30

In the following pages we shall look at several teachers in the Yinyuan zhuan whose personalities and professional role are portrayed in close detail. 31

The Moralist

Teacher Shu Zhong 蘇忠 lives in Mingshui during its time as a paradise. 32 As a licentiate with the status of a stipend student (linshen shengyuan 廩儒生員) he ranks as a scholar. Although he lives in poverty he comes from a family of scholars. Shu Zhong finds employment as a private tutor in the household of a wealthy landlord called Mr Li 李. His professional task is to teach Mr Li's two sons (aged 8 and 6 sui) and prepare them for the first public examination. His salary includes forty taels per annum, gifts for all the four seasons and clothes for summer and winter. Moreover his employer treats him with great respect. The narrating voice stresses that Shu Zhong receives generous pay. In the late Wanli 万历 period (1573-1620) the tutors of the heir to the throne would receive less benefits from the imperial household. One of them, Zhu Guozhen 朱國鎮 (1557-1632), looked back to his previous post as a private teacher with nostalgia:

When we first became licentiates our salary for teaching would never be below fifty or sixty taels per annum. Moreover our students would often make generous presents. Now that we have become tutors to the royal family we receive a mere thirty taels, plus we have to pay for our meals. 33

26 On the concept of carnival in literary criticism, see Bakhtin 1990.
27 JYZ, 33:478-82.
33 Yongchuan xiaopin, 1.20-1.
A provincial tutor in the late Ming would have considered Shu Zhong's reward as fair remuneration. Compared to the wealth of landlords, merchants and scholar-officials, however, Shu Zhong's salary does not amount to much. His private teaching post would let him and his family live in comfort though not in luxury.

The narrating voice introduces Shu Zhong first as a man famous for his morality and only then as a scholar. The narrating voice emphasises elsewhere the lack of greed as an essential virtue in a teacher: 'When it comes to [students] from poor families who have no means to pay their school fees, I would not ask for money but teach them for free so that they may grow into useful people.' The model stems from Confucius himself who expressed his attitude towards teaching thus: 'I have never refused to teach anyone who offers as much as a bundle of dried meat as a gift of his own accord.' Shu Zhong remains satisfied with his salary and position, for he knows no greed.

Shu Zhong's place in utopia does not mean that he has no flaws. The narrating voice marks him as a dilettante. His literary capacities may have limits but he plays his role in society to perfection. His employer's generosity and respect enable Shu Zhong to pour his efforts into teaching his pupils. His labour pays off. After three years his pupils have exhausted his skills. Shu Zhong realises this and admits that he can teach them no more. His modesty compels him to resign his post despite its benefits in order not to delay his pupils' progress. The narrating voice praises Shu Zhong's sense of responsibility and virtue: 'If there was a licentiate without moral conduct in such a situation, what would he care about delaying [his pupils' progress].'

Shu Zhong suggests to Mr Li that he should employ a better and 'enlightened' teacher (mingshi 明師) in his stead. Lacking professional jealousy Shu Zhong himself introduces Mr Li to a famous scholar as his successor. Shu Zhong's virtues, in particular his modesty and lack of covetousness, make him a teacher in utopia after all.

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34 Mr Di pays Teacher Cheng 24 taels per annum plus gifts, see FTZ 33:486. On teachers' salaries in Qing China (generally 20-30 taels), see Rawski 1979, pp. 54-61; in Qing fiction (around 30-40 taels), see Dai 1994, p. 66.
35 FTZ 35:510.
36 Lanyu, 77.
37 FTZ, 23:347.

