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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* 紳衿, or *shenshi* 紳士, 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

¹ It is a pleasure to express my gratitude to Professors Glen Dudbridge, Wilt Idema, Allan Barr and Dr Andrew Lo for their valuable comments on various stages of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Dr Achim Mittag for helping prepare the manuscript for publication.

² See Carlsson 1958, pp. 11-12.

³ On the *keju*, see Ho Ping-ti 1967; Chung-li Chang 1955; Miyazaki Ichisada 1946; *idem*, 1976; A. Chan 1982, pp. 95-105 and 318-325; cf. also R. Huang 1990, p. 173.

⁴ Cf. Chung-li Chang 1955, p. 3.

traditional Chinese society.⁵ More recently Glen Dudbridge 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.⁶

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.⁷ Following C. W. Mills's definition of *élite* in terms of 'the sociology of institutional position and the social structure these institutions form',⁸ 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.⁹

The term 'student', *xuesheng* 學生, denoted within the Confucian schooling system of imperial China not only a person pursuing academic studies but also a candidate for officialdom.¹⁰ The examination system as the recruitment for civil servants existed from AD 587 *mutatis mutandis* until its abolition in 1905.¹¹ In Ming 明 (1368-1644) and Qing 清 (1644-1911) times a student would have to pass through the three-step system of the *shengyuan* 生員, *juren* 舉人 and *jinshi* 進士 examinations to qualify for public office.¹² 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

⁵ Spence 1966, p. 44.

⁶ Dudbridge 1995, p. 65.

⁷ Cf. Naquin and Rawski 1987, pp. 114-15.

⁸ Mills 1967, p. 366.

⁹ Cf. Bottomore 1964, pp. 8 and 12, using *élite* 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.

¹⁰ Grimm 1960, p. 79.

¹¹ Miyazaki 1976, p. 137.

¹² Cf. Ho Ping-ti 1962, pp. 42-3 and 173-94.

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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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."¹⁵

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.¹⁶ As a result, a large group of frustrated 'eternal licentiates' emerged.¹⁷

¹³ Cf. Atwell 1970, pp. 336-8.

¹⁴ On Wang Yangming's school of thought, see de Bary 1970, pp. 145-247. Shimada Kenji 1949; Hou Wailu 1960, pp. 875-911; Ono Kazuko 1966, pp. 1-46.

¹⁵ Ho Ping-ti 1962, pp. 199; *Lunyu*, 15/39. Thousands of farmers, artisans and merchants flocked to the lectures of Han Zhen, a Taizhou philosopher and potter; see *Mingru xue'an*, 32:720.

¹⁶ Cf. Miyazaki 1976, pp. 122.

¹⁷ Famous examples include Feng Menglong (cf. Hanan 1981, pp. 75-97) and Pu Songling (cf. Barr 1986, pp. 87-111).

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 élite –students, licentiates, scholars and teachers– play an important part in the novel *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* 醒世姻緣傳 ('A Tale of Marriage Destinies that will Bring Society to its Senses'; hereafter: *Yinyuan zhuan*).¹⁸ 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,¹⁹ but it has increasingly attracted critical attention.²⁰ 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 蒲頌齡 (1640–1715), Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢 (ca. 1599–

¹⁸ The present study refers to the following editions: a) *YYZ: Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*, by Xi Zhou sheng, 3 vols. (Shanghai, Guji, 1981, repr. 1985); b) *T-YYZ: Xingshi yinyuan*, by Xi Zhou sheng, 2 vols. (Taibei, Lianjing, 1986); c) *TDI: Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*, by Xi Zhou sheng, Tongdetang edn., 20 vols. (repr. Beijing, Wenxue guji, 1988). All translations are my own except where otherwise indicated.

¹⁹ For partial translations see Wang Chi-chen 1982, pp. 46–94; Dudbridge 1992, pp. 39–64; Nyren 1995.

²⁰ For recent studies, see, e.g., Dudbridge 1991, pp. 226–52; Plaks 1985, pp. 543–80; Yenna Wu 1988, pp. 363–82; *idem* 1991, pp. 55–87; *idem* 1999; Berg 1994; *idem* 1999a; *idem* 1999b; *idem* 2000.

1670) and some lesser known literati as for example Jia Fuxi 賈燮西 (1589–1675) as possible authors, but no such claims have been substantiated as yet.²¹

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 1661.²² 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.²³ 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).²⁴ The *Yinyuan zhuan* frequently juxtaposes utopian characters with the dystopian ones that dominate the narrative present.²⁵

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 élite. 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

²¹ See Hu Shi, repr. in *YYZ*, 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 1985a, pp. 64–70; *idem* 1985b, pp. 45–8; Yenna Wu 1986, pp. 19–58; Cao Dawei 1988, pp. 64–71; Zhang Qingji 1991, pp. 1–32; Xu Fuling 1993, pp. 56–76; Yuan Shishuo 1993, pp. 1–5.

