

Play and Prestige:
A Cultural History of Early Medieval China

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Declaration

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Abstract

This dissertation is a practice of New Cultural History that draws on the analytical framework of play and prestige to explore the concept of the sociocultural model of distinguished gentlemen called *mingshi* 名士 in the Wei-Jin period (220–420 CE). I argue that *mingshi* was a status of prestige achieved through engaging in playful activities (*xi* 戲) and a social construction that came to be through the circulation of media of reputation in elite social networks.

I begin with discussing the gradual intellectual shift in the Eastern Han and the rise of social eremitism in the latter half of the second century, where decentralisation, social turmoil, and political struggles damaged the sanctity of imperial sovereignty, driving educated elites to seek prestige (*ming* 名) outside the normative political order. Henceforth, the non-institutional public space, such as idle gatherings and quasi-literary salons, became the primary loci where elites fostered personal connections with peers and claimed prestige. There, elite members accumulated symbolic capital by engaging in playful activities, such as speech play, playing board games, and drinking. While playing in the social arena, individuals could strive to embody the defining character traits and the spirit of playfulness of the ideal sociocultural model. Upon distinguishing themselves according to what I call the *mingshi* paradigm, individuals could receive prestige conferred by the audience at the scene. As the event of prestige transaction became the object of gossip, the social capital of those in the story increased, materialising in the lifetime reputation of distinguished elites. When the gossip was recorded as anecdotes and preserved in dynastic histories and anthologies, the private knowledge of enclosed elite communities became public knowledge. Distinguished elites in the Wei-Jin time eventually gained immortal posthumous fame as long as their stories continued to be read and propagated in the social network of the living.

By gravitating around the dual theme of play and prestige and employing a wide range of texts across different genres, this dissertation ends with a concluding remark that that there was a ludification and carnivalisation of elite culture in the early medieval period.

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Introduction

The Wei-Jin Nan-Bei chao 魏晉南北朝 or the Six Dynasties 六朝 period (220–589 CE) in Chinese history was marked by frequent warfare, political instability, and social disorder. However, it was also a time of remarkable innovation and accomplishment in many areas, as contemporary historians such as Albert Dien and Mark Lewis stressed.¹ In line with Dien and Lewis, this dissertation explores the rich symbolic landscape of early medieval China by investigating the construction of sociocultural models referred to as *mingshi* 名士 under the new ethos of social eremitism and the prevalence of a variety of playful activities (*xi* 戲) in during the Wei-Jin period (220–420 CE). This dissertation is a practice of New Cultural History and a response to certain methodological limitations in contemporary scholarship on the intellectual history of early medieval China.

In this introduction, I first review contemporary scholarship on intellectual history and explain my understanding of cultural history and how it offers solutions to unsolved questions in intellectual history. I then establish a creative hermeneutic framework that gravitates around the two key concepts of “prestige” and “play” for researching elite culture of the Wei-Jin period. In the rest of the introduction, I draw on a critical discussion of my primary sources and outline the methodology and structure of the dissertation.

I. Departing from Intellectual History

The classic intellectual history of early medieval China generally centres on the interplay between the three major traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. A typical narrative begins with the decline of studies on Confucian classics (*jingxue* 經學) and the gradual rise of Buddhism as the most popular and influential religion in all levels of Chinese society. Meanwhile, new schools, thoughts, and institutions of religious Daoism also asserted themselves in the process of interacting and competing internally among themselves and externally with

¹ Albert E. Dien, *Six Dynasties Civilization* (Cumberland: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 1; Mark Edward Lewis, *China between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 1–2.

their Buddhist counterparts.² Prior to the take-over by the two religious traditions, the intellectual landscape in the Wei-Jin period was dominated by the so-called “Xuanxue 玄學.”

Conventionally translated as “Neo-Daoism” or “Learning of the Dark/Mysterious,” the concept of Xuanxue is controversial in itself. Previous scholarship generally uses the term “Xuanxue” to refer to an intellectual fascination with the Way in the third and fourth centuries, as well as philosophical treatises and commentaries on the “Three Texts of Profundity” (*san xuan* 三玄): the *Laozi* 老子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and *Yijing* 易經.³

The conceptualisation of Xuanxue is attributed to Chinese scholar Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 (1893–1964), who periodised the intellectual history of the early medieval period into four stages.⁴ Tang was also the first scholar to stress “the fundamental difference” between studies of the classics in the Han dynasty and Xuanxue in the Wei-Jin time. According to Tang, what underlay the Han intellectual tradition was cosmology, whereas Xuanxue was concerned with “theory of being” or “ontology.”⁵ Tang further characterised Xuanxue with the dialectics of *mingjiao* 名教 (“Teaching of Names”) and *ziran* 自然, which Tang translated into the English word “Nature.” Based on the dialectics, Tang identified three fundamental propositions in Wei-Jin philosophy: 1) Teaching of Names originates from Nature (名教出於自然); 2) going beyond the Teaching of Names to follow Nature (越名教而任自然); 3) Teaching of Names equates to

² For studies on the interaction between Buddhism and Daoism, see Stephen Bokenkamp, “Lu Xiuqing, Buddhism, and the First Daoist Canon,” in *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm, 200–600*, ed. Scott Pearce (Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 181–99; Stephen Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2003); Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Stephen Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety: Daoism and the Birth of Rebirth in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008); Robert Campany, *Making Transcendents* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2009); Franciscus Verellen, *Imperiled Destinies* (Harvard University Asia Centre, 2019).

³ Alan K. L. Chan, “Introduction,” in *Philosophy and Religion in Early Medieval China*, eds. Alan K. L. Chan and Yuet Keung Lo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 1–4; David Chai, “Chapter 1: Introduction,” in *Dao Companion to Xuanxue 玄學 (Neo-Daoism)*, ed. David Chai (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), p. 1.

⁴ The four stages are: 1) the earliest stage of the Zhengshi 正始 period (240–249) represented by Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) and He Yan 何晏 (d. 249); 2) the period of Zhulin 竹林時期 (254–262) represented by “the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves” such as Ji Kang 嵇康 (224–262), Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263), and Xiang Xiu 向秀 (227–280); 3) the period of Western Jin (around 290) led by Guo Xiang 郭象 (252–312) and Pei Wei 裴頠 (267–330); 4) the period of Eastern Jin 東晉 (266–420) represented by Buddhist scholars such as Zhang Zhan 張湛 and Dao An 道安 (312–358). See Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, *Wei-Jin Xuanxue Lungao* 魏晉玄學論稿 (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2001), pp. 112–120.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Nature (名教即自然).⁶ Tang's scheme has been widely accepted by scholars in the field of intellectual history as the basic paradigm.⁷ Although Tang's scheme provides a convenient framework for the intellectual history of early medieval China, conducting research based on this scheme can easily be prone to over-generalisation. Another problem, as pointed out by Rudolf Wagner, is whether it is context-appropriate to apply Western terminologies such as "ontology" without questioning what it actually means.⁸

In my view, there are two fundamental issues in researching early medieval history from the perspective of Xuanxue. The first is the treatment of Xuanxue as "pure philosophy" and an ahistorical entity that focuses entirely on metaphysical ideas and philosophical argumentations. If any general observation about Chinese philosophy can be made, it should be that Chinese intellectual traditions are characterised by *practicality*; thinkers in imperial China always developed their thoughts in response to particular sociopolitical challenges of their own times. For example, Slingerland remarks that early Chinese thinkers were primarily interested in what is called "skill knowledge," and "the culmination of knowledge was understood not in terms of a grasp of abstract principles but rather as an ability to move through the world and human society" while staying in harmony with the normative order (the Way) of the natural and human worlds.⁹ By the same token, despite their employment of obscure language and ideas, Wei-Jin intellectuals might also have been responding to particular needs and challenges in their world. Then what are these needs and challenges? What is the practicality of Wei-Jin thoughts? To answer these questions require researchers to pay attention to the broader historical context and other sociocultural practices.

My second issue concerns the questionable historicity and limited epistemological scope of Xuanxue. First, dynastic histories, such as the *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 and *Jinshu* 晉書, never mention a tradition or a school of thought named Xuanxue nor a group of intellectuals who self-identified or were identified by the contemporaries as Xuanxue scholars. which unavoidably leads to the question to what extent there was a tradition known as "Xuanxue" in the Wei-Jin period. Meanwhile, historical records do mention a certain new cultural trend referred to as

⁶ Ibid., pp. 116–120.

⁷ Wagner lists a number of studies produced in the 1980s and 1990s in his footnote. See Rudolf G. Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)* (SUNY Press, 2003), pp. 86, 229. A more recent example is Yu Dunkang 余敦康, *Wei-Jin Xuanxue Shi* 魏晉玄學史, 2nd ed (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2015).

⁸ Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy*, pp. 86–88.

⁹ Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-Wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 3–4.

xuanfeng 玄風 that prevailed in elite society.¹⁰ As for those who are referred to as Xuanxue philosophers in modern scholarship, they are mostly known as *mingshi* 名士 in historical records. Xuanxue is, by large, a retrospective construct by modern scholarship, particularly by scholarship on the history of Chinese philosophy. Admittedly, this construct, like the many “-isms,” has served as a lamp that illuminates our understanding of the past. But the lighting range of this “lamp” also has its limit, as practices and people that fall beyond the scope of Xuanxue are left out of serious academic research. In other words, from the perspective of Xuanxue alone, one cannot fully capture the picture of the new cultural trend or what it meant to be a *mingshi* at the time. In order to cast light on these “blindspots,” the current study departs from the conventional scheme of Xuanxue and ventures to take a New Cultural History approach. Then, one may ask as to what I mean by “New Cultural History.” I will answer this in the following section.

II. Sketching out a Cultural History of Early Medieval China

This section provides a brief introduction to how cultural history has been defined and discusses why the current study falls into the category of New Cultural History.

Cultural history, as a branch in the history discipline, has been defined by “a concern with the symbolic and its interpretation” and is dedicated to portraying the characteristics of an age.¹¹ In the West, the growth of the field can be divided into four stages,¹² and these developments have been closely linked to the increasing awareness of cultural relativism in humanities and social sciences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This cultural turn stimulates the interest in discovering and studying the values held by particular groups in particular places and particular periods.¹³ To name a few classic examples of cultural history, Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) spoke of the “spirit of the age” by studying paintings, poems, and texts in his works on ancient Greece and the Italian Renaissance; Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) discussed visions of a golden age and a variety of ideals of life such as chivalry in the Middle

¹⁰ To name a few examples, see *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, p. 1374; *juan* 50, p. 1397; *juan* 65, p. 1751; *juan* 77, p. 2025; *juan* 80, p. 2106.

¹¹ Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019), p. 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Ages; Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) studied the culture of folk humour from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.¹⁴

Over the past few decades, there has been further diversification in the field of cultural history under the influence of sociology and anthropology, which marks the rise of New Cultural History (henceforth NCH).¹⁵ One of the foremost sources of influence is anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who delineates the cultural significance or symbolic meanings of cockfights as “a deep play” and a struggle for human status in Balinese society.¹⁶ Inspired by Geertz, some cultural historians adopt the approach of “historical anthropology” and come to treat the notion of “culture” in its wide ethnographic sense. As Peter Burke quotes Geertz, culture is “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”¹⁷ In other words, culture can be understood as “a web of symbols” or a symbolic landscape that provide meanings to the world in the human mind in a given society at a given time, and the analysis of culture is an interpretive enterprise in search of meaning.¹⁸ While an anthropologist practices ethnography by emerging in a field in order to provide an elaborate description of a given culture, likewise, a cultural historian can also dive into the ocean of historical data and treat historical subjects as one’s informants so one can make the unfamiliar familiar and provide a rationale for obscure phenomena that are otherwise incomprehensible to modern audiences.

In the present study, my ultimate goal is to shed new light on the symbolic landscape of the Wei-Jin period and, hopefully, provide my own description of the characteristics of the age. The question then arises as to how one begins to demystify Wei-Jin culture. In NCH, the entrance point to the analysis of culture can be artefacts, practices, customs, and values. My survey into the manifold sources concerning elite practices and the construction of *mingshi* leads me to conclude that all can be ultimately boiled down to two concepts—“play” and “prestige.” To elaborate further, I argue that a crucial aspect of Wei-Jin culture is the celebration of *mingshi* and

¹⁴ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Penguin Publishing Group, 1990); Jacob Burckhardt, *History of Greek Culture* (Courier Corporation, 1963); Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (University of Chicago Press, 1997). Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1984).

¹⁵ For an introduction to the rise of New Cultural History, see Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* pp. 32–51; Lynn Hunt, “Introduction: History, Culture, and Text,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Aletta Biersack and Lynn Hunt (University of California Press, 1989), pp. 1–24.

¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” *Daedalus* 101, no. 1 (1972), pp. 1–37.

¹⁷ Burke, *What Is Cultural History*, p. 38.

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation Of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.

the elite fascination with a variety of “play” that functioned as sources of “prestige” in the non-institutional public space. The following sections provide a detailed discussion of the two concepts.

III. On Prestige 名

In the English language, prestige, status, and reputation share the same conceptual framework and are semantically overlapped terms. According to the basic dictionary definitions, status is one’s position and relative importance in a social structure; reputation is the collective opinion of an individual based on what has happened in the past; prestige is slightly different from reputation and concerns the respect and value one receives because of one’s achievements or ascribed status like pedigree.¹⁹ Reputation, prestige, and status can be studied in multiple ways. For example, Kenneth Craik stresses that a reputation and a person are ontologically distinct realities. A person will cease to exist after death, but his or her reputation continues beyond death in the social environment, in the heads of other people, and in their daily chats and discourses. In other words, reputation exists in social networks; it is “a dispersed phenomenon that is to be found in the beliefs and assertions of an extensive number of other individuals.”²⁰ Craik classifies reputation into three types according to the nature of different social networks: 1) lifetime reputation, 2) posthumous reputation, and 3) reputation in a transitional network. Craik’s work is particularly helpful as it highlights the crucial role of social networks in the propagation and preservation of reputation.

Besides Craik’s network interpretation of reputation, the work of sociologist Lin Nan focuses on the concept of social capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu.²¹ Lin points out that reputation is a form of social capital that can be mobilised to generate specific outcomes; it is “a functional calculus of the worth of public awareness in social networks in terms of its value representation and recognition.”²² The accumulation and distribution of reputation determine one’s prestige, which is among the three essential factors that define one’s overall status. The other two factors are economic standing (wealth) and political standing (power). Each standing reflects the ranking of an individual

¹⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “prestige (n.),” “status (n. & adj.),” “reputation (n.),” accessed at <https://www.oed.com/>, 16 July, 2024.

²⁰ Kenneth H. Craik, *Reputation: A Network Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), xvii.

²¹ For Bourdieu’s conception of forms of capital and forms of distinction, see Rob Moore, “6. Capital,” in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 98–113.

²² Lin Nan, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 150

in comparison to others in the social structure over the command of the “capital” concerned. Nan Lin provides an insightful explanatory scheme for the correlated social phenomena of reputation, prestige, and status.

The third and likely most important theoretical elaboration that has evoked my observation and analysis is the status-power theory proposed by Theodore D. Kemper, which situates the discussion on status and prestige in social life. Kemper argues that relational interactions, whether in the case of marriage, colleagueship, friendship, etc., cannot be fully comprehended without the analysis of status-power relations because the major motivation of individuals and groups is to maximise or maintain one’s status and power while conferring status to and avoiding the power of others.²³ One complies voluntarily with the effect of status; in contrast, one is coerced into involuntary compliance with the effect of power when that of status is unfulfilled. In Kemper’s take, the concept of status is defined by two aspects. The first is a scalar aspect, referring to “the rank or standing in amount of worth or prestige or other designation of merit and value that attaches to a person or social position in a group.”²⁴ The second is a behavioural aspect, which includes what Kemper calls “status conferral,” “status accord,” and “status claiming.” The first two refer to the acts or means by which individuals convey symbolic capital to others in relational activities. Status accord, in particular, is a non-volitional, psychophysical response that individuals give status to others when a standard or criterion is met.²⁵ Regarding status claiming, it refers to the act of self-demonstration and self-assertion when individuals attempt to obtain the status that they believe they deserve.²⁶ Besides offering a comprehensive elaboration of his status-power theory, Kemper also introduces six derivations of the theory, two of which concern play, wit, humour and laughter. These two derivatives will be discussed in the section on play. As we shall eventually see, Kemper’s status-power theory provides an insightful explanation for many phenomena and practices in the social life of Wei-Jin elites.

Overall, the aforementioned theories of reputation, prestige, and status all have their respective emphasis but nevertheless do not contradict each other except for the discrepancy in terminological usage. Notedly, there is a significant overlap between Kemper’s usage of “status” and Nan Lin’s usage of “prestige.” However, in Kemper’s claim, “status” and “power” are clearly distinguished, whereas in Nan Lin’s study, “status” is a superior category that includes the scope of “power” in Kemper’s theory. This is largely a definitional discrepancy since scholars choose the same term to

²³ Theodore D. Kemper, *Status, Power and Ritual Interaction: A Relational Reading of Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Pub., 2011), p. 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14, 19–21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

signify different objects or use different terms to signify the same object. To avoid future confusion, the present study primarily utilises “prestige” to signify what Kemper means by “status” when discussing the transaction of social and symbolic capital in relational activities.

Departing from sociological theorisations, scholars in the field of history and literature have realised that “the frenzy of fame” is not a modern/contemporary phenomenon but an issue of universal concern for all human societies. For example, Leo Braudy points out that fame is a constant theme in the history of Western society, and “the history of fame is the history of the changing ways by which individuals have sought to bring themselves to the attention of others, and not incidentally, have thereby gained power over them.”²⁷ In his study on the representations of *fama*—the personified rumour, Philip Hardie highlights the power struggles and attempts to control both spoken and written words that fix and preserve the immortal fame of men from Homer to Alexander Pope. The Latin word *fama*, literally meaning “words” or “what is said,” derives from the verb *fari* (“to speak”) and probably the noun *fabula* (“story” or “tale”). The meanings of *fama* include “glory,” “(both good and bad) reputation,” “public opinion,” “report,” “rumour,” “gossip,” and “tradition.” Hardie remarks that *fama* is the medium that fixes and preserves; it is “the repository of cultural memory, with the power to preserve and replicate ideologies and beliefs over generations,” as well as the means that preserves “the immortal fame of individual great men.”²⁸

These studies are significant sources of inspiration for my study of play and prestige in the Wei-Jin period. They lead me to conceive prestige and reputation in the following ways:

1. Reputation and prestige are social capital that exists in a social network.
2. Prestige is also *symbolic* capital that can be conveyed in relational interactions through what Kemper calls “status conferral,” “status accord,” and “status claim.”
3. The conferral of prestige is non-volitional, which happens when a prior standard or criterion is met.
4. The transmission and preservation of reputation and prestige entail media such as spoken or written words.