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The denouement of Shu Zhong's story carries a clear didactic message. Shu Zhong's reward for his uprightness consists in his and his family's rise into the scholar-official elite. First, both his former pupils succeed in passing the first examination at the age of 14 sui 岁. Mr Li declines on behalf of his sons all subsequent offers of marriage into wealthy families. He instead insists on marrying them to Shu Zhong's daughters. Later both sons become scholar-officials in high positions. Second, Shu Zhong himself eventually graduates as a senior licentiate (gongsheg 翰生). His new status elevates him above the group of licentiates and enables him to hold office in the imperial bureaucracy. Special quotas for gongshe in the juren examination would moreover give him advantages over the licentiates. He thus becomes a member of the privileged elite. Shu Zhong first takes on a post as an assistant director of studies (xundao 訓導) in a prefectural school and later rises to the position of assistant prefect (longpan 隨判). His reward consists in the fulfillment of all of a Confucian scholar's ambitions. Shu Zhong's intellectual limitations do not spoil his performance as an ideal teacher. In the last analysis virtue alone is what counts.

Shu Zhong dramatises the image of the teachers from a utopian past as the narrating voice perceives it:

Those who in the past worked as teachers after all had to be profound in their learning and outstanding in their morality. ... But it was not only their scholarship that qualified them as teachers. Most important, their virtue, moral conduct, integrity and character presented a model for their students to emulate.

This statement reiterates traditional concepts. In the seventeenth century the scholar-official Huang Liuhong 黃六鴻 (ca. 1633-after 1705) composed a handbook for magistrates entitled Fuhui quanshu 福惠全書 ("The Complete Book concerning Happiness and Benevolence") which elaborates on morality and education.

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38 C.F. Chang-li Chang 1955, p. 7; Ho 1962, p. 27.
39 FTZ 35:510.
40 On Huang, see Tancheng xiaozhi, 7:26-7; Wuxianzi, 76B:4-6; see also Djiang Chu 1984; Spence 1978.
"Instructing the young in correct behaviour is what the sage accomplishes." Following the ideal of the ancients Huang, too, stressed that a teacher should transmit morality as well as scholarship: "How could the teacher not put his efforts into moulding character whilst merely paying attention to reading and recitation?"

The utopian ambience of Shu Zhong’s story culminates in a hyperbolic happy ending for all its actors. Shu Zhong and his pupils succeed in climbing the ‘ladder to the clouds’. Virtuous conduct meets with its due reward. But the reward here does not link to the Buddhist concept of retribution in a next life. Its this-worldly outcome responds to the Confucian gentleman’s ideals. In view of the career prospects for licentiates in the seventeenth century Shu Zhong dramatizes a teacher’s utopia as true as to the Confucian spirit.

The Sadist

Shan Yumin 善于民 is a former assistant director of studies (xundao) in a prefectural school in Nanyang 南陽, Henan province, who enters the narrative when his turn comes to take on a temporary professorship in Mingshui. Shan Yumin’s task is to teach licentiates in a government school. In contrast to the private tutor Shu Zhong, Shan Yumin holds an official teaching post. This position allows him to live in modest circumstances. We learn nothing about his intellectual abilities. The narrative focuses on his moral conduct in his role as a teacher.

Shan Yumin’s name puns on ‘good to the people’ (shàn yù mín 善於民). His name however turns out to be a euphemism. The narrating voice remarks that he develops a disposition for cruelty. When new licentiates enter his school he starts to exploit them until he has extorted all their possessions. One of his students is Cheng Fatang 程法湯. Orphaned since childhood, Cheng marries into a widow’s family. His wife and mother-in-law encourage his studies but it takes a long time until he gets admission to sit for the first examination because he lacks the means to pay bribes. He eventually succeeds and enters a government school as a licentiate to study under Shan Yumin. Shan Yumin’s greed forces Cheng to sell everything, even the jewellery of his wife and his mother-in-law. He has to pawn their clothes, reducing the family to poverty. Once on the occasion of a festival Cheng pays his respect to Shan Yumin. Shan shows himself dissatisfied with Cheng’s gift, flies into a rage and orders his juniors to cane him. The wounds Cheng receives from the caning cause his death within a few days. Shan Yumin’s craving for wealth and indulgence in wrath make him the bane of his students. Shan Yumin abuses his position of power while abandoning his role as a teacher.