²² See Yenna Wu 1999, pp. 73–9.

²³ For the early limit, see Sun Kaidi, repr. in *YYZ*, 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 *Yanshi jiacang chidu*, 3:128–9.

²⁴ See *YYZ*, 26:378; Yenna Wu 1986, p. 40.

²⁵ On the literary utopia in China, see Wu Qingyun 1995. On the concepts of utopia and dystopia in the *Yinyuan zhuan*, see Yenna Wu 1999, pp. 89–130.

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 mandarin. 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' (*bubu qingyun* 步步青雲)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

²⁶ On the concept of carnival in literary criticism, see Bakhtin 1990.

²⁷ *YYZ*, 33:478-82.

²⁸ Cf. Marsh 1961, p. 4. The expression stems from *Shiji* 79:2414.

²⁹ See Chung-li Chang 1962, p. 90.

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 舒忠 lives in Mingshui during its time as a paradise.³² As a licentiate with the status of a stipend student (*linshan shengyuan* 廩善生員) 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 萬曆 period (1573-1620) the tutors of the heir to the throne would receive less benefits from the imperial household. One of them, Zhu Guozhen 朱國禎 (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

³⁰ Atwell 1970, p. 337.

³¹ Other teachers appear in *YYZ*, ch. 33, 38, 46:667, 62:891-892, 92:1307, 98:1396-1398 but lack specific features. On teachers in early Qing fiction, see Barr 1994, pp. 50-75.

³² *YYZ*, 23:347-9.

³³ *Yongchuang xiaopin*, 1.20-1.

A provincial tutor in the late Ming would have considered Shu Zhong's reward as fair remuneration.³⁴ 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.'³⁵ 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.'³⁶ 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].'³⁷ 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.

³⁴ Mr Di pays Teacher Cheng 24 taels per annum plus gifts. see YYZ. 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 Barr 1994, p. 66.

³⁵ YYZ. 35:510.

³⁶ *Lunyu*, 7/7.

³⁷ YYZ. 23:347.

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* 歲. 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 (*gongsheng* 貢生). His new status elevates him above the group of licentiates and enables him to hold office in the imperial bureaucracy.³⁸ Special quotas for *gongsheng* 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 (*tongpan* 通判). His reward consists in the fulfilment 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.³⁹

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.⁴⁰ Huang called to mind the ancient classic *Yijing* 易經:

³⁸ Cf. Chung-li Chang 1955, p. 7; Ho 1962, p. 27.

³⁹ YYZ. 35:510.

⁴⁰ On Huang, see *Tancheng xianzhi*, 7.26-7; *Wuxianzhi*, 76B:4-6; see also Djang Chu 1984; Spence 1978.

'Instructing the young in correct behaviour is what the sage accomplishes.'⁴¹ 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?'⁴²

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 dramatises a teacher's utopia as true to the Confucian spirit.

The Sadist

Shan Yumin 單于民 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.⁴³ 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' (*shan yu min* 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 janitors to cane him. The wounds Cheng receives from the caning cause his death within a few days.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ In his study of education in the Ming dynasty the modern historian Tilemann Grimm describes covetousness in teachers as a common phenomenon.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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',⁵⁰ 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

⁴⁴ *YYZ*, 25:370-1.

⁴⁵ *YYZ*, 35:511.

⁴⁶ Grimm 1960, p. 84.

⁴⁷ *Rizhi lu jishi*, 17:35a.

⁴⁸ *Rizhi lu jishi*, 17:36a-36b. On Lu Shiyi, see Hummel 1943-44, pp. 548-49.

⁴⁹ *Mingshi*, 69:1680.

⁵⁰ Chung-li Chang 1962, p. 89.

⁴¹ *Fuhui quanshu* (hereafter: *FHQ*), 25:15a. *Zhouyi zhengyi*, 1:32b.

⁴² *FHQ*, 25:15a.

⁴³ *YYZ*, 25:370-3.

teachers and school directors came from the tribute system, holding titles of *suigong* 歲貢, *gongshi* 貢士, *engong* 恩貢 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 fulfil 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 huidian*, 78:6a.

⁵³ *Da Ming huidian*, 78:13b.

⁵⁴ *Chuanxi lu*, 2:70-1.

⁵⁵ *Mingyi daifang lu*, 'Xue Xiao', 13.

... 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 hanker 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 *Shujing* 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 (*gusha* 故殺) as happens here the *Fuhui quanshu* prescribes the punishment of death by decapitation after

⁵⁶ *YYZ*, 35:510.