²⁷ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 3.

²⁸ Philip R. Hardie, *Rumour and Renown: Representations of Fama in Western Literature*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 2–5.

The term for prestige and reputation in Wei-Jin sources is *ming* 名. *Ming* is one of the most complex terms in Chinese social, political, ethical, philosophical, and religious discourse.²⁹ To a large extent, *ming* mirrors the Latin word *fama*, for the semantic field of both terms encompasses reputation, prestige, and status, as well as that which generates social capital, defines individual status, and propagates and preserves fame. In addition to its early denotations, the notion of *ming* was vested with further significance in the early medieval context.

In the Wei-Jin period, a gentleman who distinguished himself in the social arena was known as *mingshi*. The identification of *mingshi* is a controversial topic, and several theories have been proposed in previous scholarship.³⁰ One of the most influential theories on *mingshi* comes from the Kyoto School of Sinology. Under the influence of Naitō Konan 内藤湖南 (1866–1934), Kawakatsu Yoshio 川勝義雄 (1922–1984) identified *mingshi* with the “pure-stream” elites who shared the same Confucian political ideology and stood against imperial affines, eunuchs, and local magnates in the Eastern Han; this group eventually became founders of the ruling nobles and aristocratic lineages (*J. monbatsu*; *C. menfa* 門閥) in the Six Dynasties period. In 1970, Kawakatsu revised his theory about the “pure-stream” aristocracy by introducing the “communitarian” (*kyōdōdai* 共同体) concept that he developed in cooperation with Tanikawa Michio 谷川道雄 (1925–2013). Kawakatsu and Tanikawa argued that the pure-stream aristocrats were initially leading figures in local gentry societies and eventually formed a transregional alliance that dominated the political regimes in the Three Kingdoms and the periods after.³¹

Others propose different theories. For example, Jack Chen considers *mingshi* a particular cultural community of early medieval elites imagined in the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語. He translates the term as “famous gentleman” or “gentleman of repute.”³² This translation is not always appropriate. As we shall see, accounts on *mingshi* are not always concerned with the possession of fame.

²⁹ As Mark Lewis notes, there are at least six semantic layers of *ming* in early Chinese texts: 1) the most basic literal meaning as “name” or “to name”; 2) as repute, renown, or fame; 3) as the designation of social status; 4) as a technical term in administrative and legal discourse; 5) as a philosophical designation for “word” or “language”; and 6) as a concept that overlaps with the notion of “honour.” Mark Edward Lewis, *Honor and Shame in Early China* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 11.

³⁰ For a detailed discussion on the upper stratum in early medieval China, see Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer and Thomas Jansen, “The Scholar-Official and His Community: The Character of the Aristocracy in Medieval China,” *Early Medieval China* 1994, no. 1 (1994), pp. 60–83.

³¹ Kawakatsu Yoshio 川勝義雄, *Liu-Chao guizu zhidu yanjiu* 六朝貴族制社會研究, trans. Xu Gupeng 徐谷芃 and Li Jicang 李濟滄 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), pp. 3–52.

³² Jack Wei Chen, *Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance: Essays on the Shishuo Xinyu* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021), pp. 9–10.

A worth-noting theory comes from Watanabe Yoshihiro 渡邊義浩. Although Watanabe himself appropriates the theory of Kawakatsu and regards *mingshi* as the ruling class,³³ the result of his thorough survey into the pool of biographical data in the *Sanguo zhi* suggests a different interpretation. Watanabe's survey focuses on three factors: 1) prestige (*ming*) defined by personal accomplishments, 2) the person's pedigree, and 3) the economic status of one's clan. Looking at the biographical data of those affiliated with the Cao-Wei regime alone, the result shows that among the 209 men, 106 men (about 50%) can be considered *mingshi*. Within the *mingshi* group, over half (56 men, approximately 53%) have no mention of their pedigrees (*fayue* 閥閱), which is defined by the capacity to reproduce a lineage's influence through the continuous holding of high-ranking official posts over generations, nor the economic standing of their clans.³⁴ The data implies that *mingshi* is more of an achieved status than an ascribed status. In other words, criteria of power, such as pedigree, economic standing, bureaucratic position, and aristocratic rank, did not always guarantee the acquisition of a *mingshi* status in the Wei-Jin period.

Since a *mingshi* status was not granted based on the criteria of power, one may look into the issue of prestige. In light of the theories of Craik, Lin, Kemper, and Hardie's study of *fama*, I come to approach the *mingshi* problem by looking at four factors:

1. The relational activities that underlie moments of awe and respect and through which individuals confer and claim symbolic capital (prestige).
2. The paradigm of the ideal sociocultural model, upon meeting which the conferral of prestige takes place.
3. The media, through which moments of awe and respect and events of prestige-conferral are preserved and by which the social capital (reputation) of individuals is materialised.
4. An extended social network that facilitates the circulation of the media of reputation over time and space.

A search into these four factors allows us to take a bottom-up approach to the *mingshi* problem. It also allows us to pay attention to the process of social construction as well as the complex human conditions of Wei-Jin elites. The second and the fourth factors are the main subjects of chapters 1 and 2. The third factor, as exemplified in anecdotes and official histories, will be discussed shortly in the section on primary sources. Here, I want to lay emphasis on the first factor, which is boiled down to the other key concept of this dissertation: play.

³³ Watanabe Yoshihiro 渡邊義浩, *Sankoku seiken no kōzō to meishi* 三國政權の構造と「名士」 (Tokyo: Kyūko Shoin, 2020), pp. 83–107.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 701–719, Appendix Table 3.

IV. On Play 戲

The term “play” here is a concept first coined by Johan Huizinga. To provide a clear, formalised definition of play is a challenging task. Although everybody plays, it is rather difficult to define play since play is essentially ambiguous. As the pioneer in the cultural history of play, Huizinga leaves the definition of play in a vague sense and describes play as a universal, cultural phenomenon that exists in all human societies at all times in his famous book *Homo Ludens* (“Men the Players”) published in 1938.³⁵ Similarly, Miguel Sicart is also resistant to providing a formalised definition of play but describes it as “a mode of being human” and “a way of engaging with others.”³⁶ To tackle the ambiguity of play, Brian Sutton-Smith identifies various play forms and experiences. In terms of play forms, there are mind or subjective play, solitary play, playful behaviours, informal social play, vicarious audience play, performance play, celebration and festivals, contests, and risky or deep play.³⁷ Sutton-Smith also classifies existing theoretical statements on play into what he calls “seven ideological rhetorics” of progress, fate, power, identity, the imaginary, the self, and frivolity.³⁸ In recent years, with a long-standing interest in exploring the cognitive foundations of human behaviour and experience, some scholars define play along with ritual, as both play and ritual are performative behaviours that involve symbolic representation and are not functionally productive nor directed towards an immediate, well-defined goal.³⁹ This accords with Huizinga’s remark that “in play, there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action.”⁴⁰

Although play is a universal phenomenon, every culture has its own language for the concept of play, and different signifiers influence the conceptualisation of play in specific contexts. Huizinga conducts a general discussion on the play concept in different languages, such as Greek, Sanskrit, Chinese, English and German, Latin, Japanese, and Semitic languages.⁴¹ In the case of Chinese,

³⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Ranchos de Taos: Angelico Press, 2016), p. 1.

³⁶ Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014), pp. 1–3.

³⁷ Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 4–5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–12.

³⁹ Colin Renfrew, “Introduction: Play as the Precursor of Ritual in Early Human Societies,” in *Ritual, Play and Belief, in Evolution and Early Human Societies*, ed. Colin Renfrew, Iain Morley, and Michael Boyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 9–14.

⁴⁰ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–44.

Huizinga brings our attention to words such as *wan* 玩, which denotes children's games, games of skills, contests, gambling, and theatrical performance; *wan* also connotes "handling something with playful attention" and "to be lightly engrossed." In the case of contests, specific words such as *zheng* 爭 and *sai* 賽 are used. According to Huizinga, *zheng* is the perfect equivalent of the Greek word *agon* (social arena).⁴²

While Huizinga writes about the signifiers of play in early modern Chinese language, play in the Wei-Jin context is primarily signified by two words. The first and foremost word is *xi* 戲, which initially means "banner of a distinctive army commander"; since the graph contains the radical *ge* 戈 "halberd," it also connotes the meaning of "engaging in battle."⁴³ In early medieval texts, *xi* is used to signify a wide range of idle activities and playfulness. It is the verb for going on a leisure excursion with friends, wordplay, playing the board game *weiqi*, and acting in a playful manner. The other word is *you* 遊/游, which means "travelling" or "wandering around" for idle purposes. *You* often occur in combination with *jiao* 交. The compound word *jiaoyou* 交遊 hence signifies travelling for the purpose of fostering social connections. Although *xi* and *you* can appear independently as verbs or nouns, they also stand as the antithesis of *li* 禮, which denotes the formal, conventional, ritualised performances that indicate one's possession of moral propriety. As Roel Sterckx points out, play in the classical Chinese textual tradition is generally perceived negatively by Confucian elites due to its lack of moral intent.⁴⁴ Although such rhetorics of play as frivolity continued to exist, play and playfulness were imbued with various symbolic values and became indispensable in the social life of Wei-Jin elites.

To better understand the significance of play, I want to highlight two functions of play. The first function is a cognitive and psychological one. As we shall see through chapters 3 to 5, Wei-Jin individuals engaged in playful activities in order to cultivate their wisdom, emotions, spirit, and virtues.⁴⁵ As practices carried out on the self by the self for the purpose of taking care of the self, playful activities can be conceived as what Michel Foucault calls "technologies of the self." As

⁴² Ibid., p. 32.

⁴³ *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), p. 636.

⁴⁴ Roel Sterckx, "Ritual, Mimesis and the Animal World in Early China," in *Ritual, Play and Belief, in Evolution and Early Human Societies*, ed. Colin Renfrew, Iain Morley, and Michael Boyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 184.

⁴⁵ Here, I take an Aristotelian definition of virtue as a moral character trait that helps us to become good people and accomplish a happy, flourishing life. The idea that playfulness can be conceived as such a virtue is inspired by Boomer Trujillo, *The Virtue of Playfulness: Why Happy People Are Playful* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

Foucault puts it, technologies of the self “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, [the] perfection of immortality.”⁴⁶ In the case of my study, Wei-Jin individuals also exerted power to control and transform themselves via play, thereby attaining the ideal personality traits and the state of being as defined by a new sociocultural paradigm.

Besides serving as a technology of the self, play is also social and relational. Play in the Wei-Jin context was often carried out in the leisure sphere as a performance and social contest. Participating in play was to signal one’s sociality and membership in an elite community. More significantly, as Kemper stresses, relational activities can always be interpreted in terms of status-power theory. Regarding play, it creates a unique space and time of ambiguity where societal constraints relax, and the initial interpersonal relation determined by the existing power structure is temporarily disrupted and replaced by a more equalitarian relation between players. This is also what Sicart calls “the contextual and carnivalesque attribute of play.”⁴⁷ During structured play, such as games and sports, players are solely bound by the specific rules on the field and given equal opportunity to win. The winner is rewarded with prestige and status enhancement, while the loser is compelled to admit one’s inferiority. The transaction of prestige also takes place in non-structured play or when one is simply acting as a playful agent. For instance, humour and jokes are often something of a personal challenge. Laughter usually follows when a humorous remark works. According to Kemper, laughter is an affective expression when a playful agent successfully challenges the identity and defies the status of the opponent.⁴⁸ In joke, the structural hierarchy between individuals in reality is rendered irrelevant. The playful agent gains a symbolic victory over the counterpart through the work of humour and the rite of laughter. In the examination of playful activities through chapters 3 to 5, we shall also see how Wei-Jin elites employed the ambiguity and political transgressiveness of play to enhance their own status, resist domination, and defy the established power dynamics. It is through play and playfulness,⁴⁹ I shall argue, that individuals attained the status of *mingshi*.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), p. 19.

⁴⁷ Sicart, *Play Matters*, pp. 6–8.

⁴⁸ Kemper, *Status, Power and Ritual Interaction*, p. 61.

⁴⁹ By playfulness, I take Sicart’s definition that playfulness is “the capacity to play outside the context of play” and “a physical, psychological, and emotional attitude toward things, people, and situations.” Sicart, *Play Matters*, p. 21.

V. Sources, Methodology, and Structure:

All histories come into being as historians create their own narratives of the past by selecting, analysing, and interpreting the relevant primary sources. While all primary sources can be biased and unreliable in regard to the totality of historical reality, an extended discussion on the nature and evidential value of primary sources is indispensable. As Stephan Jaeger stresses, professional historians are required to establish “a pact of trustworthiness” with the reader by increasing the reliability of one’s historical research.⁵⁰ This reliability is based on critically assessing one’s primary sources, employing reliable methodology, and providing logical interpretation.

In this dissertation, I draw on a wide range of sources that concern the dual themes of “play” and “prestige” across different genres, such as dynastic histories, anecdotes, poetry, literary essays, philosophical treatises, and polemic discourses. Most of the materials were composed by or attributed to Wei–Jin authors. A few texts dated to the earlier and later periods are also used as long as they pertain to the particular topic of concern. The table below shows the major locations of my primary sources in received texts listed in chronological order:

Title the Source	Author and Year	Genre
<i>Sanguo zhi</i> 三國志	Chen Shou 陳壽 (233–297 CE); Annotated by Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (373–451 CE)	Dynastic history
<i>Hou Hanshu</i> 後漢書	Composed by Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445 CE)	Dynastic history
<i>Shishuo xinyu</i> 世說新語	Attributed to Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444 CE); Annotated by Liu Jun 劉峻 (462–521 CE)	<i>Xiaoshuo</i> 小說 (Sui-dynasty classification); literary anthology (modern classification)
<i>Wenxin diaolong</i> 文心雕龍	Liu Xie 劉勰 (465–522 CE)	Literary anthology
<i>Wenxuan</i> 文選	Attributed to Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531 CE)	Literary anthology
<i>Jinshu</i> 晉書	Attributed to Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (579–648 CE) and others	Dynastic history
<i>Yiwen leiju</i> 藝文類聚	Attributed to Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (557–641) and others	Encyclopaedia

Figure I. Major Locations of Primary Sources

⁵⁰ Stephan Jaeger, “Unreliable Narration in Historical Studies,” in *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness: Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Vera Nünning (De Gruyter, 2015), p. 379.

In his famous article “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” Quentin Skinner writes, “The understanding of texts, I have sought to insist, presupposes the grasp both of what they were intended to mean, and how this meaning was intended to be taken.”⁵¹ To follow this, Skinner stresses that the essential question confronted by historians in studying any given text is “what its author, in writing at the time he did write for the audience he intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by the utterance of this given utterance.”⁵² In other words, understanding a text necessitates decoding the authorial intention, situating the text in its historical context and cultural framework, and trying to engage in the contemporary, living discourse. In line with Skinner, here I attempt to discuss the authorial biases of the *Sanguo zhi*, *Hou Hanshu*, and *Shishuo xinyu*, which host more than half of my primary sources, and the complex factors that might have caused these biases.

Among the three titles, the main texts of *Sanguo zhi* by Chen Shou provide the most contemporary accounts that overlap with the author’s lifetime. Chen Shou was a native of the Shu 蜀 Kingdom in the South West. He initially served in the Shu regime but was demoted and alienated. After the conquest of the Shu by the Wei 魏 forces in 263 and the usurpation of the Wei by Sima Yan 司馬炎 (236–290 CE) in 265, Chen Shou was appointed to be the official historian in the Western Jin 西晉. He compiled the *Sanguo zhi* between 280 and his death in 297, as archival documents from all three regimes became accessible to him after the conquest of the Wu 吳 Kingdom in 280.⁵³

According to Rafe de Crespigny, Chen Shou was “an objective historian” who did not tamper with his texts to support a political opinion.⁵⁴ Admittedly, Chen Shou’s work is the most reliable written source of the history of the Three Kingdoms period. However, the absence of Chen Shou’s explicit voice does not mean that the *Sanguo zhi* is free from ideological implications. In fact, one can observe an obvious emplotment in favour of the narrative of dynastic cycle in the *Sanguo zhi*, judging from the hierarchical arrangement of the *juan* within the three sections of *Weishu* 魏書,

⁵¹ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969), p. 48.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵³ Rafe de Crespigny, *The Records of the Three Kingdoms* (Canberra: Australian National University Centre of Oriental Studies, 1970), p. 5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–14.

Shushu 蜀書, and *Wushu* 吳書 as well as stereotypical presentations of certain types of individuals in the biographies.⁵⁵ Taking the twenty-eighth *juan* of the *Weishu* as an example of the hierarchical arrangement, this *juan* contains the biographies of individuals who betrayed and rebelled against the regency of the Sima family.⁵⁶ Despite the considerable power and prestige of these individuals at their times, their biographies are located in the *juan* almost at the end of the *Weishu*, only before the *juan* of those who are conventionally referred to as “masters of methods” (*fangshi* 方士) and the *juan* of the non-Chinese. Regarding stereotypical presentations, the *Sanguo zhi* tends to portray the founders of a dynasty and their political rivals in a contrastive manner, which is a typical narrative trope in the genre of dynastic history. In short, the *Sanguo zhi* demonstrates the tendency to establish the Wei as the legitimate successor (*zhengtong* 正統) of the Han dynasty, as the Sima regime claimed their legitimate succession from the Wei dynasty.