The narrating voice perceives vice and misconduct not only in one but in the majority of contemporary teachers. In his study of education in the Ming dynasty the modern historian Tilemann Grimm describes covetousness in teachers as a common phenomenon. Teachers in government schools did not receive any official salary. They depended on gifts from students and the income from the land owned by the school. The seventeenth-century thinker Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682) deplored the greed he perceived in the teachers of his days. He quoted the philosopher Lu Shiyi 陸世儀 (1611-1672) who endorsed the Confucian ideal of teachers without office or salary who should hold a special position in society by virtue of their moral conduct rather than rank or title. This attitude may have accounted for the fact that the profession did not seem attractive to the literati. An entry in the Mingshi 明史 on fifteenth-century conditions states that juren degree-holders detested the teaching profession. Teachers ranked lowest in the hierarchy of officials. Although Chung-li Chang points out that in imperial China teaching was regarded as an ‘honourable profession for the gentry’, Grimm maintains that the social status of teachers generally remained low and as a consequence juren graduates rarely took on provincial teaching posts. The majority of

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42 FHQS, 25:15a.
teachers and school directors came from the tribute system, holding titles of suigong 咫賜, gongshi 賜士, engong 恩貴 or jiansheng 監生. 51 The Yinyuan zhuan likewise depicts as teachers those who hold licentiate status (and sometimes another academic rank as well) but not (or not yet) the juren degree.

Vice, in particular, covetousness, in teachers indeed posed a problem in the Ming. Imperial edicts were issued to exhort teachers as for example in 1382: "The teacher should epitomise the way of the ancient sages and put every effort into teaching to guide the uneducated." 52 Another edict from 1462 denounced greed and licentiousness in teachers. 53 In 1518 Wang Yangming proposed to reform the education system and issued instructions and school regulations to teachers. He deplored the low level of morality of contemporary teachers in provincial schools in contrast to the ideal teachers of the ancient past. 54 In the seventeenth century the philosopher Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695) assigned to government teachers a key role in society. In his Mingyi daifang lu 明夷待訪錄, a blueprint for ideal society, he affirmed their moral function and social responsibility:

When in any region sacrifices are held that violate the rites, when clothes are worn against the legal regulations, when local markets offer useless things, when corpses are abandoned without burial, when people listen to the songs of actors, and when vulgar words fill the streets, then the educational official in the local Confucian government school is failing to fulfill his task. 55

The imagery of covetousness and cruelty in the story of Shan Yumin takes on an almost allegorical meaning in the Yinyuan zhuan:

51 See Grimm 1960, p. 82.
52 Da Ming huadian, 78:6a.
53 Da Ming huadian, 78:13b.
54 Chunjing lu, 2:70-1.

... today's teachers have the same cast of mind as today's officials. The officials of the past as a matter of course served their sovereign and provided for the people. The officials of our days merely exploit the people to enrich themselves. Therefore, if they do not get the favour of their sovereign, they will only hunger after their own profit. The teachers of the past as a matter of course wanted to teach and transmit the traditions of the past to the next generation. The teachers of our days merely teach for the sake of the school fees to make a living. Therefore, if someone is unable to pay his school fee, they behave like the magistrates who get furious because the people cannot pay their taxes. 56

The narrating voice describes Shan Yumin as the very antithesis of the teachers of the past. 57 The portrayal of this teacher as the tormentor and murderer of his students projects the grim face of the narrative present. The narrating voice perceives Shan Yumin not only as a typical teacher but also as representing a universal phenomenon of his time.

The portrayal of Shan Yumin as a vice-figure leaves little space for amusement. We witness a nightmare. A teacher administering corporal punishment on a student did not count as extraordinary in traditional China. Already the Shijing 書經 mentions the cane as a means of disciplining students. 58 The seventeenth-century Fuhui quanshu confirms that caning as a form of punishment serves the purpose of education. 59 But here a teacher has his student beaten to death only to gratify his greed. As in the case of other dystopian characters in the Yinyuan zhuan, covetousness incites Shan Yumin to murder.