⁵⁷ *YYZ*, 25:370.

⁵⁸ *Shangshu zhengyi*, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 3:14a.

⁵⁹ *FHQ*, 12:4b.

⁶⁰ *FHQ*, 14:9b-16a.

investigation in court.⁶¹ The *Fuhui quanshu* informs us that the duty of examining the corpse and leading the investigation would fall to the magistrate.⁶² 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 bane of its time Shan Yumin's story strikes a key note in the *Yinyuan zhuan*.

Retribution descends not on Shan Yumin but instead on his son Shan Bao 單豹, a model student whose name puns on *shan bao* 善報, good retribution.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ The cycle of nature collapses, too, resulting in the failure of harvest, drought and flood. Famine, cannibalism and epidemics ensue.⁶⁵ The structure of society turns topsy-turvy as individuals disregard its traditional values. Extravagance takes over and fashions change.⁶⁶ The story of the major protagonists of the novel—in particular Di Xichen 狄希陳 and his shrewish wife Xue Sujie 薛素姐—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

⁶¹ *FHQ*S, 14:10b-11a.

⁶² *FHQ*S, 14:4a-7b; 16:1a-31b.

⁶³ See *YYZ*, 25:370-3.

⁶⁴ *YYZ*, 27:392, 27:403.

⁶⁵ *YYZ*, 27:390-1.

⁶⁶ *YYZ*, ch. 26-28.

and dysfunctioning 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.⁶⁷ A list of such incidents climaxes in the story of the teacher Wu Xuezhou 吳學周.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ 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

⁶⁷ *YYZ*, 31:450.

⁶⁸ *YYZ*, 31:451-4.

⁶⁹ *YYZ*, 27:391; 31:451-2.

man-made emergency situations such as war and siege has a long history in China. In a recent study the modern historian Key Ray Chong defines this kind of cannibalism as a normally prohibited behaviour occurring only in times of crises. He calls it an 'act of desperation arising by circumstance rather than by design' which even those who depend on it for survival would condemn under normal circumstances.⁷⁰ The earliest references found stem from the summer of 594 BC.⁷¹ Modern historians have little doubt about the existence of survival cannibalism.⁷² Historical records since the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) yield a mass of data on this subject.⁷³ Late Ming records mention the occurrence of survival cannibalism in Shandong province during the years 1615, 1616, 1640 and 1641 among numerous other incidents elsewhere in China.⁷⁴ Famine and cannibalism also continued to take their toll during the Qing.⁷⁵

In the *Yinyuan zhuan* the shock follows when the father forces his way into Wu Xuezhou's private rooms. He calls his son but gets no answer. The reader understands only in retrospect that his son's appearance at Wu's door was but a supernatural vision revealing the crime he had suffered. The father discovers a pot of soup simmering on the stove in Wu's kitchen and recognises the human remains of his son inside. In Wu's house he also finds the clothes of his son and the three other pupils who disappeared earlier. Human flesh was cooked into soup in China already in the period of the Warring States (475-221 BC).⁷⁶ Copious references to cannibalism in Ming fiction render boiling as the most popular image for preparing human flesh.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Key Ray Chong 1990, p. 1.

⁷¹ *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi*, in *Shisanjing zhushu* (Xuangong, 15th year) 24:9b; (Aigong, 8th year) 58:14b. *Shiji*, 38:1629, 40:1702.

⁷² See Kuwabara Jitsuzô 1924, pp. 1-62; Key Ray Chong 1990, p. 55; Nakano Miyoko 1987, p. 161.

⁷³ Cf. Key Ray Chong 1990, pp. 45-6, 55-77, 107-15.

⁷⁴ *Qingzhou fuzhi*, 20:28a-28b, 30a; *Mingshi*, 24:328; 30:511; *Chongzhen shilu*, 13:243; *Jinan fuzhi*, 20:18b.

⁷⁵ See *Qingshi gao*, 14:1648-55.

⁷⁶ *Zhan'guo ce zhushi*, pp. 1248-49.

⁷⁷ *Shuilu quanzhuan*, 11:167, 27:427-31, 44:716; *Xiyao ji*, 20:230; 28:322-24; 29:326, 328; 42:481-85; 49:562; 72:821; 73:832; 77:879-80; 78:893; 86:977-78.

In the *Yinyuan zhuan* 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.⁷⁸ 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 zhiyi* 聊齋志異 how the fear of hunger and cannibalism in 1640 drove a man to selling his wife.⁸⁰ Tang Menglai 唐夢賚 (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.'⁸¹ When five thousand rebels suffered decapitation after attacking Puzhou 濮州 in Shandong during the same year starving people devoured their corpses.⁸²

The *Yinyuan zhuan* represents fathers and sons, elder and younger brothers, husbands and wives as killing and devouring each other.⁸³ According to Sima Guang's 司馬光 (1019-1086) *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑

⁷⁸ Kwang-chih Chang 1977, p. 243; but compare Key Ray Chong 1990, p. xi.