Unlike Chen Shou’s contemporary position, Fan Ye wrote the history of the Later Han approximately two centuries after the end of the Han dynasty. Born in a gentry family in the South, Fan Ye witnessed the end of the Eastern Jin 東晉 and the establishment of the Liu-Song 劉宋 dynasty in 420. Due to his direct involvement in the powerful struggle between Emperor Wen 文 of Liu-Song (Liu Yilong 劉義隆, r. 424–453) and the emperor’s brother, Fan Ye was first exiled and later accused of rebellion and killed. The *Hou Hanshu*, composed during his exile, was Fan Ye’s private endeavour.⁵⁷ Without access to imperial archives, Fan Ye mostly relied on previously existing histories of the Later Han, such as the *Dongguan Han ji* 東觀漢紀 (“Annals of the Han Composed at the Eastern Lodge”) and the so-called *Bajia Hou Hanshu* 八家後漢書 (“Eight Histories of the Later Han”).⁵⁸ The *Hou Hanshu* is defined by the unique feature of “historiographical paratext,” in which the historian inserts his viewpoint on historical events and

⁵⁵ For example, Xu Chong 徐沖 identifies four structural units in the official histories of the Six Dynasties period and investigates their function as an “ideological device.” See Xu Chong 徐沖, *Zhonggu shidai de lishi shuxie yu huangdi quanli qiyuan* 中古時代的歷史書寫與皇帝權力起源 “The Writing of History and Origins of Imperial Power in Medieval China” (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012).

⁵⁶ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 28, pp. 757—797.

⁵⁷ Béatrice L’Haridon and Hans van Ess, “Fan Ye and the *Hou Hanshu*: Introduction to the Paris Workshop, 2017,” *Monumenta Serica* 67, no. 1 (2019), p. 2.

⁵⁸ Sebastian Eicher, “Early Representations of Filial Piety in Dynastic Historiography: Textual History and Content of *Hou Han Shu* Chapter 39,” *Journal of Chinese History* 3 (2019), pp. 5-6.

persons in the forms of *xu* 序 (“introduction”), *lun* 論 (“disquisition”), and *zan* 贊 (“eulogy”) in between the narratives.⁵⁹

Living at a different historical moment, Fan Ye faced different pressures and had his own agenda in addition to reproducing the discourse of the dynastic cycle. Writing from the perspective of the Liu-Song dynasty, Fan Ye might have intentionally represented the Wei regime in a negative light and the Han loyalists as heroes and martyrs under the pressure of establishing the Liu-Song as the rightful successor of the Han.⁶⁰ These potentially problematic representations are most apparent in *juan* 67, the “Array of Biographies of Proscribed Partisans” (*danggu liezhuan* 黨錮列傳).⁶¹ Nevertheless, L’Haridon speculates that the chapter on the partisans may have been inspired by earlier works like the *Xu Hanshu* 續漢書 by Sima Biao 司馬彪 (240–306).⁶² Considering how Fan Ye might have been influenced by a continuous intellectual discourse, one can still regard the biographies of partisans as evidence that reflects a social attitude toward the *danggu* events rather than Fan Ye’s sole invention. Besides, the evidential value of the *danggu* section in the *Hou Hanshu* lies in its highlight of the significance of social networks and the emergence of a certain sociocultural ethos in the elite stratum, which is also attested by polemic discourses written by late Han authors. The discussion on the pertinent phenomenon is the major subject of chapter 1.

The next principal location of my primary sources is the *Shishuo xinyu* (henceforth *Shishuo*), which was also compiled at the beginning of the Liu-Song period. Traditionally, the *Shishuo* was attributed to Liu Yiqing 劉義慶, a royal Prince of Liu-Song.⁶³ Under the influence of Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), modern and contemporary scholarship generally agrees that the text was, in fact, compiled by a group of Liu Yiqing’s literati clients.⁶⁴ The *Shishuo* contains 1130 anecdotes about 626 historical figures from the second to the fourth centuries. Like the *Sanguo zhi* and *Hou Hanshu*, the *Shishuo* is a work with its own bias. Japanese scholars have proposed several theories regarding

⁵⁹ L’Haridon and van Ess, “Fan Ye and the *Hou Hanshu*,” p. 2.

⁶⁰ Liu Yü 劉裕, the founding emperor of the Liu-Song, claimed his ancestry to the Han royal house. *Songshu*, *juan* 1, p. 1.

⁶¹ For a detailed discussion of Fan Ye’s representations of heroic partisans, see Béatrice L’Haridon, “The Historian’s Judgement and the Peers’ Judgement in the ‘Biographical Chapter on the Proscribed Party’ of the *Hou Hanshu*,” *Monumenta Serica* 67, no. 1 (2019), pp. 127–143.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 131–132.

⁶³ *Suishu*, *juan* 34, “Jing ji san 經籍三,” p. 1011.

⁶⁴ Lu Xun 魯迅, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shiluē* 中國小說史略 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2019), pp. 42–49.

its authorial intention. Noting the anti-conventional and subversive overtone of the text, Kawakatsu argues that the *Shishuo* was compiled by junior literati among Liu Yiqing's clients who self-identified with the tragic fate of the prestigious gentleman Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433), as Xie was persecuted and killed by the reigning emperor Liu Yilong.⁶⁵ Likewise, focusing on the repressive circumstance of the patron, Tanaka Yasuhiko 田中靖彦 suggests that the *Shishuo* embodies Liu Yiqing's subtle criticism of Liu Yilong and his anxiety as a male descendant of the imperial house in a time of brutal political struggle.⁶⁶ Leaving the immediate political circumstance of the Liu-Song aside, Watanabe provides an alternative interpretation from the perspective of aristocratic culture. Paying attention to the titles of the chapters and the hierarchical structure of the *Shishuo*, Watanabe argues that the author(s) purported to construct a culturally superior identity for the northern emigrant lineages and composed the *Shishuo* as a *history* that contains stories of aristocratic lineages, famous individuals, their achievements and words, and alternative names etc., which are requisite pieces of knowledge for members of the elite community. Watanabe concludes that the *Shishuo* is a manual that teaches the prescribed order of early medieval aristocratic society and the ideal *façon d'être* of cultured elites.⁶⁷

Studies on the conscious and subconscious in modern psychology remind us that human behaviours and motivations are determined by manifold factors.⁶⁸ By the same token, the intention behind the compilation of the *Shishuo* can be multilayered. The aforementioned studies all demonstrate, respectively, a strong probability regarding the authorial intention with the support of sufficient primary sources. In light of previous scholarship, one can outline the possible bias in the *Shishuo* on two levels: 1) personal bias, whether of the actual authors or the patron; 2) collective

⁶⁵ Kawakatsu Yoshio, “Sesetsu Shingo no hensen o megutte 『世説新語』の編纂をめぐる,” *Tōhō Gaku Hō* 41 (1970), p. 233.

⁶⁶ Tanaka informs the reader about the brutal power struggle between the emperor, the royal princes, and powerful ministers during the Yuanjia 元嘉 Era; four-fifths of the male descendants in the royal house had “unnatural deaths.” Liu Yiqing likely feared and resented Emperor Wen until the end of his life. Tanaka Yasuhiko 田中靖彦, “Sesetsu Shingo no Sankoku byōsha to Ryū Gikei 「世説新語」の三国描写と劉義慶,” *Nihon Chūgoku Gakkai Hō*, no. 59 (2007), pp. 35–36.

⁶⁷ Watanabe notes that the titles of the first four chapters of the *Shishuo* allude to the “Four Categories in the *Analects*” (*Lunyu sike* 論語四科), which implies that the text was composed to transmit “speech” (*yu* 語) of prominent individuals in previous generations and for elite cultivation. Watanabe Yoshihiro 渡邊義浩, “Sesetsu Shingo no hensen ito 『世説新語』の編纂意図,” *Tōyō Bunka Kenkyusho Kiyō*, no. 170 (2016), pp. 2–6, 26–27.

⁶⁸ John A. Bargh and Ezequiel Morsella, “The Unconscious Mind,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science* 3, no. 1 (2008), pp. 73–79.

bias of the social stratum and community to which the authorship and readership belong. The former is generally manifested in the positive representation of distinguished individuals in repressive situations, whereas the latter is primarily expressed in the assertion of the cultural superiority of northern emigrant lineages. Bearing these biases in mind helps us better assess the evidential value of anecdotes, which I will discuss shortly later.

Besides the main text of the *Sanguo zhi* and the *Shishuo*, the paratexts, meaning the annotated commentaries by Pei Songzhi and Liu Jun, are also important repositories of information. Regarding the compilation of commentary, we know that Pei Songzhi was a contemporary of Fan Ye; he had a highly successful career under the Liu-Song regime and was commissioned by the throne to compile a commentary on the *Sanguo zhi*.⁶⁹ Liu Jun, who was born about a decade after Pei Songzhi's death, was less successful in his official career. His commentary on the *Shishuo* was likely a private effort. Despite their different status, the two commentators shared the same exegetical style, which de Crespigny labels "patchwork form."⁷⁰ Both commentators included extant materials dated from the Later Han through their own times. When citing a work, the commentators usually gave the author's name and the book title. The commentaries preserve fragments of works that are mostly lost. For example, among Pei's cited materials, there are dynastic histories, such as the *Weilüe* 魏略 by Yu Huan 魚豢 (ca. 239–265), the *Weishu* 魏書 by Wang Chen 王沈 (d. 266), the *Jinji* 晉紀 by Gan Bao 干寶 (d. 336), and the *Weishi chunqiu* 魏氏春秋 by Sun Sheng 孫盛 (302–373). These works supply us with alternative narratives of persons and events in parallel with Chen Shou's concise accounts. Besides, unofficial biographies, such as the *Wenshi zhuan* 文士傳 by Zhang Yin 張隱 (ca. 3rd–4th centuries) and the *Mingshi zhuan* 名士傳 by Yuan Hong 袁宏 (328–376), are crucial sources that not only provide extra contextual information but also attest to the shift of behavioural paradigm in the social world of cultured elites. In addition to citing extant works, the commentators also expressed their own views but rarely gave the final judgement. These historiographical paratexts were treated as the source materials for official histories like the *Jinshu* 晉書 compiled in the Tang dynasty. In this dissertation, the main text is usually read and interpreted along with the commentaries that can either be supplementary or contrastive to each other and the main text. The multivocality of paratext reminds us of the multiplicity of social memory, attitude, and perceived reality.

⁶⁹ *Songshu*, juan 64, p. 1701.

⁷⁰ de Crespigny, *The Records of the Three Kingdoms*, p. 16.

Having discussed the nature of the sources and the authorial intentions, we now move to outline the methodology in this dissertation, which consists of three steps: 1) locating the relevant texts and clarifying the purpose of reading the texts; 2) establishing the readability of the texts through source-oriented translation; and 3) interpreting the texts by a twofold close reading method.⁷¹

First, in dynastic histories, the relevant accounts of “play” and “prestige” tend to appear as an integral part of the narrative of the dynastic cycle and of the polemic discourse cited by the historian during times of trouble. Records of idle activities within the institutional space are usually brought up as evidence of moral decadence and incompetence of those in power. This is why one usually spots such records when a dynasty enters a period of decline, such as the reigns of Emperor Huan 桓 (r. 146–168 CE) and Emperor Ling 靈 (r. 168–189 CE) at the end of the Han dynasty. Nevertheless, thematically concurrent accounts concerning elite subjects can be portrayed neutrally and even positively. Both narrative and polemic accounts are valuable evidence of the attitudes of an early medieval elite stratum that was inclined to assert its autonomy rather than fully depending on the imperial state. Besides, regardless of their prescriptiveness, these accounts are still somewhat descriptive and can serve as testimonies to certain social realities. In fact, I am able to narrow down the three emblematic forms of play (speech play, *weiqi*, and drinking) of distinguished figures thanks to the polemic writing of the Daoist master Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–363), which we will encounter at the beginning of chapter 3.

Other than official histories, anecdotes in the *Shishuo* provide abundant down-to-earth accounts of playful activities in Wei-Jin elite society. Regarding the evidential value of these anecdotes, Richard Mather remarks that characters and incidents in the text are attested in dynastic histories and other sources, and “there is no good reason to doubt their reality,” even though minor issues of anachronism, contradiction of known facts, and supernatural intrusion do exist in the text.⁷² Still, the animated and extraordinary stories and their conventional classification as *xiaoshuo* 小說 (“petty stories” in the premodern context; “fiction” and “novel” in the modern context) unavoidably invite doubts as to whether things “really happened” and whether the *Shishuo* is a literary anthology or a repository of historical data. As Qian Nanxiu stresses, categorising the text as *xiaoshuo* (fiction)

⁷¹ My methodological reflection is inspired by Ane Ohrvik’s delineation of the close reading method in cultural history. See Ane Ohrvik, “What Is Close Reading? An Exploration of a Methodology,” *Rethinking History* 28, no. 2 (2024), p. 4

⁷² Richard B. Mather, *A New Account of Tales of the World*, 2nd ed (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), p. xvi.

in the modern sense is both a misclassification and a distortion.⁷³ Although the *Shishuo* is put under the category of *xiaoshuo* in the *Suishu* 隋書 bibliographical catalogue,⁷⁴ *xiaoshuo* in the early medieval context is an appropriation of an earlier idea in the *Hanshu* 漢書, which identifies *xiaoshuo* with “petty stories based on gossip and rumours on the streets.”⁷⁵ Despite their disdain, elite historians in every dynasty used these “petty stories” generated by unofficial sources as raw materials. In dynastic histories, anecdotal accounts are present in the sections of imperial annals and official biographies. For example, as we shall see in this dissertation, the official biographies of distinguished figures in the *Jinshu* compiled in the Tang dynasty include a large number of anecdotal accounts in the *Shishuo* and Liu Jun’s commentary.⁷⁶ As Stephen Owen observes, elite historians in premodern China were more comfortable with degrees of probability and were more concerned with establishing the plausibility, instead of veracity, of written histories.⁷⁷ Anecdotes constitute an indispensable constituent of written histories, providing us with the kind of public knowledge that was considered realistic by early medieval subjects.

The debate over the evidential value of the *Shishuo* is also linked to the nature of anecdotes and their conceptualisation and evaluation in the history discipline. The ambiguity of anecdotes is even reflected in its dictionary definition. According to the *OED*, the top two definitions of anecdotes are 1) “secret, private, or hitherto unpublished episodes or details of history” and 2) “a short account of an amusing, interesting, or telling incident or experience; something with implications of superficiality or unreliability.”⁷⁸ These two definitions point to the brevity, freestanding, sensational, and ambiguous attributes of anecdotes. Anecdotes can be inaccurate and exaggerated, but they are not primarily defined by falsity or fictionality. As a written form of information, anecdotes appear to be the binary opposite of the longer, more elaborate, serious, authorised narratives of history. This is

⁷³ Qian Nanxiu, *Spirit and Self in Medieval China: The Shih-Shuo Hsin-Yü and Its Legacy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), p. 9.

⁷⁴ *Suishu*, *juan* 34, “Jing ji san 經集三,” p. 1012.

⁷⁵ *Hanshu*, *juan* 30, “Yiwen zhi 藝文志,” p. 1745.

⁷⁶ *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, pp. 1359–1378.

⁷⁷ Stephen Owen, “Postface: ‘Believe It or Not,’” in *Idle Talk: Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China*, ed. Jack Wei Chen and David Schaberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 218, 220.

⁷⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Anecdote, n. Meanings, Etymology and More,” accessed at https://www.oed.com/dictionary/anecdote_n, 28 June 2024.

similar to gossip and rumours, the oral predecessors of anecdotes, which are basically information from unofficial sources that have yet to be verified by established authorities.⁷⁹

In modernist histories, anecdotes are generally considered the least reliable sources. Giving the example of Voltaire's disdain for anecdotes in his *Siècle de Louis XIV*, Lionel Gossman remarks, "In general, modern historiography has no place for anything that cannot be properly verified, and that is often the case with anecdotes."⁸⁰ This negative evaluation of anecdotes is arguably a result of the modernist belief that history should be a science in which a certain "truth" can be claimed by relying on scientific methods, quantitative data, reliable archival sources, and administrative records. The conception of history as a science has been largely questioned with the rise of postmodernism in the post-war era. At one extreme, in his book *Metahistory*, Hayden White denies the truth claims and highlights the "fictional" attribute of history by identifying different modes of narration, emplotment, argument, and ideological implication using examples of nineteenth-century European historiographies and the works of the foremost philosophers of history.⁸¹ The intellectual shift from modernism to postmodernism has revolutionised the history discipline. The increasing interest in micro-history and the rise of NCH since the 1980s have led historians to accept anecdotes as valuable sources for cultural history.⁸²

Coming back to the *Shishuo*, anecdotes featuring the social engagements of prestigious individuals are widely distributed throughout the text. The accounts of the subjects of my case studies (speech play, *weiqi*, and drunkenness) are mostly put in the "lower" chapters of the *Shishuo*,⁸³ which implies that these playful activities in the social field were still deemed somewhat inappropriate and futile by the compiler(s) of *Shishuo*. This is understandable, considering the function of *Shishuo* as a manual of elite education. Nevertheless, these anecdotal accounts, as Gossman stresses, provide us with "particular instances exemplifying and confirming a general rule or trend or epitomising a larger general situation."⁸⁴ Even if the factual veracity is in doubt, cultural

⁷⁹ Jean-Noel Kapferer, *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images* (Transaction Publishers, 2011), p. 13.

⁸⁰ Lionel Gossman, "Anecdote And History," *History and Theory* 42, no. 2 (2003), p. 154.

⁸¹ Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 42.

⁸² Richard Saller, "Anecdotes as Historical Evidence for the Principate," *Greece & Rome* 27, no. 1 (1980), p. 82; Gossman, "Anecdote And History," p. 167.

⁸³ For example, *Shishuo xinyu* 21, 23, 25 and 26.

⁸⁴ Gossman, "Anecdote And History," p. 155.

historians still recognise anecdotes as crucial raw materials that illuminate the historical reality of social imagination.⁸⁵

Finally, the relevant materials about play and prestige are also found in literary anthologies like the *Wenxin diaolong* and encyclopedic works like the *Yiwen leiju*. Here, one finds how early medieval writers imbued playful activities with meanings and symbolic values by composing lyric poems, verses, and essays. A close reading of historical anecdotes and literary sources enables one to provide interpretations as to why playful activities became associated with the conferral of elite prestige as well as the significance of play as a technology of the self, thereby outlining the new literary and aesthetic tradition that significantly enriched the symbolic landscape of premodern China.