The Fuhui quanshu distinguishes between seven kinds of homicide. 60 In the case of intentional murder (qushu 故殺) as happens here the Fuhui quanshu prescribes the punishment of death by decapitation after
investigation in court. The *Fuhui quanshu* informs us that the duty of examining the corpse and leading the investigation would fall to the magistrate. But in Shan’s case no magistrate investigates the crime. Only a local scholar-official living in retirement examines the corpse and files a suit to expose the murder case. The authorities, however, seek profit, not justice. Shan Yumin only receives a beating and has to pay bribes. In the end he and his janitors suffer no more than demotion. The failure to punish this teacher for his vices and crimes is the fault of the contemporary bureaucracy. In exposing corruption as the base of its time Shan Yumin’s story strikes a key note in the *Yinyuan zhuang*.

Retribution descends not on Shan Yumin but instead on his son Shan Bao 薛寶, a model student whose name puns on *shan bao* 善報, good retribution. Shan Yumin’s crimes disturb the harmony in the microcosm of his household. They cause the inversion of filial piety, the loss of respect for elders, the proliferation of vices and eventually the end of his family line, as the story of Shan Bao’s systematic self-destruction demonstrates. Indirectly Shan Yumin also upsets the balance of the macrocosm. He is the first to bear responsibility for the fall of Mingshui and the loss of its paradise. He is also the first to provoke the wrath of the gods and their subsequent purging of the village by the flood. Physical illness and abnormalities develop in humans in response to the crimes of humanity that start with Shan Yumin’s. The cycle of nature collapses, too, resulting in the failure of harvest, drought and flood. Famine, cannibalism and epidemics ensue. The structure of society turns topsy-turvy as individuals disregard its traditional values. Extravagance takes over and fashions change. The story of the major protagonists of the novel—in particular Di Xichen 狄希陳 and his shrewish wife Xue Suijing 薛素靜—echoes the very consequences of Shan’s sins. Taking over the stage from the Shan family, the Xue and Di families play out the hell of inverted hierarchies and dysfunctional relationships. In short, retribution for Shan Yumin’s deeds engulfs the world around him. Shan Yumin appears as the one who triggers the drama of dystopia.

The Cannibal

After the flood that supernatural forces release over Mingshui the balance of nature collapses. Subsequently a prolonged period of drought and an unnatural cold spell result in famine, plunging the population into a plight that leads to cannibalism. A list of such incidents climaxes in the story of the teacher Wu Xuezhou 吳學周.

Wu Xuezhou’s academic standing remains obscure except for the fact that he has not been teaching for long. The narrating voice calls him by his name without any reference to academic titles, an indication perhaps that Wu does not even rank as a licentiate. We learn nothing about his professional abilities; but his name contains a pun on *wu xue* 無學, ‘lacking learning’. Wu Xuezhou runs a private school. He teaches more than ten pupils, aged eleven to twelve sui. Unlike Shan Yumin, Wu accepts any pupil willing to attend without demanding school fees. His motives, however, are far from noble.

Within a fortnight three of Wu Xuezhou’s pupils have disappeared. Their families believe that the boys were kidnapped on the road and devoured by the starving, as happened in other incidents in Mingshui. One of Wu’s other pupils is the son of a noodle-shop keeper. Worried about his son’s security, his father escorts him to school every day. When his son fails to return home one day, the man searches for him at school. Wu prevaricates but the father insists that his son cannot be elsewhere. While they argue the father suddenly sees his son peep his head out of Wu’s private rooms and then withdraw again. All spectators—father and reader alike—feel relief that the suspicions about cannibalism seem not to be true. Everyone believes the pupil is after all alive and safe in Wu’s place.

Many seventeenth-century citizens would have shared the worries of the anonymous father. Survival cannibalism in times of natural disasters and
In the *Yinyuan zhuang* it comes out that the teacher Wu Xuezhou opened his school in order to partake of his fat and healthy pupils such as the noodle-shop keeper’s son. A weak constitution on the other hand would spare a pupil’s life.