⁷⁹ *Qizhen jiwenlu*, 2:10b. (On Ye, see Goodrich and Fang 1976, p. 1577.) Ji Yun (1724-1805) described the late Ming situation in similar terms in his *Yuewei caotang biji*, 8:161-2.

⁸⁰ 'Liu Xing' in *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 7:879-82.

⁸¹ *Zhihetang zaji*, 8:8a-8b. Cf. Barr 1983, p. 109.

⁸² *Huatling liukou shizhong lu*, in *Xuanlantang congshu xuyi*, 13:21b.

⁸³ *YYZ*, 31:451.

cannibalism among fathers and sons already existed in 135 BC.⁸⁴ The *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 mentions cannibalism among husbands and wives in AD 170.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ The gazetteer of Jinan 濟南 also mentions cases of fathers killing and eating their sons in 1641.⁸⁷

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.⁸⁸ Other late Ming observers depicted cannibalism between kinsfolk during the siege of Kaifeng 開封 by the rebel leader Li Zicheng 李自成 (ca. 1605-1645) in the autumn of 1642.⁸⁹ The *Yinyuan zhuan* 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 濰城 county in southern Shandong quotes very similar proverbs as common currency in 1640 and 1641—a time when even friends no longer dared to walk together in the fields.⁹⁰ 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 resulted in cannibalism. One observer, Gu Shanzhen 顧山貞 (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,

⁸⁴ *Zizhi tongjian*, 17:575.

⁸⁵ *Hou Hanshu*, 8:331.

⁸⁶ *Qingzhou fuzhi*, 20:28a-28b.

⁸⁷ *Jinan fuzhi*, 20:18b.

⁸⁸ *Huailing liukou shizhong lu*, 6:8b, 9:11b, 13a.

⁸⁹ *Shoubian rizhi*, 28; *Daliang shoucheng ji jianzheng*, 106.

⁹⁰ *Tancheng xianzhi*, 9:9; cf. Spence 1978, p. 5.

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 Mianzhou 綿州 in Sichuan fell prey to the hunger of bandits.⁹¹ Such images—showing the collapse of social order in the extreme—form the backdrop to Wu Xuezhou's story and the drama of the Di family.

The father gets his revenge for the cannibalism of the teacher Wu Xuezhou. 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.⁹² Modern scholarship has found many motives for learned cannibalism in China such as punishment, hate, love, loyalty, filial piety, taste, and medical treatment.⁹³ 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 spectator here sanctions cannibalism by sharing the perspective of the narrating voice and participating in the narrative ironies. Wu Xuezhou's deed differs from all traditions of cannibalism. It takes us to the limits of carnival, the celebration of disorder, destruction and death. Wu's representation reaches the extremes of the grotesque in inverting 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.⁹⁴

The late Ming scholar-official Lü Kun 呂坤 (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.⁹⁵ The *Yinyuan zhuan*, too, projects the imagery of cannibalism as a sign of social

⁹¹ *Kedian shu*, 21.

⁹² Key Ray Chong 1990, p. 2.

⁹³ See Key Ray Chong 1990, pp.46-54, 79-103, 115-123; Kuwabara 1924, pp. 32-59. *Gegu*, cutting flesh off one's thigh to cure relatives, is mentioned in *YYZ*, 4:53; 36:537; 52:759-60; cf. Berg 2000. For taste and medical treatment, see also the article "Chinese trade in human fetuses for consumption is uncovered", in *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 April 1995, p. 14.

⁹⁴ *YYZ*, 31:455.

⁹⁵ *Shizheng lu*, 3:19a-b; cf. Clunas 1993, p. 47.

disorder.⁹⁶ Wu Xuezhou takes on a metaphoric dimension in representing the Confucian teacher as a man-eating monster. This image anticipates the early twentieth-century short story *Kuangren riji* 狂人日記 ('Diary of a Madman') by Lu Xun 魯迅 (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.⁹⁷ 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 fulfils 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 élite, 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 dramatise dystopia *par excellence*.

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T-YYZ Xingshi yinyuan 醒世姻緣, by Xi Zhou sheng 西周生, 2 vols. Taipei, Lianjing, 1986

TDI Xingshi yinyuan zhuan 醒世姻緣傳, by Xi Zhou sheng 西周生, Tongdetang edn, 20 vols. repr. Beijing, Wenxue guji, 1988

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