We now move to discuss establishing the readability of texts. To render a historical text written in an unfamiliar language readable means to translate it. Although more than half of the texts used in this dissertation are well-researched and translated in previous scholarship, any translator would likely agree that translation is not simply providing literal or lexical synonyms, as translation always entails interpretive decisions and mediation. For this reason, I provide my own translation of most primary sources in order to acquire an unmediated reading experience and to foster my original interpretation. When my reading does not differ from existing translations to a significant extent, existing translations are also used or referred to, which are clearly indicated in the footnotes. Regarding the particular strategy of translation, I generally implement what Umberto Eco calls “source-oriented translation.”⁸⁶ As the theory of linguistic relativism notes, different linguistic systems can be mutually incommensurable, and each language expresses its own worldview and directs how its speaker experiences the world.⁸⁷ A source-oriented translation is contextual insofar as it leads readers to understand the linguistic universe and cultural experience of historical subjects, which differs from a target-oriented translation that significantly transforms the source material by adapting it to the habitus of contemporary readers. For example, in the case of translating philosophical treatises, I primarily follow the definition of a specific term provided by the author instead of immediately choosing the lexical synonym in modern bilingual dictionaries. When the meaning is not provided by the author, I consult early Chinese glossaries such as the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, specialised dictionaries such as Paul Kroll’s *Dictionary of Classical and*

⁸⁵ Saller, “Anecdotes as Historical Evidence for the Principate,” p. 82.

⁸⁶ Umberto Eco, *Experience in Translation* (University of Toronto Press), p. 22.

⁸⁷ Barbara C. Scholz et al., “Philosophy of Linguistics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2024 Edition), accessed at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/linguistics/whorfianism.html>. 16 July, 2024.

Medieval Chinese,⁸⁸ and online resources such as the *Handian* 漢典.⁸⁹ When translating biographical accounts, I consult Charles Hucker's *Dictionary of Official Titles Imperial China*⁹⁰ and de Crespigny's *Biographical Dictionary of the Later Han and Three Kingdoms*.⁹¹

Turning to the interpretation of texts, I draw on a close reading method that involves content and discourse analysis as well as contextual analysis. Such a reading method largely agrees with the historicist or contextualist approach advocated by Skinner, who asserts that a better understanding of a given text entails both linguistic and contextual reading.⁹² While linguistic or philological analysis is mostly carried out in the process of translation, as for content and discourse analysis, I pay close attention to the choice of words, the denotation and connotation, the tone and structure of the narrative, literary allusion, and rhetorics in order to understand how a text works and the effect the author tries to create. At times, I also employ theories developed in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and literary studies (e.g. theories of humour, social capital, and Foucault's theory of power) as well as the framework developed in the earlier section on prestige as critical tools of analysis. This allows me to explore and interpret the texts from refreshing perspectives. Contextual analysis usually follows to complement content analysis and is especially indispensable in the case of interpreting anecdotes, which account for the largest proportion of my primary sources. Like gossip, most anecdotes are only meaningful to the audience in a given community with knowledge about the immediate contexts. Anecdotes resemble individual pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, and each piece is only meaningful in relation to other numerous pieces and the overall image. Hence, in order to unravel the meaning of anecdotes, one needs to embrace the *habitus*—worldview, cultural bias and shared knowledge of early medieval audiences and search for supplementary clues in the paratext and other extant sources to restore the historical condition of a given story. Efforts are made to retrieve essential clues such as the identity of actors, the relationship between them, their respective sociopolitical positions in the world, as well as social rules and ritual protocols that prescribe the appropriate behaviour on the given occasion. In short, contextual reading allows us to temporarily approximate our own worldview to that of the historical subjects, hence fostering our understanding of the historical and cultural conditions, experiences, and perceptions of reality.

⁸⁸ Paul W. Kroll, *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese* (Brill, 2017).

⁸⁹ *Handian* 漢典, accessed at <https://www.zdic.net/>, 16 July, 2024.

⁹⁰ Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford University Press, 1985).

⁹¹ Rafe de Crespigny, *A Biographical Dictionary of Later Han to the Three Kingdoms (23-220 AD)* (Brill, 2007).

⁹² Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," p. 49.

This dissertation is arranged into five chapters. The first two chapters focus on the theme of prestige. Chapter 1 traces the changing means of status conferral from the Han dynasty to the Wei-Jin period. I begin with reviewing the conventional sources of prestige in the Han dynasty, which were institutionally based. I then outline the events of power struggle at court near the end of the Han period, which impaired the capacity of the imperial state to grant prestige to learned elites and alienated them from the political centre. This circumstance gave rise to a new ethos of *jiaoyou* 交遊 (“social eremitism”). By investigating narrative and polemic accounts pertaining to the practice of *jiaoyou*, we see how engaging in playful activities and fostering an extended social network outside the institutional space became increasingly important for educated elites. This chapter also looks into the role of idle conversation as a crucial medium of reputation. In light of Kemper’s theory that “status” (as in prestige) is conferred automatically when social standards and expectations are met, chapter 2 examines the discourse on the prestigious and the paradigm shift in the conception of sociocultural models in the Wei-Jin period. By taking heed to the words of three distinguished gentlemen at the time, I sketch out the essential criteria of being a *mingshi*. I call this new sociocultural paradigm the *mingshi* paradigm.

Having outlined what was expected from a *mingshi*, the next three chapters proceed to explore how individuals could embody the *mingshi* paradigm and claim prestige through engaging in concrete practices. I select three playful activities: speech play, *weiqi*, and drunkenness, as my case studies. The choice of speech play and *weiqi* is informed by the polemic writing of the Daoist master Ge Hong, which gives a clue to the kind of playful activities that became closely associated with the conferral prestige in the social world of Wei-Jin elites. We will encounter Ge Hong’s account at the beginning of chapter 3. The choice of drunkenness is informed by the proliferation of positive representations of drunken elites in dynastic histories and the *Shishuo*.

Chapter 3 starts with a survey of the pertinent terminologies of speech play and the conceptualisation of the genre of playful literature in early medieval China. Early medieval literary critics stressed a strong connection between the genre of playful literature and the practice of speech play and regarded the latter a predecessor of the former. This leads me to the *Shishuo*, which hosts the highest concentration of playful utterances of elite men, women, and monks. By highlighting the working of humour in these anecdotes, this chapter shows how speech play enabled individuals to approximate the *mingshi* paradigm in practice.

Chapter 4 explores the role of *weiqi* (also known as gō or encirclement chess) in the making of *mingshi*. By analysing treatises and anecdotes, this chapter shows how the board game

exceeded the function of mere entertainment and was eventually elevated to the level of art in the early medieval period. This chapter underlines the function of *weiqi* as a structured play that allows players to evaluate and compete with each other on equal ground, as well as its function as a technology of the self for distinguished gentlemen who aspired to cultivate their inner character, wisdom, and emotional composure.

Chapter 5 discusses the aesthetic values and function of drunkenness as a form of carnivalesque play and non-verbal expression. By analysing anecdotes, literary essays and poems, this chapter provides an explanation as to why the drunkard was recognised as an exemplification of the *mingshi* paradigm, as drunkenness in the Wei-Jin period was considered a manifestation of honesty and spiritual enlightenment as well as an ambiguous act of resistance.

Based on my study of play and prestige, I attempt to redefine what it meant to be *mingshi* in the Wei-Jin period and offer my answer to the classic question in cultural history regarding the characteristics of a given age. A final remark on Wei-Jin elite culture will be given in the thesis conclusion.

Chapter 1 In Pursuit of Prestige

The Wei-Jin period witnessed several paradigm shifts and the increasing importance of social networks and personal connections in defining elite status. This chapter introduces the historical background at the end of the Han dynasty that paved the way for the fascination of playful activities in the Wei-Jin period. This chapter consists of three sections. First, I review three major sources of prestige in early China. Second, I turn to the sociocultural realm and trace the rise of what Mark Lewis calls “social eremitism”¹ in the latter half of the Eastern Han by examining texts pertaining to the widespread practice of *jiaoyou* 交遊 (“travelling around to foster social connections”). The third section conducts a survey into the role of idle conversation (often referred to as *qingtan* 清談) in the economy of prestige and reputation in the Wei-Jin period.

I. The Three Sources of Prestige

This section reviews the essential literature related to sources of prestige in early China. According to Mark Lewis, elite prestige could be acquired primarily through three kinds of philological and textual mastery in the Qin and Western Han periods.²

The first type is expertise in the Zhou classics. Lewis argues that the cultural authority of writing in early China lies in the imaginary world in far antiquity ruled by legendary sage kings; such an idealised golden age in the past represented in the classics created a model of society against which actual institutions were evaluated, therefore providing the foundation of cultural authority.³ It is by means of actively engaging in and reproducing discourses of this imaginary past and representations of the masters in the texts that groups who identified themselves with certain traditions outside the range of the state acquired power and legitimacy to participate and influence contemporary political practices.⁴ It should be noted that the establishment of the Imperial Academy and official patronage of classism during the era of Emperor Wu 武 of Han (r. 141–87 BCE) are generally regarded as

¹ Mark Edward Lewis, *Honor and Shame in Early China* (Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 190.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 135–144.

³ Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–73.

evidence for the victory of Confucianism, which is by large a myth. Lewis historicises the myth and explains that this development was shaped by personal decisions and actions of specific individuals, as well as historical challenges such as the rise of landlordism, the abolition of universal conscription, and the emergence of a new form of elite in local communities.⁵ The establishment of Confucian classics as the state canon reconciled the relationship between the centre and local communities by providing local elites with the channel to acquire prestigious positions at the court and the Imperial Academy through textual expertise. This led to the increasing presence of classicist officials in the bureaucracy. However, greater access to the court and even high offices did not necessarily equate to greater power, for power lay in the sovereignty and was primarily reserved for the “inner court” consisting of the emperor’s kins by marriage, his secretaries, personal favourites, and eunuchs. One of the few ways that allowed scholar-officials to exert influence on the ruler was to become the emperor’s teacher or tutor for royal princes. Nevertheless, most scholar-officials had little influence over the decision-making process and policy formulation, and their roles were restrained to drafting and relaying documents.⁶

The second type of textual mastery involves expertise in legal statutes and their technical language. In various early sources, officials who specialised in legal documents appear to be a relatively well-defined group. Their duties include carrying out the specific issuance of statutes and ordinances and legal enforcement, recording the judiciary process in the correct language, reviewing and revising doubtful cases, and arithmetic. These legal specialists were referred to as “vulgar clerks” (*su li* 俗吏) or “knife-scraper and brush clerks” (*daobi li* 刀筆吏) by classical scholars (*Ru sheng* 儒生) in received texts.⁷ Such differentiation between classical scholars and legal specialists persisted into the Cao-Wei 曹魏 period (220–265). For example, an official edict issued in the third year of the Huangchu 黃初 era (222) states that local authorities should recruit official candidates from both literary scholars who specialised in classics and clerks who specialised in legal documents regardless of their age.⁸ Although legal specialists were discriminated against by

⁵ Ibid., p. 337.

⁶ Lewis, *Honor and Shame*, p. 139.

⁷ Ibid., p. 141; Yan Buke 閻步克, *Shidafu zhengzhi yan sheng shi gao* 士大夫政治演生史稿 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1996), pp. 120–126.

⁸ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 2, p. 79.

classical scholars, they took pride in their identity.⁹ According to their research on texts excavated from Zhangjiashan 張家山 Tomb no. 247, Anthony Barbieri-Low and Robin Yates speculate that some of the cases may be edited and dramatised later and used to entertain and inspire audiences who also undertook legal duties, for the representation of “scribal hero” who brought satisfactory resolution to a case resembles those in “legal case fictions” (*gong'an xiaoshuo* 公案小說) in the later period.¹⁰ The prestige assigned to legal specialists was based on the administrative need of the massive empire and their roles as legal and political agents of the ruler to implement the ruler’s policies and exert control over other officials. Depending on one’s performance, a local judiciary scribe could accumulate reputation and authority and be promoted to high offices in the capital. The ultimate example is Sire Yu 于公 and his son Yu Dingguo 于定國 (d. 40 BCE), who achieved remarkable professional success as a local judiciary scribe and eventually rose to the position of Prime Minister (*chengxiang* 丞相), the highest post in Han bureaucracy.¹¹

Other than textual mastery, Lewis also points out the role of history writing in shaping an individual’s reputation, giving the example of Confucius, who drew on the discourse of honour and shame in the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (“Spring and Autumn Annals”) to describe historical figures.¹²

Modelling himself on Confucius, Sima Qian 司馬遷 was also aware of the impact of history writing on determining one’s reputation. As noted by Lewis, the end of *juan* 61 of the *Shiji* 史記 mentions the transmission of reputation multiple times.¹³ The end of *juan* 61 states: “As for those in villages and alleys who intend to polish their conducts and establish names, [if] they do not rely on gentlemen of dark-blue cloud (*qingyun zhi shi* 青雲之士), how could they spread their names to the later generations”¹⁴ Regarding the phrase “gentlemen of dark-blue cloud,” I have two interpretations. The first is that the phrase refers to the noble and powerful who rose to the highest institutional position, like King Wu of Zhou 周武王. Second, the phrase may refer to someone who detaches himself from the state and adopts a higher perspective. In the context of biographical

⁹ Anthony J. Barbieri-Low and Robin D. S. Yates, *Law, State, and Society in Early Imperial China: A Study with Critical Edition and Translation of the Legal Texts from Zhangjiashan Tomb No. 247* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 71.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 98–100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹² Lewis, *Honor and Shame*, p. 142.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁴ *Shiji*, *juan* 61, p. 2127.

writing, the phrase may refer to historians like Confucius and Sima Qian, who were capable of casting and transmitting immortal reputations. Since *juan* 61 “Boyi 伯夷” stands as the first scroll in the section of *liezhuan* 列傳 (“Arrays of Biographies”), it is reasonable to assume the structural importance of *juan* 61 in the entire *liezhuan* section.

Reviewing the two sources of prestige mentioned above, one can observe that the prestige embedded in classical and legal expertise is institutionally based. In other words, it is the bureaucratic system of the empire and the sovereignty that underlie the prestige of textual mastery. Reputation was rewarded to individuals who offered service to the state and generated merits, whether as the ruler’s teacher or advisor in the palace or as the ruler’s agent in the government. By comparison, reputations transmitted through history writing are relatively independent of the institutional sphere. Even though official historians like Sima Qian were affiliated with government ministries, it is rather common for historians to incorporate contemporary political agendas and personal judgements in the composition and compilation of dynastic histories, which results in tension between the state and historians over the issue of who was entitled to grant prestige.¹⁵

In addition to textual mastery, official service, and histories, the Eastern Han period witnessed a gradual intellectual shift that vested life outside state bureaucracy with increasing importance. For instance, literature in the Western Han was considered far inferior to public service and classical exegetics. Literary composition could not raise one’s reputation but was instead deemed “a shameful activity suitable only for jesters and entertainers” in elite society.¹⁶ According to previous scholarship, such attitude started to change thanks to writers such as Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53 BCE—18 CE) and Huan Tan 桓譚 (40 BCE—28 CE), who argued that reading and writing were among the basic human pleasures and crucial ways of self-cultivation.¹⁷ Upon criticising state-sponsored erudites who specialised in only one commentarial tradition, Yang Xiong instead advocated a comprehensive scholarship and established an alternative intellectual ideal referred to as *tongren* 通人 or *tongshi* 通士 (the universalist). With Yang Xiong and Huan Tan’s justification, all the forms of non-state public life that emerged in the Han dynasty were sanctioned. This new intellectual trend

¹⁵ Lewis, *Honor and Shame*, p. 144.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Honor and Shame*, pp. 187–205; Michael Nylan, “Yang Xiong 楊雄 on the Allure of Words Well Chosen,” in *The Chinese Pleasure Book* (New York: Zone Books, 2018), pp. 236–314; Martin Kern, “Tropes of Music and Poetry: From Wudi (r. 141–87 BC) to ca. 100 CE,” in *China’s Early Empires: A Re-Appraisal*, ed. Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 480–491.

was gradually accepted by the wider elite society. Universal scholarship (*boxue* 博學 or *tongxue* 通學) became one of the defining features of the eminent intellectuals in the Eastern Han period. For example, Wang Chong 王充 (27–97 CE) also upheld the same view, holding comprehensive learning and literary composition in high esteem.¹⁸ Likewise, the eminent scholar-officials Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166 CE) and Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–192 CE) were both known for their comprehensive scholarship and a broad interest in music, literature, and various idle activities.¹⁹

By the latter half of the Eastern Han, literary composition and other “minor arts” or unconventional idle activities had become sources of prestige in elite society. Along with the general intellectual shift, several simultaneous developments are also crucial for understanding the new sociocultural trend referred to as “social eremitism” by Lewis or as *jiaoyou* 交遊 in later Han sources.²⁰ The following section delineates the political context that gave rise to the ethos of social eremitism.

II. Political Alienation

Regarding when the practice of *jiaoyou* began to prevail in elite society, Yu Yingshi 余英時 points out that the trend likely emerged during the era of Emperor Huan 桓 (r. 146–168).²¹ Tang Yiming 唐翼明 accepts Yu’s view in his dissertation and argues that the trend can be further traced to the practice of *jiangjing* 講經 (expounding the Confucian classics) in the Former Han that evolved into the engagement of *youtan* 遊談 (hanging out and chatting) among students at the Imperial Academy during the reign of Emperor Shun 順 (r. 126–144).²² Although the scholarly effort of looking for the origin is admirable, tracing the exact origin of a phenomenon is rather difficult, if not impossible.

¹⁸ Lewis, *Honor and Shame*, p. 198.

¹⁹ *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, *juan* 60, pp. 1972, 1980. Okamura Shigeru 岡村繁, “Sai Yū wo meguru Go-Kan makki no bungaku no sūsei 蔡邕をめぐる後漢末期の文学の趨勢,” *Nihon Chūgoku Gakkai Hō* 28 (1976), pp. 61–78.

²⁰ Lewis, *Honor and Shame*, p. 186.

²¹ Yu Yingshi 余英時, *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua* 士與中國文化 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2003), p. 255.