The modern scholar Kwang-chih Chang has doubted the practice of gourmet cannibalism in China. The fear of famine, murder and cannibalism, however, must have been real to many seventeenth-century Chinese citizens. Ye Shaoyuan 葉紹袁 (1589-1648) gave an eye-witness account of the year 1642:

As to cannibalism: in the past I heard that it existed in Shandong and Henan but I had doubts about it. Nowadays it occurs often within and outside of Suzhou city. ... The authorities have imposed severe penalties but people continue to commit such acts. 79

Pu Songling described in the *Liaozhai zhiti* how the fear of hunger and cannibalism in 1640 drove a man to selling his wife. 80 Tang Menglai 唐夢寐 (1627-1698), a friend of Pu Songling, watched an incident of cannibalism in Shandong in 1640 when famine ensued after a long drought. He reported on a father killing and eating his son and a younger brother preying on his sick older brother. Later he recalled the fear among the population: ‘That year we often bolted our doors and dared not venture outside.’ When five thousand rebels suffered deprivation after attacking Puzhou 蘆州 in Shandong during the same year starving people devoured their corpses. 81

The *Yinyuan zhuang* represents fathers and sons, elder and younger brothers, husbands and wives as killing and devouring each other. 82 According to Sima Guang’s 司馬光 (1019-1086) *Zaizhi tongjian* 齊志通簡

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79 *Qiwen juenlu*, 2.10b. [On Ye, see Goodrich and Fung 1976, p. 1577.] Ji Yun (1724-1805) described the late Ming situation in similar terms in his *Yuewei caoying biyi*, 8.161-2.
80 ‘Liu Xing’, in *Liaozhai zhiti*, 7.879-82.
82 *Huailing liou shizhong lu*, in *Xuanlantang congshu* 4, 13.21b.
cannibalism among fathers and sons already existed in 135 BC. The *Hou Han shu* mentions cannibalism among husbands and wives in AD 170.\(^5\) The gazetteer of Qingzhou 青州 prefecture, Shandong, records that in 1616 famine drove people into cannibalism. First people devoured only corpses but later they also preyed on the living without concern whether they were father or son, wife or husband, elder or younger brother. Some sold human flesh in the market while others salted it at home to guard against worse times to come.\(^6\) The gazetteer of Jining 濟南 also mentions cases of fathers killing and eating their sons in 1641.\(^7\)

Such scenes took place not only in Shandong. Dai Li 戴笠 (fl. 1670) noted that during the Chongzhen reign markets for human flesh opened in Shanxi 山西, a mother killed and ate her daughter and a son killed, roasted and ate his parents.\(^8\) Other late Ming observers depicted cannibalism between kinsfolk during the siege of Kaifeng 开封 by the rebel leader Li Zicheng 李自成 (ca. 1605-1645) in the autumn of 1642.\(^9\) The *Yin yuan zhuo* cites the proverbs people reiterated to rationalise their plight: "To have the body of one’s relative eaten by strangers is not as good as eating it oneself to survive." And: "If I am not killed, I shall starve to death. It is better to die earlier and escape suffering whilst saving somebody else." The local history of Tancheng 道城 county in southern Shandong quotes similar proverbs as early as the Ming in 1640 and 1641—a time when even friends no longer dared to walk together in the fields.\(^10\) The fall of the Ming government did not change the situation. A famine in Sichuan 四川 in 1647 for example claimed thousands of lives and in the end resulted in cannibalism. One observer, Gu Shanzhen 赵山真 (fl. mid-17th century), noted that since the dynastic transition disorder in society had gone so far that husbands ate their wives and fathers ate their children. In the markets men’s flesh sold for seven cash per cattie, women’s for eight. Even the offspring of the literati such as the youngest son of the Grand Secretary Liu Yuliang 劉宇亮 (jinshi 1619) from Mianzhu 湔州 in Sichuan fell prey to the hunger of bandits.\(^11\) Such images—showing the collapse of social order in the extreme—form the backdrop to Wu Xuezhuo’s story and the drama of the Di family.