²² Tang Yiming 唐翼明, *The Voices of Wei-Jin Scholars a Study of “Qingtān”* (Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI, 1994), p. 20.

One of the reasons is that dynastic histories generally pay less attention to the sphere of private life since the primary objective of Chinese historiography was not to provide accounts that accurately reflect historical events but to create didactic guidance for the present and to predict the future.²³ As discussed in the introduction chapter, dynastic histories are hardly bias-free, for most historians had their own ethical concerns and political agenda. Aspects of private and daily life were usually only brought up during times of political struggles and social turmoil, as intellectuals endeavoured to look for the causes of the current crisis, particularly the objects of blame. Sources like dynastic histories are simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive. We can identify the change of attitude towards a particular phenomenon instead of making assertions about its origin.

I accept Yu's speculation but would like to modify his argument slightly into "the trend of *jiaoyou* began to be perceived as a social issue during the era of Emperor Huan." The emergence of such an attitude is correlated to the political struggle between three groups: imperial affines referred to as *waiqi* 外戚 or *guiqi* 貴戚, eunuches, and reformist ministers.

A typical example of imperial affines is Liang Ji 梁冀 (144–159 CE). In 132, Lady Na 嬪 from the Liang family was made the empress of Emperor Shun. Liang Shang 商, the father of Lady Na, impressed the emperor with his moral qualities and was accepted as a member of the emperor's inner cabinet and as the emperor's mentor and guide. With the trust of Emperor Shun, the Liang family soon became the most influential force at court. When Liang Shang died in 141, his heir Liang Ji, the elder brother of Empress Liang Na, received the title of General-in-Chief (*da jiangjun* 大將軍), which was synonymous with regent in the Later Han and the Wei-Jin period.²⁴ It appears that Liang Ji quickly took advantage of his position and abused power to the extent of threatening the sovereignty. When Emperor Shun died in 144 without an adult heir, Empress Liang, now the Dowager, took the power of regency along with her brother Liang Ji. The period from 144 to 146 marked the succession of two child emperors, first Liu Bing 劉炳, known as Emperor Chong 沖, and later Liu Zuan 纘, known as Emperor Zhi 質. Displeased by Liang Ji's dominance, Emperor

²³ Endymion Porter Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual*, 3rd edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), p. 599.

²⁴ Most general-in-chiefs in the Later Han did not handle military affairs but controlled the government on behalf of the throne. In the following Wei-Jin period, most general-in-chiefs did lead military campaigns and also acted as regents. Hans Bielenstein notes that as regent, general-in-chiefs were equal to the Three Excellencies (*san gong* 三公) in rank but superior to them in power. See Hans Bielenstein, "The Institutions of Later Han," in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 1, The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C. — A.D. 220*, ed. Denis Crispin Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 515.

Zhi once called Liang Ji “the overbearing general” (*bahu jiangjun* 跋扈將軍).²⁵ It was suspected that Liang Ji was so offended that he eventually poisoned the young emperor to death in 146. In the same year, Liu Zhi 志, known as Emperor Huan, was enthroned by the Dowager and Liang Ji. In 147, Liang Ji married a second Liang woman, Lady Liang Nüying 女瑩, into the imperial family as empress, which allowed the Liang family to maintain its status and power.²⁶ Liang Ji’s manipulation of power evoked discontent, particularly from the two senior ministers, Li Gu 李固 and Du Qiao 杜喬, who had wide support among the court and the bureaucracy. Both ministers were purged and died in the same year, which marked “the effective end of the Confucian reform movement” and the beginning of Liang Ji’s hegemony over the next 15 years.²⁷

From 144 to 159, the power and influence of Liang Ji and his clan were unprecedented. Their network of influence extended from the capital to the provinces. Nevertheless, such dominance was also extremely fragile. Since the legitimacy of Liang Ji’s power lay in the marital alliance with the emperor and his identity as imperial affine, Liang Ji’s hegemony came to a sudden end when Empress Nüying passed away in 159. Emperor Huan might have feared that he could be replaced by Liang Ji like the former child emperors at the time. Facing the urgent situation, the emperor conspired to remove Liang Ji and summoned the eunuchs who had either personal quarrels with the Liangs or had been discontent with their power. The conspiracy was successful. Liang Ji and his wife were driven to commit suicide at home, and the clan and their supporters were purged shortly after.²⁸ It was said that when Liang Ji and his wife committed suicide in 159, more than ten high officials with the rank/salary of Two Thousand *dan* 石 were arrested and executed; more than three hundred others who held office under Liang Ji’s appointment and recommendation were dismissed.²⁹

The hegemony of the Liang family was ended. However, similar cycles of power struggle between the new imperial affines and eunuchs kept repeating until the end of the Han dynasty. If the earlier court politics created a relative balance between meritocracy and nepotism, this balance was largely disrupted during the latter half of the second century, which led to several long-lasting

²⁵ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 34, p. 1179.

²⁶ For a thorough study regarding the hegemony of Liang Ji, see Rafe de Crespigny, *Fire over Luoyang: A History of the Later Han Dynasty, 23-220 AD* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 269–360.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 280–281.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 307–309.

²⁹ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 34, pp. 1186–1187.

consequences. Two consequences are noteworthy here. First of all, with the emperor's subservience to imperial affines and his favour for eunuchs, the sanctity of imperial sovereignty was blemished. Later, when powerful warlords like Dong Zhuo 董卓 (d. 192 CE) and Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220 CE) captured and subjugated the last emperor, the dignity of the throne was further damaged.³⁰ Although nepotism and favouritism always existed in earlier times, scholar-officials in the outer court could still exert some influence on the emperor and attain power and prestige based on merit in public service or excellence in classical scholarship. Now, with power monopolised by those who had personal ties to the emperor and the destruction of leading reformists by members of the inner court, we can observe “a broad resentment and the distancing of scholar-gentry from the imperial government.”³¹ Second, there was a growing insensitivity in local administration and increasing corruption in the officialdom, which correlated with changes in the practice of recruiting official candidates based on the recommendation of men under the criterion of “filial and uncorrupted” (*xiaolian* 孝廉).³² In former times, candidates were required to prove their worth by undergoing a probationary period. However, such assessments became less important than the private opinions of local appraisers by the late second century.³³

In short, the imperial sovereignty and the bureaucratic system that operated in the name of the emperor both lost dignity and moral authority. It is under this context that one witnesses the rise of the ethos of social eremitism and the proliferation of discourses on *jiaoyou*, as many educated gentlemen became *chushi* 處士 (idle gentlemen who refused to take official appointment) and started to seek alternative sources of social recognition and prestige outside the normative political and moral order. This also led to a general fascination with individual reputation and the vogue of pursuing a life outside the institutional sphere and fostering personal connections with elite peers, local patrons, and appraisers within the *shi* 士 communities. Next, I will examine textual evidence regarding the ethos of social eremitism or *jiaoyou*.

³⁰ For discussion on the dignity of the throne, see Michael Loewe, “The Concept of Sovereignty,” in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume I, The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.—A.D. 220*, ed. Michael Loewe and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 740–743.

³¹ de Crespigny, *Fire over Luoyang*, p. 491. Regarding the alienation of officials, also see Lewis, *Honor and Shame*, pp. 206–207.

³² For discussion on the system of official recruitment, see Bielenstein, “The Institutions of Later Han,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, pp. 515–517.

³³ de Crespigny, *Fire over Luoyang*, p. 324.

III. The Rise of Social Eremitism

The first example of textual evidence regarding the vogue of *jiaoyou* is a social critique composed by a late Han official named Zhu Mu 朱穆 (100–163). Regarding what motivated Zhu Mu to compose his essay, the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 states:

Zhu Mu saw associations contracted merely for gain impair the spirit of righteousness, and selfish cliques undermine social conventions. He determined to restrain the selfish [practice] of travelling around to foster social connections.³⁴ Thus, he composed a discourse on “terminating the practice of *jiao*.” Cai Yong, who considered Mu to be upright but solitary, later composed a discourse on “correcting the practice of *jiao*” in order to widely promulgate Zhu Mu’s view.

朱穆見比周傷義，偏黨毀俗，志抑朋游之私，遂著絕交之論。蔡邕以為穆貞而孤，又作《正交》而廣其致焉。³⁵

According to the *Hou Hanshu*, Zhu Mu was born in a “hereditary house” (*shijia* 世家) known for classical scholarship. Both his grandfather and father served as high officials at court. Zhu Mu was selected as a candidate for “Filial and Uncorrupted” and once served under the notorious General-in-Chief Liang Ji. He used to admonish Liang Ji for abusing the power as regent, but his effort was in vain. Eventually, Zhu Mu was demoted and resigned to stay at home after having a conflict with the eunuchs. The *Hou Hanshu* describes him as a gentleman of integrity. He often lamented the moral decline in the world and composed two essays, one of which is the *Juejiao lun* 絕交論 (“Essay on Terminating the Practice of *Jiao*”), to exhort his peers.

The full text of the *Juejiao lun* did not survive. Based on the outline of the essay collected in the personal anthology of Zhu Mu and quoted in the annotation to the *Hou Hanshu* by Tang historians, we know that the essay was written in the form of “hypothetical discourse” (*shelun* 設論) where the author conducts a dialogue with an imaginary interlocutor. The outline reads as follows:

Someone asked: “You stop asking after [your friends], refuse to meet with your guests, and do not even respond to them. Why do you do this?”

[I] said: “In the past, official promotion and demotion had nothing to do with practising *jiao* in private. Instead, [officials] would meet in the court and have banquets in accordance with the *Book of Rites*.”

³⁴ Here, I adopt Michael Nylan’s translation of *bizhou* 比周 as “associations contracted merely for gain.” See Nylan, *The Chinese Pleasure Book*, p. 105.

³⁵ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 43, p. 1474.

Other than these occasions, friends and disciples would [only meet up] to receive teaching from their peers.”

或曰：“子絕存問，不見客，亦不答也，何故？”

曰：“古者，進退趨業，無私游之交。相見以公朝，享會以禮紀，否則朋徒受習而已。”³⁶

This dialogue shows us several senses of *jiao* 交 and Zhu Mu's attitude toward sociability. First, the text implies that the word *jiao* does not necessarily mean “to make friends” or “travelling around to foster social connections” (*jiaoyou* 交遊/游). The word *jiao* can be a generic term for making social contact. It can be used to describe the case of being simultaneously present in a space such as the court. As for *jiaoyou*, the emphasis lies in the notion of *you* 游/遊, which denotes “travelling far” and “roaming” and also connotes the sense of “leisure.” In terms of making contact with friends, Zhu Mu stresses that socialisation must be conducted in accordance with ritual protocols and/or for the purpose of fostering mutual learning. This standpoint is typically Confucian, as the *Analects* states: “The gentleman joins friendship with shared cultivations and uses friendship to assist his capacity of humaneness” (君子以文會友，以友輔仁).³⁷

In contrast to Zhu Mu's vision of ideal friendship, the social reality in the latter half of the second century was a different story:

Nowadays, the phenomenon that [officials and literati] engage in *jiaoyou* has been in vogue for long. These people admire those who possess thousands of chariots (the powerful and wealthy) but have no fear of the ruler. They transgress the rites to follow the powerful and wealthy and betray [the principle of] impartiality to obey them. As for those who are even wealthier and more powerful, even infants adore them; for those who are more than this, [followers] strive to conceal mistakes and fabricate honour for them so followers can fulfil their selfish interests. Duties are discarded, and righteousness is forsaken. The principle of impartiality is belittled, while the pursuit of partial desire is prioritised. I feel increasingly exhausted simply by listening to all of this.

世之務交游也久矣，敦千乘不忌于君。犯禮以追之，背公以從之。其愈者，則孺子之愛也；其甚者，則求蔽過竊譽，以贍其私。事替義退，公輕私重，居勞於聽也。³⁸

In this passage, Zhu Mu depicts the contemporary vogue of “travelling around to make social contact for selfish reasons,” probably with exaggeration. Nevertheless, the text still indicates why Zhu Mu perceives such a phenomenon as a negative issue. The reason lies in the dichotomy of *gong*

³⁶ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 43, p. 1467.

³⁷ *Lunyu* 12.24. In *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義, *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成, Vol. 1, p. 279.

³⁸ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 43, p. 1467.

公 and *si 私*. The term *gong* here includes the senses of “selfless,” “public-spirited,” and “impartial,” and the term *si* signifies the opposite of *gong*, meaning “selfish,” “partial,” and “unjust.” While socialisation in the former category is considered neutral or positive, socialisation in the latter category is condemned. The text seems to suggest that what distinguishes the good and the bad practices of *jiaoyou* largely depends on the motivation of the subject. For instance, if one meets with friends and colleagues out of ethical commitments, then such social contact is *gong*. The opposite can be seeking to obtain potential profit by following the rich and powerful referred to as *qiansheng* 千乘, which is probably an allusion to the term *baisheng* 百乘 in the *Mencius*.³⁹ While Mencius criticises the nobles and kings who coerced others into friendship, the objects of Zhu Mu’s accusation may be the eunuchs and powerful imperial affines like Liang Ji and their followers who amassed power, prestige, and wealth for themselves at the cost of damaging the sanctity of imperial sovereignty and disrupting the prescriptive order of society. Alternatively, it may be local magnates referred to as *haoqiang* 豪強 and gentry communities that became dependents of regional forces.⁴⁰ In either case, both groups were problematic from the perspective of self-righteous loyalists like Zhu Mu.

Zhu Mu’s writing pioneered the debate over socialisation and friendship in elite societies and was highly evaluated by contemporary and later writers. For example, as mentioned earlier, the prominent scholar-official Cai Yong stayed in line with Zhu Mu and composed a discourse on “correcting the practice of *jiao* 正交” to widely promulgate Zhu Mu’s idea.⁴¹ During the Liu-Song period, Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝標 (462–521 CE) emulated Zhu Mu and composed an essay titled *Guang*

³⁹ In “Wanzhang xia 萬章下,” Mencius stresses the importance of genuineness and spontaneity in friendship. The key word in his conversation with Wanzhang is *xie* 挾 (coercion), which occurs four times and obviously functions as an antonymy of genuineness and spontaneity. Mencius then lists several cases of making friends by means of coercion (*xie*), such as those of Meng Xianzi 孟獻子, a noble from “a house of a hundred chariots” (*baisheng zhi jia* 百乘之家), Duke Hui of Fei 費惠公 who was a ruler of a small state, and Duke Ping of Jin 晉平公 who was a ruler of a large state. These figures intimidated others into friendship by taking advantage of their status as rank-holders and kings. The contrastive case was that of Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 whose relationship was described in terms of mutual respect and egalitarian principle. When Shun went to pay respect to Yao, Yao received Shun in a cordial manner and shared his privilege as the host with Shun (迭為賓主). In the end, Mencius drops the punchline: “Honouring the superior and respecting the worthy, the principle in both cases should be identical” (貴貴，尊賢，其義一也). *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義, in *Zhuzi jicheng*, Vol.1, pp. 408–410.

⁴⁰ Yang Liansheng 杨联陞, *Dong-Han de haozu* 東漢的豪族 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2017), pp. 10–16.

⁴¹ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 43, pp. 1474–1475.

Juejiao lun 廣絕交論 (“Extending the Essay on Terminating the Practice of Jiao”) in which he praises the “pure socialisation” (*su jiao* 素交) of worthy gentlemen and criticises five types of socialisation based on the exchange of profit (*li jiao* 利交).⁴²

The second example of polemic discourse on *jiaoyou* is found in the *Zhonglun* 中論 (“Balanced Discourses”) by Xu Gan 徐幹 (171–218 CE), who is known as one of the Seven Masters of the Jian’an Era (Jian’an Qizi 建安七子). The *Sanguo zhi* describes Xu Gan as intelligent and lofty, for he was good at literary composition and did not hold official positions and worldly honour with high esteem. He was recruited by Cao Cao but could not take the appointment because of illness.⁴³ Like Zhu Mu, Xu Gan perceived the contemporary vogue of *jiaoyou* in a highly negative way. In Xu Gan’s view, those who actively engaged in *jiaoyou* were fame-seekers, and the pursuit of personal reputation was the source of disorder in society.⁴⁴ For example, the “Kaowei 考偽” (Examining Falsity) chapter of the *Zhonglun* states:

Although [a person] follows the former sage kings and promulgates the *Odes* and the *Documents*, what benefits can he bring? By doing so, [he] only poisons the people of the realm. Everyone deviates from the fundamental to chase after the peripheral. State affairs are done on the basis of falsity. [The people] are distressed by turmoil and cannot cease to tremble. Once such a trend prevails in the world, it will lead fathers to steal the reputation of their sons and older brothers to steal the honour of their younger brothers; those who share the same blood will deceive each other, and friends will cheat on one another. Such is the path of great chaos. Thus, those who seek name and prestige are ultimately prohibited by the sages.

雖依先王稱《詩》《書》，將何益哉？以此毒天下之民，莫不離本趣末，事以偽成，紛紛擾擾，馳騖不已。其流于世也，至於父盜子名，兄竊弟譽，骨肉相詬，朋友相詐，此大亂之道也。故求名者，聖人至禁也。⁴⁵

⁴² *Wenxuan* 文選, juan 55, pp. 754–760. Fukui Yoshio conducts a close reading of the *Guang Juejiao lun*. See Fukui Yoshio 福井佳夫, *Rikuchō no yūgi bungaku* 六朝の遊戯文学 (Tōkyō: Kyūko Shoin, 2007), pp. 571–597.

⁴³ *Sanguo zhi*, juan 21, p. 599.

⁴⁴ “In general, the fame seekers switch the real over the fake and reverse the definition of the right and the wrong, which eventually transforms the people. This is a great calamity for the state” 夫為名者，使真偽相冒，是非易位，而民有所化。此邦家之大災也。 In *Zhonglun jiegou* 中論解詁, p. 201.

⁴⁵ *Zhonglun jiegou*, pp. 190–191; for alternative translation, see John Makeham trans., *Balanced Discourses* (New Haven, Beijing: Yale University Press; Foreign Languages Press, 2002), p. 143.

Here, the object of Xu Gan's critique is an educated gentleman who feels anxious about social recognition. Earlier in the chapter, such a person is referred to as a "charlatan and seeker of fame" (惑世盜名之徒) who "produces unorthodox knowledge and practices" (生邪端造異術). These unorthodox knowledge and practices include both non-Confucian teachings such as those of Yang Zhu 楊朱, Mo Di 墨翟, Shen Buhai 申不害, and Gongsun Long 公孫龍, as well as deviant teachings and practices promoted by contemporary Confucian scholar-officials.⁴⁶ According to Xu Gan, the former did not cause much calamity in the Warring States because these teachings were distinguishable from the teachings of the sages. It was the latter that brought greater confusion and calamities to the world by falsifying the correct teachings of the sages and causing a discordance between name and actuality.⁴⁷ These "fake gentlemen" spoke of the *Odes* and the *Documents* and misled the world in order to claim undeserved titles.

Undeserved reputations of "fake gentlemen" were achieved and propagated through the means of *jiaoyou*. In the next chapter "Qian jiao 譴交" (Condemning socialisation), Xu Gan expresses his conception of *jiaoyou*:

During the intermission between state affairs, gentlemen in ancient times would visit their colleagues and the worthies of the country and bring gifts to them. They would take joy in banquets and feasts, conversing on humaneness and righteousness without involving matters of fame and profit. In accordance with agrarian holidays, gentlemen who had yet received their appointments would also visit their countrymen and peers and bring gifts to them. This can also be applied to the worthies in ancient times. How can it be the case that those in antiquity did not have [the opportunities to] mingle with the worthies? It is the case that nobody neglected state affairs and discarded agrarian works to travel far away to foreign lands and waste months and years. Hence, social intercourse in the past was conducted nearby, whereas that of the present is conducted far away. Social intercourse in the past was conducted among a few, whereas that of the present is conducted among the many. Social intercourse in the past was practiced to seek the company of the worthies, whereas that of the present is practiced in pursuit of fame and profits.

古之君子因王事之閒，則奉贄以見其同僚及國中之賢者。其於宴樂也，言仁義而不及名利。君子未命者，亦因農事之隙，奉贄以見其鄉黨同志。及夫古之賢者亦然，則何為其不獲賢交哉？非有釋王事、廢交業、遊遠邦、曠年歲者也。故古之交也近，今之交也遠；古之交也寡，今之交也眾；古之交也為求賢，今之交也為名利而已矣。⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Zhonglun jiegou*, pp. 185, 189.

⁴⁷ John Makeham remarks: "In the Eastern Han, however, and particularly so in the second century an ethos had evolved among the *shi* class which give unprecedented status to the attainment of reputation, such that 'the fame-seeker could earn himself a reputation (*ming*) without necessarily securing an actual achievement (*shi*),' thereby rupturing the bond or correlation that should obtain between names and actualities." John Makeham, *Name and Actuality in Early Chinese Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 6.

⁴⁸ *Zhonglun jiegou*, pp. 220–221; Also Makeham trans., *Balanced Discourses*, p. 161.

This passage is a part of Xu Gan's response to an anonymous interlocutor who inquires about the difference between the practice of social intercourse (*jiao*) in antiquity and the phenomenon of *jiaoyou* at present. In his reply, Xu Gan describes a utopian past ruled by the sage kings where society was simplistic and primitive, and people had little desire and social mobility. There, the four classes of people (*simin* 四民), governed and ordered by laws and punishment, fully dedicated themselves to their professions. The officials devoted themselves to official duties instead of engaging in *jiaoyou*. The vogue of *jiaoyou*, like other problematic issues, emerged after the decline of the Zhou dynasty. By the eras of Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling, the social environment was nowhere near that of the idealised past. Not only did people travel far and socialise out of self-interest, but their obsession with personal fame and fake names disrupted state affairs and jeopardised the official selection and recommendation system.⁴⁹ Later in the chapter, Xu Gan points out another moral downside of *jiaoyou*: *jiaoyou* is unfilial because there is the possibility that one may leave one's parents and close relatives behind and die in foreign lands.⁵⁰

Overall, although Xu Gan does not entirely deny the need for social intercourse and leisure among scholar-officials, like Zhu Mu, he holds a moralistic view that socialisation should only be practiced and enjoyed with modesty and ethical objectives. One can also argue that Xu Gan's viewpoint is essentially utilitarian and imperial, for he implies that socialisation, both in public and private contexts, should always remain "useful" in terms of helping individuals improve themselves so that they can provide a better service to the state. Besides, travelling around means greater mobility, which can pose several challenges to the state. Since people are sources of labour and financial revenue in an agrarian empire, losing control over people's movement means losing state finances. Moreover, since practitioners of *jiaoyou* do not engage in any productive activities sanctioned by the state, they may also become a potential source of social unrest.

So far, we have seen the discourse on *jiaoyou* in the genre of polemic essay. Next, I would like to examine some descriptive sources pertaining to the group referred to as *chushi* 處士 ("idle gentlemen") in order to shed more light on the phenomenon of social eremitism.

The most representative example of *chushi* can be found in the biographies of partisans in the *Hou Hanshu*:

⁴⁹ Makeham trans., *Balanced Discourses*, pp. 164–171.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 172–173.

When it came to the reigns of Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling, the ordering of political affairs in the central government was preposterous. The mandate of the state was handed over to eunuchs with whom young gentlemen were ashamed to group. Therefore, the righteous men were all indignant, becoming *chushi* to express their critique. Eventually, they radically promulgated their reputation [by] mutually labelling each other, appraising [characters of] high-ranking officials, and evaluating those who dominated the state. The ethos of admiring integrity started to prevail from here.

逮桓靈之間，主荒政繆，國命委於閹寺，士子羞與為伍。故匹夫抗憤，處士橫議。遂乃激揚名聲，互相題拂，品覈公卿，裁量執政。婞直之風，於斯行矣。⁵¹

These partisans were given alternative names in honour of their resistance against the corrupted power of eunuchs and imperial affines, as the *Hou Hanshu* further states:

Since then, [those of] integrity were cast aside while [those of] perversion colluded together. The scarce stream [of upright gentlemen] within the realm eventually started labelling each other. They pointed out the gentlemen of distinction in the world and created special designations for them. The most superior group was called “The Three Masters”. The next group was called “The Eight Excellent.” The next group was called “The Eight Mentors.” The next group was called “The Eight Guiders.” The next group was called “The Eight Benefactors.” They resembled “The Eight Principals” and “The Eight Triumphs” in ancient times.

自是正直廢放，邪枉熾結。海內希風之流，遂共相標榜。指天下名士，為之稱號。上曰“三君，”次曰“八俊，”次曰“八顧，”次曰“八及，”次曰“八廚，”猶古之“八元”“八凱”也。⁵²

Regarding the meanings of these titles, Fan Ye 范曄 explains that *jun* 君 refers to those venerated by the current generation; *jun* 俊 refers to the heroic character of a person; *gu* 顧 refers to those who can guide others through their virtuous conduct; *ji* 及 refers to those who can lead others to follow the well-venerated masters; *chu* 廚 refers to those who can save others with their own wealth. These titles are probably inspired by the idea of “alternative name” (*bie ming* 別名) mentioned in earlier texts like the *Baihu tongyi* 白虎通義. With reference to the *Li bieming ji* 禮別名記, the *Baihu tongyi* states: “[Those who surpass] five people are called ‘mao,’ [those who surpass] ten people are called ‘xuan,’ [those who surpass] a hundred people are called ‘jun,’ [those who surpass] one thousand people are called ‘ying,’ [those who surpass] twice of ‘ying’ are called ‘xian,’ [those who surpass] ten thousand people are called ‘jie,’ [those who surpass] ten thousand ‘jie’ are called

⁵¹ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 67, p. 2185.

⁵² *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 67, p. 2178.

‘sheng’ 五人曰茂，十人曰選，百人曰俊，千人曰英，倍英曰賢，萬人曰傑，萬傑曰聖。”⁵³ It seems to me that these terms can be regarded as measurement units of social prestige.

The most respected gentleman who fought against the eunuchs was Li Ying 李膺 (d. 169 CE). Li Ying was born into a prominent scholar-official family in Yinchuan 潁川 (present-day central He’nan). He was a lofty gentleman and only acted as “mentor and friend” (*shi you* 師友) to Xun Shu 荀淑 and Chen Shi 陳寔 from the same commandery. He once served as the Governor of He’nan and Metropolitan Commandant (*sili xiaowei* 司隸校尉), which, according to the encyclopaedic section in the *Hou Hanshu*, was a high-ranking position with authority to investigate and impeach officials in the area around the capital.⁵⁴ He was a leading reformist and was widely feared by the eunuchs. He was banned from office after the first incident of “partisan proscription” (*danggu* 黨錮) in 166 and was arrested in the second faction incident in 169, where he died in prison.⁵⁵

Due to his integrity and “heroic” attack on the corrupted eunuch power, Li Ying was widely respected and probably became honoured as a “martyr” among students in the Imperial Academy and the gentry communities.⁵⁶ During Li Ying’s lifetime, many alienated gentlemen (*chushi*) went to join his clique. The most famous example is the private appraiser Guo Tai 郭泰/太. According to the *Hou Hanshu*, Guo Tai came from a humble background. His father passed away early, and his mother sent him to serve in the local government. He looked down on trivial duties of the lower-ranking post and eventually resigned from office to travel to the capital. The *Hou Hanshu* states:

[Guo Tai] was good at conversation and improving the rhythm of speech. He then travelled to Luoyang. When he met Li Ying, the governor of He’nan, for the first time, Li Ying was so impressed by Guo Tai that they befriended each other. Accordingly, Guo Tai’s name became known throughout the capital region.

善談論，美音制。乃游於洛陽。始見河南尹李膺，膺大奇之，遂相友善，於是名震京師。⁵⁷

⁵³ See *Baihu tongyi lun* 白虎通義論, *juan* 6, “Shengren 聖人.”

⁵⁴ *Hou Hanshu*, “Bai guan si 百官四,” pp. 3613–3614.

⁵⁵ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 67, pp. 2191–2197.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *Honor and Shame*, pp. 207–208.

⁵⁷ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 68, p. 2225.

After being appraised by Li Ying, Guo Tai was invited by high offices in the capital, but he still refused the offer. He kept travelling around the country and conducting evaluations of human characters. His speech remained vigilant, thanks to which he was spared from political persecutions from 166 to 169. Later, he opened a private academy and had hundreds of disciples. After his death, Cai Yong composed an inscription to commemorate him.⁵⁸

The next example of *chushi* in the same section of the *Hou Hanshu* is Fu Rong 符融, whose official career resembles that of Guo Tai:

When he was young, [Fu Rong] held the post of Official Legal Investigator. Feeling ashamed, he resigned and left. Later, he travelled to the Imperial Academy and served Imperial Treasurer Li Ying as his master. Ying's disposition was upright and modest. Each time he met Rong, he would always dismiss other visitors and attendants to listen to Rong's discourse. Rong would touch his headscarf and shake his sleeves; his speech was bountiful like clouds. Each time, Ying would cup his hands and gasp in admiration.

少為都官吏，恥之，委去。後遊太學，師事少府李膺。膺風性高簡，每見融，輒絕它賓客，聽其言論。融幅巾奮袖，談辭如雲，膺每捧手歎息。⁵⁹

Fu Rong served as a lower-ranking official in the capital at a young age. Like Guo Tai, Fu Rong also considered his minor position somewhat shameful. He hence resigned and offered his services to Li Ying, which probably means he became a dependent (*ke* 客) at Li Ying's residence. Guo Tai was recommended to Li Ying by Fu Rong. Fu Rong was later selected as a "Filial and Uncorrupted" candidate and was offered high positions, but he refused all of these.⁶⁰ Interestingly, the *duguan li* 都官吏 was probably a subordinate official in charge of investigations of violations within the bureaucracy in the office of the *sili xiaowei* 司隸校尉 ("Metropolitan Commandant").⁶¹ As we have seen earlier, Li Ying established his reputation during his time as the *sili xiaowei*. It is possible that Fu Rong was a "former subordinate" (*guli* 故吏) of Li Ying in the bureaucracy. After Li Ying was proscribed and demoted, Fu Rong probably followed Li Ying and resigned, which implies that Fu Rong prioritised his personal connection with Li Ying instead of the official post itself. After resigning from his official post, Fu Rong spent time in idle conversations (*youtan* 游談) at home

⁵⁸ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 68, pp. 2226–2231.

⁵⁹ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 68, p. 2232.

⁶⁰ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 68, pp. 2232–2233.

⁶¹ *Hou Hanshu*, "Bai guan si 百官四," p. 3614. The translation of official titles is based on Charles Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford University Press, 1985), p. 451.

and at the Imperial Academy. Besides the last passage, this episode is also attested in the biographies of “benign officials” (*xun li* 循吏).⁶²

The last example is Zhongchang Tong 仲長統 (180–220 CE), who was known for his political and social critiques like the *Changyan* 倡言 (“Proclaiming My Words”) and was highly praised by Fan Ye.⁶³ The *Hou Hanshu* portrays Zhongchang Tong as follows:

In his twenties, [Zhongchang Tong] travelled back and forth between the provinces of Qing 青, Xu 徐, Bing 并 and Yi 冀. Most people who befriended him were astonished by him...[Zhongchang] Tong had an extraordinary disposition. He dared to speak explicitly and cared little about trivial matters. It was unpredictable whether he would stay silent or speak out, due to which people at the time called him “the lunatic.” Each time the local government summoned him to take a post, he always refused the offer by claiming to be sick. He often claimed that those who associated themselves with the monarch did so only because they intended to acquire a position and promulgate their name; however, one’s name could not be constantly preserved, and life could be easily terminated. [Therefore], he would rather leisurely bend or lift his head to entertain himself while residing in peace and seclusion to please his mind.

年二十餘，游學青、徐、并、冀之間，與交友者多異之...統性倜儻，敢直言，不矜小節，默語無常，時人或謂之狂生。每州郡命召，輒稱疾不就。常以為凡遊帝王者，欲以立身揚名耳。而名不常存，人生易滅。優游偃仰，可以自娛，欲卜居清曠，以樂其志。⁶⁴

Zhongchang Tong appears to be a typical *chushi* who renounced public service and dedicated himself to cultivating a sociocultural life outside officialdom. He found joy in travelling, making friends, and idle activities. In his verses, he celebrated the practice of social eremitism: “When good friends gathered together, I would present food and beverage to entertain them; when it was an auspicious day, I would cook lamb and pork to serve them. We would wander in fields and gardens, play around in the bushes, splash clean water, chase after the breeze, fish carp, and hunt birds with bows.”⁶⁵ What an idyllic life indeed. Nevertheless, one may wonder how someone could achieve such an ideal life without engaging in productive activities.

⁶² *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 76, p. 2481.

⁶³ For study on Zhongchang Tong’s thoughts, see Uchiyama Toshihiko 内山俊彦, “Chūchō Dō: Go Kan ichi chishijin no shisō to kōdō 仲長統: 後漢末一知識人の思想と行動,” *Nihon Chūgoku Gakkai Hō*, no. 36 (1984), pp. 55–70. Uchiyama discusses Zhongchang Tong’s thoughts from five perspectives: 1) critique against imperial affines and eunuchs; 2) the conceptualisation of *tian* 天 (heaven); 3) self-cultivation and nourishment of life; and 4) historical consciousness.

⁶⁴ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 49, pp. 1634–1644.

⁶⁵ *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 49, p. 1644.

Notedly, being a *chushi* did not mean that someone was entirely independent of the normative political order. For example, by studying stele inscriptions from the Eastern Han, Xu Chong 徐冲 argues that *chushi* should be distinguished from “hermits” (*yinshi* 隱士) in the later periods. Despite the posture of refusing official appointment, many *chushi* still undertook some sort of official tasks at home; because of this, they were still considered “former subordinates” of a local governor and were expected to participate in mourning rituals and funerals of the governor.⁶⁶ Since *chushi* could receive a salary by offering private services to local governors, this explains how a humble-born gentleman like Zhongchang Tong could sustain himself to live an idle life.

So far, we have seen three cases of social eremitism in dynastic histories. A conclusion about the rise of social eremitism in the latter Han can be made here. First, the gesture of renouncing public service originated in the partisan movement (*danggu*) and later became largely performative. Renouncing one’s official position did not mean that an individual terminated his connections and relationships with former superiors. Instead, by renouncing public service, an individual could not only demonstrate his moral integrity by distancing himself from the disgraceful regime dominated by imperial affines and eunuchs but also foster a personal connection with elite peers and seniors, as shown in the case of Guo Tai and Fu Rong. Second, it is clear that social eremitism is not a practice of seclusion. As Zhao Lu describes it, social eremitism is “a peripatetic culture that initially centred exclusively on classical learning, but later its objective gradually shifted towards making friends.”⁶⁷ In addition, individuals remained highly active in partaking in social life outside the institutional space. The movement of social eremitism further stimulated the proliferation of new social spaces, or in Lewis’s words, “the non-state public spaces” and of “new intermediate organisations and activities that lay between the family and the state.”⁶⁸

IV. The Fascination for Name and Idle Conversation

⁶⁶ Xu Chong 徐冲, *Zhonggu shidai de lishi shuxie yu huangdi quanli qiyuan* 中古時代的歷史書寫與皇帝權力起源 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), p. 194; Also see Patricia Buckley Ebrey, “Patron-Client Relations in the Later Han,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 3 (1983), pp. 533–542.

⁶⁷ Zhao Lu, *In Pursuit of the Great Peace: Han Dynasty Classicism and the Making of Early Medieval Literati Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), p.115. One may question whether the earlier practice of *jiaoyou* was done exclusively to foster classical learning.

⁶⁸ Mark Edward Lewis, *China between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 44–51.

The third century was a period of frequent warfare, social unrest, and political turmoil. The Han central state in Luoyang was militarily weak and had to recruit non-Chinese horsemen and frontier generals to maintain imperial control over certain regions, which eventually backfired and brought the dynasty to an end. Leading militarists such as Cao Cao arose and dominated the Han court after accumulating their power and reputation in military campaigns against religious-inspired peasant rebellions in the Guanzhong 關中 area (present-day Sichuan and Shandong) and regional warlords. Cao Cao died in 220. In the same year, the last Han emperor was forced to abdicate to Cao Cao's heir, Cao Pi 丕 (187–226), who became known as Emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty 魏文帝.