The father gets his revenge for the cannibalism of the teacher Wu Xuezhuo. He brings the case before the magistrate. The magistrate has Wu and his wife flogged and thrown into the city moat as living food for the starving. The modern historian Key Ray Chong describes learned cannibalism in contrast to survival cannibalism as an institutionalised and culturally sanctioned practice.\(^12\) Modern scholarship has found many motives for learned cannibalism in China such as punishment, hate, love, loyalty, filial piety, taste, and medical treatment.\(^13\) In Wu’s death scene the narrating voice and also the reading audience appreciate that the vice-figure receives his due retribution. Whilst reeling from Wu’s cannibalism the narrator here sanctions cannibalism by sharing the perspective of the narrating voice and participating in the narrative stories. Wu Xuezhuo’s deed differs from all traditions of cannibalism. It takes us to the limits of carnivore, the celebration of disorder, destruction and death. Wu’s representation reaches the extremes of the grotesque in inventing the ideal of the teacher’s role in society into the imagery of cannibalism. Wu embodies the very antithesis of the ‘renowned teacher’ (mingshi 名師) whom the narrating voice mentions as a potential saviour of society in times of disaster.\(^14\)

The late Ming scholar-official Lu Kun 吕坤 (1536-1618) regarded cannibalism as the result of extravagance and excess, in particular the local official’s failure to rule with a strong hand and to maintain the law.\(^15\) The *Yin yuan zhuo*, too, projects the imagery of cannibalism as a sign of social

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\(^{44}\) Zhi tongjian, 17:575.

\(^{55}\) Hou Han shu, 8:331.

\(^{66}\) Qinzhou fazhi, 20:28a-28b.

\(^{77}\) Jinzhou fazhi, 20:18b.

\(^{88}\) Huaming liuchen shizhong lu, 6:8b, 9:11b, 13a.

\(^{99}\) Shoubian zhi, 28, Daliang shoucheng ji fangzheng, 106.

\(^{100}\) Tancheng zhanzhi, 9:9, cf. Spence 1978, p. 5.

\(^{111}\) Kedian shu, 21.

\(^{122}\) Key Ray Chong 1990, p. 2.


\(^{144}\) *Yiz*, 31:455.

\(^{155}\) Shizheng lu, 3:19a-b; cf. Chumas 1993, p. 47.
disorder. Wu Xuezhou takes on a metaphorical dimension in representing the Confucian teacher as a man-eating monster. This image anticipates the early twentieth-century short story *Kuangren riji* "Madman’s Diary" by Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936). The "Diary of a Madman" takes the metaphor of social satire further and describes the whole tradition of Confucianism as a cannibal culture. The *Yinyuan zhuan* however depicts not Confucian culture but the perversion of Confucianism as cannibal.

The reader of the *Yinyuan zhuan* may sanction cannibalism at the end of Wu’s story as the very punishment for the cannibal teacher, but in Lu Xun’s story cannibalism fulfills a very different function, exposing the perceived dangers and evils of Confucian culture. While Lu Xun ultimately envisages a China purged of the burden of Confucianism, the narrative voice in the *Yinyuan zhuan* wants to cleanse the Confucian system. In diametrical opposition to the "Diary of a Madman", the *Yinyuan zhuan* advocates a Confucian revival and dreams of a moral reform as true to the Confucian spirit, a utopia in which Confucianism is restored to all its glory.

The narrative voice thus reveals itself as a Confucian conservative, not as a modern iconoclast. In depicting a Confucian teacher in particular—and not some other member of society—as a cannibal, it conveys social criticism by pointing to the perceived corruption of the literati. As an educator of the future elite, the teacher plays a crucial role in the social and political system. If he is corrupt and morally flawed, then there is no hope for the nation. The *Yinyuan zhuan* however does not preach—it plays with possibilities and pokes fun at the world. Carnival, satire by inversion and the grotesque here dramatic dystopia *par excellence*.

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   *FHQS Fuhui quanshu* 福惠全書, by Huang Liuhong 黃六鴻. Author's preface 1694, ed. Ohata Yukihiro 小畑行隆, repr. Yamane Yukio 山根幸夫, Tokyo, Kyoto, 1973

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   *Gu Shanzhen* 郭山尊, *Kedian shu* 乾律述, Taipei, Taiwan yinhang, 1969


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