The Cao-Wei regime was a short-lived dynasty. Although Cao Pi and his heir Cao Rui 叡 (aka. Emperor Ming of Wei 魏明帝; r. 226–239) both endeavoured to consolidate imperial power of the new dynasty, the succeeding emperor Cao Fang 芳 (r. 239–254) was too young to rule and the court soon fell into the hands of the two rivalry regents Cao Shuang 爽 (d. 249) and Sima Yi 司馬懿 (179–251). The rivalry between Cao Shuang and Sima Yi concluded with the victory of the Sima faction who enthroned the last two Wei rulers, Cao Mao 髦 (r. 254–260) and Cao Huan 奂 (r. 260–266). Cao Mao and Cao Huan were no more than puppet emperors controlled by Sima Yi's sons, Sima Shi 師 (208–255) and Sima Zhao 昭 (211–265). In 266, Sima Zhao's heir, Sima Yan 炎, usurped the throne and proclaimed himself emperor of the new Jin 晉 dynasty.

The glory of the Sima regime reached a peak as it reunited the empire after defeating the Wu Kingdom in 280. However, like its predecessor, the Jin failed to consolidate its rule and was soon troubled by a long-lasting succession crisis in the 280s. The crisis eventually escalated to a series of civil wars from 291 and 306 known as the War of the Eight Princes 八王之亂. The civil wars not only drained the military resources of the Jin but also gave opportunities to semi-nomadic troops to seize power and found their own dynasties in the North, which drove the Jin court to flee to the South and establish a new capital at Jiankang (present-day Nanjing). The military struggle between the Jin and non-Han forces also drove a mass of northern elites to become refugees and migrate to the lower Yangzi River basin, which marks the official beginning of the division of northern and southern dynasties.⁶⁹

In contrast to the capriciousness of politics, there was a certain continuity in the sociocultural field. The ethos of social eremitism persisted throughout the Wei-Jin period and gave rise to various

⁶⁹ For comprehensive histories, see Lewis, *China between Empires*, pp. 54–64; Albert E. Dien, *Six Dynasties Civilization* (Cumberland: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 1–7.

idle activities and social contests in elite societies. Among these idle activities, *qingtán* 清談 played the most significant role in conferring prestige, defining elite status and propagating personal reputation in the Wei-Jin period.

Although *qingtán* in early medieval China is not a novel research topic in Japanese, Chinese, and Western scholarship, there is still certain conceptual confusion and problematic handling of the term.⁷⁰ In the field of intellectual history, *qingtán* (also written as *qinglun* 清論 and *qingyan* 清言) is usually translated as “pure talk/discussion” or simply “philosophical conversation” and is primarily understood as a form of scholastic practice through which Wei-Jin intellectuals challenged traditional interpretations of Confucian classics and generated new ideas and thoughts that were retrospectively labelled as Xuanxue 玄學 by modern scholars. To name the most influential examples of Chinese scholarship, Chen Yinqe 陳寅恪 takes *qingtán* as a form of debate over metaphysical subjects and argues that *qingtán* derived from *qingyi* 清議 in the partisan movement in the Eastern Han period; Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 identifies *qingtán* with discussion on the Three Texts of the Profundity (*sanxuan* 三玄); He Changqun 賀昌群 takes *qingtán* as the equivalent of Xuanxue derived from the studies of the *Laozi* and *Yijing* and the practice of *fangshu* 方術 in the Eastern Han.⁷¹ Regarding Western scholarship, Richard Mather translates *qingtán* as “pure conversation,” which has been accepted into subsequent scholarship. Mather suggests that there were initial practical applications in *qingtán*, but it eventually became purely focused on metaphysical problems.⁷² More recent examples can be found in the *Dao Companion to Xuanxue* 玄學, where all contributors take *qingtán* as “pure conversation.” To list a few, James Sellmann states that “during the Wei-Jin period, some scholars of integrity withdrew from court and turned their attention to an apophatic philosophy of non-being to further remove themselves from court intrigue, engaging in “pure conversation”; Alan Chan defines *qingtán* as “highly minded debate,” a “distinctive form of social and intellectual

⁷⁰ For a thorough list of these scholarship, see Tang Yiming, *The Voices of Wei-Jin Scholars*, pp. 9–16; Makeham, *Name and Actuality* (State University of New York Press, 1994), notes 40–42, 242–43.

⁷¹ Chen Yinqe 陳寅恪, *Weijin Nanbeichao Shi Yanjianglu* 魏晉南北朝史演講錄 (Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2018), p. 40; Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, *Zhongguo zhexue shijiu jiang* 中國哲學十九講 (Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2020), pp. 193–194; He Changqun 賀昌群, *Wei-Jin qingtán sixiang chulun* 魏晉清談思想初論 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2011), pp. 6–26.

⁷² Richard B. Mather, *A New Account of Tales of the World* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), pp. xviii–xxv.

exchange of the upper-class elite, where ideas were contested and which shaped thought leadership in early medieval China.”⁷³ Some hold different views. John Makeham criticises many of these characterisations as “anachronistic” but does not provide his reasoning.⁷⁴ Rudolf Wagner suggests a more historical and contextual understanding of the term that *qingtān* or *qingyān* (pure words) were subtle spoken words beyond verbiage employed by third-century authors in order to reproduce insights of the Sage.⁷⁵

To regard *qingtān* as “philosophical discussions of Xuanxue” is ahistorical, as some scholars point out that the rendering of *qingtān* as a technical noun denoting scholastic activities was, in fact, a later development. For example, Tang Changru 唐長孺 traces such designation back to Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) and Qian Daxin 錢大昕 in the Qing Dynasty. Tang cites Gu Yanwu’s *Ri zhi lu* 日知錄, saying: “*Qingtān* in the past spoke of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. *Qingtān* in the present time speaks of *Confucius* and *Mencius*.”⁷⁶ Tang also cites the *Shijia zhaiyang xinlu* 十駕齋養新錄 by Qian Daxin 錢大昕, which reads: “People in the Wei and Jin spoke of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, which is *qingtān*; people in the Song and Ming spoke of the mind (*xin* 心) and the human nature (*xing* 性), which is also *qingtān*.”⁷⁷ In his book on *qingtān*, Tang Yiming points out that from the Later Han throughout the early medieval period, *qingtān* had always been a generic, non-technical noun. Tang stresses the fact that historically *qingtān* designated some much broader and more complex phenomena in the *Shishuo xinyu* and other miscellaneous sources. Tang points out the necessity to distinguish the two concepts of *qingtān* and Xuanxue and suggests the potential to extend the scope of *qingtān* to cover other aspects of elite life. However, Tang’s attempt to redefine and approach *qingtān* remains insufficient in

⁷³ James D. Sellmann, “Xuanxue’s Contribution to Chinese Philosophy,” in *Dao Companion to Xuanxue* 玄學 (Neo-Daoism), ed. David Chai (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), p. 16; Alan K.L. Chan, “Re-Envisioning the Profound Order of Dao: Pei Wei’s ‘Critical Discussion on the Pride of Place of Being,’” in *Dao Companion to Xuanxue* 玄學 (Neo-Daoism), p. 326.

⁷⁴ John Makeham, “He Yan, Xuanxue and the Editorship of the Lunyu Jijie,” *Early Medieval China* 5 no. 1 (1999), p. 9.

⁷⁵ Rudolf G. Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi’s Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)* (State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 47.

⁷⁶ Tang Changru 唐長孺, *Tang Changru Wencun* 唐長孺文存 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), p. 26.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

innovativeness, as he still limits *qingtán* to its technical designation and academic function rather than extending his analysis to other functions of *qingtán*.⁷⁸

Since the 1960s, some Japanese scholars have been seeking to provide alternative interpretations of *qingtán*, among which the views of Okamura Shigeru 岡村繁 and Fukui Fumimasa 福井文雅 are the most insightful and noteworthy. By examining late Han and early medieval dynastic histories, Okamura argues that “fundamentally, like most of the contemporaneous poetry and rhapsody, [*qingtán*] should be understood as a form of spiritual entertainment and hobby unfolded on the basis of the social recreation of idle elites.”⁷⁹ Such practice is marked particularly by the game-like characteristic of “playful interaction” (*yaritori* やりとり), with goals of merely playing to win or lose. It belonged to the realm of private life and was conducted in a context of relative freedom that disregarded established hierarchies and barriers based on the differences of age and identity, the awareness of the self and other, and host-guest relations. Fukui accepts Okamura’s view. While challenging the conventional definition of *qingtán* as equivalent to scholastic and philosophical discourse on the Daoist classics of *Yijing*, *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, Fukui describes *qingtán* as “[something] that pleases [the participants] with the witty and iconoclastic conversational style” and is “game-like.”⁸⁰

The observations of Okamura and Fukui are extremely helpful, as both scholars put aside retrospective speculations and focus on restoring the historical significance of *qingtán*. In line with Okamura and Fukui, I will approach *qingtán* from the perspective of “idle conversation” or “idle talk.”⁸¹ The early medieval period witnessed a proliferation of anecdotal accounts that thematise the story of becoming known (*zhiming* 知名) in dynastic histories, personal biographies, as well as literary anthologies like the *Shishuo xinyu*. These anecdotes demonstrate a collective fascination with the economy of reputation and the anxiety over one’s social standing

⁷⁸ Tang Yiming, *Wei-Jin qingtán* 魏晉清談 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2002), pp. 9–11, 14, 18.

⁷⁹ Okamura Shigeru 岡村繁, “Seidan no keifu to igi 清談の系譜と意義,” *Nihon Chūgoku Gakkai hō* 15 (1963), p. 100.

⁸⁰ Fukui Humimasa 福井文雅, “Seidan no kainen to so no kaishaku ni tsu i te 清談の概念とその解釋について,” *Nihon Chūgoku Gakkai hō* 20 (1968), p. 105.

⁸¹ Idle talk includes gossip and anecdotes. As Jack W. Chen notes, “Both gossip and anecdote are constitutive of, and constituted by, local structures of social organization and relationality—which is to say, the interpersonal networks that manifest themselves throughout society.” With the lens of idle talks, one can easily discover the tensions between public and private knowledge and explore the economy of reputation and social capital. See Jack W. Chen and David Schaberg eds, *Idle Talk Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China* (University of California Press, 2014), pp. 2–7, 55–70.

(status) within the relatively closed elite communities. Next, let us explore the role of idle conversation as the infrastructure for character appraisal in the non-institutional public space and the economy of reputation through a detailed reading of some anecdotal accounts.

The first example is a typical story that focuses on the theme of becoming known in the *Shishuo xinyu*:

After Wang Ru'nan (Zhan) had completed the period of mourning for his father, he continued to live by the tomb. Whenever his brother's son Ji came to visit the tomb, Ji almost never passed by his uncle's place. Neither did his uncle expect him. When Ji did stop by, he would only have some small talks [with Wang Zhan]. Later, when Ji made a slight attempt to direct his inquiries towards recent events, [Zhan's] replies were exceedingly eloquent and well phrased, far beyond anything Ji had anticipated, and Ji was extremely surprised. As Ji continued talking with Zhan, their conversation grew more and more refined and subtle. Earlier, Ji had rarely shown any respect to Zhan as a nephew. Having heard the words of his uncle now, Ji could not help but be in awe of Zhan, to the extent that his mind and body were both overwhelmed. Thereupon, he stayed to converse with Zhan for days and nights. Although Ji was intelligent and open-minded, he considered himself lacking (in discernment). With a deep sigh, Ji said: "Our family has all along had a distinctive gentleman in it, and I remained unaware of this for thirty years."⁸²

王汝南既除所生服，遂停墓所。兄子濟每來拜墓，略不過叔，叔亦不候。濟脫時過，止寒溫而已。後聊試問近事，荅對甚有音辭，出濟意外，濟極愧愕。仍與語，轉造精微。濟先略無子姪之敬，既聞其言，不覺慄然，心形俱肅。遂留共語，彌日累夜。濟雖雋爽，自視缺然，乃喟然嘆曰：“家有名士，三十年而不知！”⁸³

The current anecdote is the most extended story in the chapter “Appreciation and Praise” in the *Shishuo xinyu*. The story concerns two gentlemen, Wang Zhan 湛 (249–295) and Wang Ji 濟 (ca. 246–ca. 291). Both were members of the Wang 王 lineage in Taiyuan 太原, which later became one of the most prominent aristocratic lineages in the Southern dynasties and Tang period. The story's plot can be divided into three phases: 1) not being known, 2) conversing to be known, and 3) the aftermath of being known. The passage quoted above tells the process of Wang Zhan from being neglected by his surroundings and in a state of social non-existence to finally being discovered and recognised by his nephew Wang Ji through idle conversation, which covers the first phase and partially the second phase of the story.

To briefly sum up the rest of the story, after the initial conversation between Wang Zhan and Wang Ji, Wang Ji challenged his uncle further by asking him to ride a ferocious horse. Wang Zhan

⁸² This translation is based on Mather's translation with minor modifications. Mather, *A New Account*, pp. 229–230.

⁸³ *Shishuo xinyu* 8.17. In *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏, p. 473.

maintained his composure and tamed the horse. His demeanour impressed Wang Ji. After Wang Ji went back home, his father Wang Hun 渾 asked the reason for his delayed return. Wang Ji replied: “I just got an uncle 始得一叔.” The story then shifts to a conversation between Wang Ji and Sima Yan (236–290), who was referred to as Emperor Wu 武帝. It is said that Sima Yan often used his imbecile uncle to tease Wang Ji, and Wang Ji would have nothing to reply. Nevertheless, after the events in the story, Wang Ji proudly defended his uncle. Thereafter, Wang Zhan finally got his name established and was offered the first official appointment at 28 *sui*.⁸⁴

The commentary of *Shishuo xinyu* 8.17 refers to the *Jinji* 晉紀 (Records of the Jin) by Deng Can 鄧粲, saying that Wang Zhan remained unknown for a long time and his family even suspected him of being imbecile. Wang Zhan remained underestimated until his nephew Wang Ji returned home for the mourning of Wang Zhan’s father (Wang Chang 昶, d. 259) and discovered the *Zhouyi* 周易 on Wang Zhan’s bedside. The two had a conversation, and then Wang Zhan became socially recognised as a gentleman of distinction (*mingshi*). Mather translates *mingshi* as “famous gentleman,”⁸⁵ which is inaccurate in this context. *Ming* here clearly does not concern fame but one’s cultural competence in comparison to his peers, as the same commentary shows that when Wang Ji was asked by Sima Yan to rank Wang Zhan, Wang Ji placed Wang Zhan below Shan Tao 山濤 (205–283) and above Wei Shu 魏舒 (209–290).⁸⁶

The story about Wang Zhan and Wang Ji is not a solitary example. In fact, another story in the chapter “Cultivated Learning” shows an identical motif and plot structure:

Zhang Ping was selected as a Filial and Incorrupt candidate. He left for the capital. Proud of his talent, he claimed that he would certainly join the group of the most brilliant of his time and intended to visit Magistrate Liu (Liu Tan 憐). The local community and governor all laughed at him. Zhang Ping eventually visited Liu Tan. Liu Tan was washing and preparing himself at the time, and he placed Zhang Ping on an inferior seat. Merely exchanging words about the weather, their spirit and mind did not connect. Zhang Ping wanted to express himself, but there was no chance. Soon after, the senior governor and other worthies came for idle conversation. Whenever the guests and the host had anything incomprehensible, Zhang would discern it from his far-end seat. The concision of his words and the profoundness of his ideas were enough to smooth the mind of everyone. Everyone in the audience was astonished. Zhenchang (Liu Tan) invited him to the upper seat, where they engaged in idle conversation throughout the whole day, and so [Zhang Ping] stayed overnight until sunrise.

⁸⁴ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 474.

⁸⁵ Mather, *A New Account*, p. 230.

⁸⁶ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 473.

張憑舉孝廉，出都，負其才氣，謂必參時彥，欲詣劉尹。鄉里及同舉者共笑之。張遂詣劉。劉洗濯料事，處之下坐。唯通寒暑，神意不接。張欲自發無端。頃之，長史諸賢來清言。客主有不通處，張乃遙於末坐判之。言約旨遠，足暢彼我之懷，一坐皆驚。真長延之上坐，清言彌日，因留宿至曉。⁸⁷

This story centres on a humble-born gentleman named Zhang Ping 張憑.⁸⁸ Like the last anecdote, the current story also consists of a tripartite plot: 1) the stage of not being known, 2) the process of becoming known, and 3) the aftermath of becoming known. The passage above shows the first two phases of the story. In phase one, the worthy gentleman Zhang Ping was not yet known widely beyond his locality. He was underestimated by the local gentry community and even became the target of mockery despite holding the degree of “Filial and Incorrupt.” Zhang Ping was an ambitious young man, so he went on searching for the one who could genuinely recognise his worth. The story then proceeds to the second phase, where Zhang Ping approached the famous conversationist Liu Tan 劉惔 (d. 348 or 349), who was a well-established figure of power and prestige in the capital of the Eastern Jin.⁸⁹

Initially neglected, Zhang Ping was sent to the lower seat, which symbolised Zhang Ping’s insignificant status perceived by Liu Tan. Later, Zhang Ping demonstrated his worthiness amidst the group’s idle gathering. Liu Tan acknowledged Zhang Ping’s competency and invited Zhang Ping to sit on the superior seat, which symbolised the ascendance of Zhang Ping’s status perceived by the audience. As Liu Tan was totally absorbed in the conversation with Zhang Ping, he forgot the flow of time, which caused Zhang Ping to stay overnight. To sum up the last phase of the story, Zhang Ping returned to his friend, who asked for the reason behind his delayed return. Zhang Ping did not reply. In the end, Zhang Ping’s ascendance of status was not only symbolic but became a reality, as Liu Tan later summoned Zhang Ping and recommended him to the regent Sima Yü 昱, who eventually became known as Emperor Jianwen 簡文 of the Jin dynasty. Zhang Ping was

⁸⁷ *Shishuo xinyu* 4.53. In *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 259–260.

⁸⁸ The only mention of Zhang Ping’s family background in the *Jinshu* is that his grandfather was a county governor, based on which we can speculate that Zhang Ping was not someone of high birth and his family had no pre-existing connections with those at the political centre. *Jinshu*, *juan* 75, p. 1992.

⁸⁹ For information about Liu Dan, see *Jinshu*, *juan* 75, pp. 1990–1992.

subsequently appointed to the position of grand ordinary erudite (*taichang boshi* 太常博士) in the central government.⁹⁰

Other than elite male, anecdotal accounts show that less privileged groups could also establish their names and gain respect through participating in idle conversations, as one can see in the next example:

When the monk Kang Sengyuan first crossed the Yangzi River, nobody knew him. [Kang Sengyuan] continually wandered around the markets and shops, begging for alms to support himself. In the end, he went to the residence of Yin Yuanyuan (Hao 浩). At the time, [the house] happened to be filled with guests. Yin bade him be seated and greeted him roughly, but eventually [their conversation] got to involve interpretations and principles. Kang's verbal expressions and ideas never showed any sign of embarrassment. Once Kang grasped the rough idea, he would attain the essence in a single stride.⁹¹ Thereafter, he became known.

康僧淵初過江，未有知者。恆周旋市肆，乞索以自營，忽往殷淵源許。值盛有賓客，殷使坐，麤與寒溫，遂及義理。語言辭旨，曾無愧色。領略麤舉，一往參詣。由是知之。⁹²

This account centres on a monk with Central Asian ancestry named Kang Sengyuan 康僧淵, who experienced a change of social standing after conversing with one of the most prestigious gentleman-officials Yin Hao 殷浩 (d. 356) in an idle gathering.⁹³ Like in the previous case, idle conversation configures a relatively egalitarian space where pre-existing social hierarchy can be challenged and redefined. Conversing with a higher-standing peer is both a challenge and a chance for someone of lower social standing. Kang Sengyuan's idle conversation with Yin Hao is a double-layer challenge not only because the monk needed to draw on his distinctive wisdom

⁹⁰ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 260.

⁹¹ My thesis examiner, Joachim Gentz (2024), points out that the phrase “領略麤舉，一往參詣” may be an echo of *Lunyu* 7.8 “舉一隅不以三隅反，則不復也” (“If I raise one aspect of a question, but the student cannot come back to me with the other three, then I will not instruct him again”). So, an alternative interpretation is that once Kang Sengyuan grasped the rough idea, he could apply it to all other aspects.

⁹² *Shishuo xinyu* 4.47. In *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 255.

⁹³ For the biography of Yin Hao, see *Jinshu*, *juan* 77, pp. 2043–2048.

and literary competency in expounding both Buddhist and non-Buddhist knowledge,⁹⁴ but also because the foreign monk was under pressure to maintain his composure in a disadvantageous situation. While the former challenge is explicitly stated in the text, the latter is only implied by the line that Kang Sengyuan “never showed any sign of embarrassment.”

Kang Sengyuan’s experience was not unique. In the Eastern Jin period, there were monks who gained remarkable prestige due to their performance in idle conversation.⁹⁵ Besides monks, women could also shine and exceed others in idle conversation. Regarding women in the *Shishuo xinyu*, Qian Nanxiu argues that the term *shi* 士 in the *Shishuo* genre also includes women, and the two genders in the Wei-Jin period were evaluated on “equal terms.”⁹⁶ The most famous example is *Shishuo xinyu* 2.71, where Xie An 謝安 (320–385) discussed literature and philosophy with his family on a snowy day. He asked the children what the snow resembled. While his nephew gave a mediocre reply, his niece Xie Daoyun 謝道韞 said: “It resembles catkins of willow trees uplifted by the wind.”⁹⁷ Lady Xie’s official biography in the *Jinshu* also tells that she was a poet and had a reputation for being intelligent and eloquent in conversations and debates (*tanyi* 談議), and her cultural competency outshined that of her male siblings and husband.⁹⁸ Furthermore, another account in the *Shishuo xinyu* praises Lady Xie for having the demeanour and spirit equivalent to those of the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves.⁹⁹

So far, anecdotal accounts show idle conversation serves as a platform upon which individuals can demonstrate his or her cultural and social competency to their elite peers, thereby claiming prestige and establishing their initial reputation. Moreover, idle conversation is also the crucial medium through which memories and posthumous reputation of the deceased can be transmitted over time, as one can see in the following account:

⁹⁴ The *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks) also records this anecdote but with additional explanations. According to the *Gaoseng zhuan* account, *yi* 義 here stands for “the meanings of human nature and disposition and of secular books” (俗書性情之義), while *li* 理 stands for “the profound principles of Buddhist scripture” (佛經深遠之理). See *Gaoseng zhuan*, *juan* 4, p. 149.

⁹⁵ Among these monks, Zhi Dun 支遁 (314–366) was the most famous. There are numerous accounts about Zhi Dun in the *Shishuo xinyu*. For example, see no. 25, 32, 35, 36, 37, 40, 43, 51, and 55 in the fourth chapter “Cultivated Learning.” I will discuss Zhi Dun’s engagement in verbal contests in Chapter 3.

⁹⁶ Qian Nanxiu, *Spirit and Self in Medieval China: The Shih-shuo Hsin-yü and Its Legacy* (Hawai’i University Press, 2001), p. 11.

⁹⁷ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 143.

⁹⁸ *Jinshu*, *juan* 96, p. 2516.

⁹⁹ *Shishuo xinyu* 19.30. In *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 771.

[After] Yuan Boyan (Hong 宏) finished compiling the *Biographies of Distinctive Gentlemen*, he went to see Master Xie. Master Xie laughed and said: “I once told people stories of those in Jiangbei (north of the Yangzi River) simply for the sake of amusement. Yanbo eventually composed a book based on these!”

袁伯彥作《名士傳》成，見謝公。公笑曰：“我嘗與諸人道江北事，特作狡獪耳！彥伯遂以箸書。”¹⁰⁰

This short account is particularly interesting, for it provides clues regarding how social memory is produced and reproduced, as well as how oral history was converted into written history in early medieval China. Master Xie here refers to Xie An, one of the most influential political figures in the Eastern Jin court.¹⁰¹ According to Jack W. Chen’s visualisation of social networks in the *Shishuo xinyu*, Xie An is the most well-connected figure in the *Shishuo xinyu*.¹⁰² Hence, it is unsurprising that Xie An acted as the source of information, telling stories of the previous generations of eminent gentlemen who lived during the Cao-Wei and Western Jin period before the mass emigration to the South after the Jin dynasty lost its territory to the non-Chinese forces in a series of civil war and rebellion from 304 to 317.

Notably, the anecdotal account shows that Xie An’s purpose of storytelling was not to lament the loss of homeland nor to express condolences but simply to entertain the audience in an idle context. It was rather unexpected to Xie An that Yuan Hong 袁宏 (328–376) compiled the *Mingshi zhuan* 名士傳 (“Biographies of Gentlemen of Distinction”), which is why Xie An reacted with laughter. We know that although Yuan Hong never served as an official historian at court, he had such a strong personal interest in history that he authored the *Hou Han ji* 後漢紀 (“Records of the Later Han”) in 30 *juans* and composed a eulogy (*song* 頌) for eminent statesmen of the Three Kingdoms period, as well as the *Mingshi zhuan* as mentioned above.¹⁰³

Unfortunately, the complete text of *Mingshi zhuan* has been lost. The text only exists in fragments preserved in the *Shishuo xinyu* and the annotated commentaries. One can still grasp the outline of *Mingshi zhuan* from the commentary under *Shishuo xinyu* 4.94 that Yuan Hong

¹⁰⁰ *Shishuo xinyu* 4.94. In *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 299–300.

¹⁰¹ For the official biography of Xie An, see *Jinshu*, *juan* 79, pp. 2072–2077.

¹⁰² Jack Wei Chen, *Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance: Essays on the Shishuo Xinyu* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021), p. 70.

¹⁰³ *Jinshu*, *juan* 92, pp. 2391–2399.

divided 18 individuals into three groups: *mingshi* of the Zhengshi 正始 period (240–249), *mingshi* of the bamboo grove 竹林 period (ca. 250–265), and *mingshi* of the central court 中朝 period (265–316).¹⁰⁴ As Kenneth H. Craik stresses, a reputation and a person are ontologically distinct realities. A person ceases to exist after death, but his or her reputation continues beyond death in social environments, in the heads of other people, in their daily chats and discourses, and in the oral tradition of the person’s family and associates.¹⁰⁵ This is also the case in early medieval China. As we can see, the posthumous reputation of the deceased persisted as the living continued to talk about them and propagated their stories through idle talks. Eventually, this private knowledge became a part of public knowledge, as anecdotal accounts from Xie An and Yuan Hong became source materials for later historiography.

In his study of gossip and reputation in the world of the *Shishuo xinyu*, Chen asserts that idle talk like gossip is never an insignificant social practice limited to private and trivial matters or “women’s envious tale-telling,” as suggested in misogynistic terms. Instead, idle talk plays a central role in defining social norms and the boundaries of social groups. In the world of the *Shishuo xinyu*, it is the network of gossip that binds the elite community together, as members of the community gossip about one another, elevating the reputations of some while defaming others.¹⁰⁶ Based on the analysis so far, I would like to add more to Chen’s perspicacious observation regarding the role of idle conversation as the infrastructure for community formation and the economy of reputation and prestige. On the individual level, idle conversation was one of the most common means through which a person could impress an elite peer and hence become known by a wider social network beyond the scope of his (sometimes her) home locality. Not only did idle conversation serve as the platform for the construction and reconstruction of one’s lifetime reputation, but it also facilitated the transmission and preservation of one’s posthumous reputation and bridged the gap between private and public knowledge.

¹⁰⁴ Xiahou Xuan 夏侯玄, He Yan 何晏, and Wang Bi 王弼 are grouped as *mingshi* of Zhengshi; Ruan Ji 阮籍, Ji Kang 嵇康, Shan Tao 山濤, Xiang Xiu 向秀, Liu Ling 劉伶, Ruan Xian 阮咸, Wang Rong 王戎 as *mingshi* of bamboo grove; Pei Kai 裴楷, Yue Yue Guang 樂廣, Wang Yan 王衍, Yu Ai 庾敳, Wang Cheng 王承, Ruan Zhan 阮瞻, Wei Jie 衛玠, Xie Kun 謝鯤 as *mingshi* of the central court.

¹⁰⁵ Kenneth H. Craik, *Reputation: A Network Interpretation* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. xvii.

¹⁰⁶ Chen, *Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance*, pp. 90–91.

In summary, this chapter has traced the changing sources of prestige ranging from textual mastery and public service to “minor arts” like literary composition and unconventional idle activities prior to the fall of the Han dynasty. I have demonstrated how prestige generated in conventional institutional spaces gradually lost its appeal for educated elites during the latter half of the second century, and this simultaneously gave rise to a general fascination with individual reputation, the ethos of social eremitism, and the proliferation of non-institutional public spaces. These non-institutional public spaces became the new loci where elites fostered personal connections with peers, local patrons, and appraisers while engaging in various idle activities that were essentially playful. Among these idle activities, idle conversation, referred to as *qingtan*, played a crucial role not only in the production of metaphysical and literary knowledge but also in the conferral and transmission of social capital and the reproduction of social memories. Besides staying connected to a social network, one may wonder about other criteria for being a *mingshi*. In the next chapter, we will explore the discourse of social distinction and the new paradigm that underlies the celebration of *mingshi* in the Wei-Jin period.

Chapter 2 The *Mingshi* Paradigm

Wei-Jin elite society is marked by a collective fascination with prestigious individuals referred to as *mingshi* 名士. While previous scholarship has primarily approached this phenomenon from the perspective of fame and reputation or the rise of individualism,¹ the criteria for being a *mingshi* in the Wei-Jin are far more complicated and should be better approached from the perspective of social distinction. This chapter explores what I call the *mingshi* paradigm. I argue that in the Wei-Jin time, prestige was accorded to individuals who embraced behavioural unconventionality and spiritual transcendence and distinguished themselves from followers of conventions (*su* 俗). The chapter can be divided into three parts. In the first part, I briefly examine how prestigious individuals are characterised by a discourse of social distinction in biographies. The second part traces the origin of the Wei-Jin discourse of social distinction to the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. I argue that the conception of *mingshi* is inspired by the spirit of anti-conventionalism in the *Zhuangzi*. In the third part, I lend attention to the writings of three prestigious gentlemen at the time and sketch out the definitive traits of their model sages, which epitomise the new *mingshi* paradigm.

I. The Discourse of Social Distinction

Let us begin with three descriptions of prestigious gentlemen in late-Han and Wei-Jin sources:

1. Xu Zhi, courtesy name Ruzi, came from Nanchang Yuzhang. He was pure and wondrous, standing loftily beyond the ordinary world and breaking off from the conventions. He was recommended several times by high officials, but he never took the appointment. When he passed away, [people] travelled for thousands of *li* to mourn him.
徐稚，字孺子，豫章南昌人。清妙高跼，超世絕俗。前後為諸公所辟，雖不就。及其死，萬里赴弔。
2. Ruan Ji, courtesy name Sizong, came from Weishi Chenliu. He was the son of Ruan Yu. He was free and intelligent, unrestrained by rites and customs. Wang Chang, the governor of Yanzhou, sent a request to meet with Ruan Ji but could not speak with him for the whole day. Chang felt ashamed and sighed over it, thinking that he could not measure up to Ji. Ji never commented on contemporary affairs. He was spontaneous and lofty.

¹ Yu Yingshi 余英時, *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua* 士與中國文化 (Shanghai: Shanghai renming chubanshe, 2003), pp. 310–331; Jack W. Chen, “Knowing Men and Being Known: Gossip and Social Networks in the Shishuo Xinyu,” in *Idle Talk: Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China*, ed. Jack W. Chen and David Schaberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 55–70; Jack W. Chen, *Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance: Essays on the Shishuo Xinyu*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021), pp. 90–95.

阮籍, 字嗣宗, 陳留尉氏人。阮瑀子也, 宏達不羈, 不拘禮俗。兗州刺史王昶請與相見, 終日不得與言, 昶愧歎之自以不能測也。口不論事, 自然高邁。

3. [Xi] Chao, in his youth, possessed ability and spirit. [He] transcended the world and outstripped the common. He did not conform to conventional rules, and his contemporaries considered him the one with the most flourishing reputation of his generation.

超少有才氣, 越世負俗, 不循常檢。時人為一代盛譽者。

All three accounts belong to the genre of official histories.² The first account comes from the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (“History of the Later Han”) by Xie Cheng 謝承 (182–254) and is quoted in the commentary of *Shishuo xinyu* 1.1. The account is about a famous hermit named Xu Zhi during the reign of Emperor Huan 桓 (r. 146–168). Since the convention for an ideal Confucian gentleman was to become educated and serve in the bureaucracy, Xu Zhi set himself apart from the mundane and ordinary by refusing official appointments. The second account is from *Weishi chunqiu* 魏氏春秋 (“Spring and Autumn of the Wei Dynasty”) by Sun Sheng 孫盛 (302–373) quoted in the commentary of *Shishuo xinyu* 1.15. It describes an anecdote about Ruan Ji (210–263), who was known as one of the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves. Unlike Xu Zhi in the first example, Ruan Ji did have a rather successful career under the Cao-Wei regime. Nevertheless, his fame primarily came from his deviant behaviours, spontaneity, and seemingly apolitical attitude. The third account comes from the *Xu Jinyangqiu* 續晉陽秋 (“The Continuation of Jinyangqiu”) by Tan Daoluan 檀道鸞 (5th century) and is quoted in the commentary of *Shishuo xinyu* 8.126. The main figure is Xi Chao 郗超, a prestigious gentleman-official in the Eastern Jin period. Like Ruan Ji, Xi Chao was known for his anti-conventional behaviour and spirit.

In all three accounts, the prominent gentlemen are characterised by unconventionality, expressed in words such as *qing* 清 (purity), *gao* 高 (loftiness), and *chao/yue shi* 超/越世 (transcendence). This unconventionality represents a superior category and is defined in opposition to the category of the “common” and “conventional” expressed in words such *chang* 常, *li* 禮, and *su* 俗. Fame and prestige are rewarded to those who embraces the former category while challenging and deviating from the latter category.

² *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏, pp. 1, 19, 536.

Furthermore, a strong desire to distinguish oneself from the *suren* can be observed in the literary composition of Wei-Jin *mingshi*. The following shows one example:

One ought not to become intimate with the vulgar,	俗人不可親,
Instead, take Red Pine and Wang Qiao as neighbours.	松喬是可鄰。
Why dwell amongst dirt and mire,	何為穢濁間,
Where any shake can build up filth and dust?	動搖增垢塵。

Above are the first four lines in one of the pentasyllabic verses (*wu yan shi* 五言詩) by Ji Kang 嵇康 (223–262).³ Here, Ji Kang explicitly expresses his contempt against the *su ren* 俗人. In his view, the world of conventional and mediocre men is full of dirt and pollution. Involving oneself with the *su ren* is to participate in a negative cycle of pollution, for one can be polluted by every action taken and then generate more pollution in the world. Instead of living in the lower realm of the conventional, Ji Kang advocates that one should stay in proximity with the two legendary immortals, Chisong zi 赤松子 and Wangzi Qiao 王子喬.

In short, to become a model figure of prestige in the Wei-Jin time meant to distinguish oneself by embracing the unconventional while distancing oneself from the common and conventional. Such a discourse is not entirely new but a derivative of a long-existing tradition of anti-conventionalism that traces its origin to the *Zhuangzi*. In the next section, I will briefly examine some analogous discourse in the *Zhuangzi*.

II. The Tradition of Anti-Conventionalism

In early China, the fascination for social distinction began to emerge as early as the Eastern Zhou period (770–550 BCE) among the warrior nobility. For example, it is articulated in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 that social hierarchy should be determined by “ritual (*li*),” which, on the basis of assigning both titles and personal names (*ming*), was also intertwined with the ideas of “reputation” and “fame.”⁴ In the Confucian tradition, an elite person (*shi* 士) is encouraged to establish a name by cultivating

³ *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu* 嵇康集校注, pp. 137–138.

⁴ Lewis, *Honor and Shame*, p. 19.

himself and becoming an exemplary *junzi* 君子 like the Sage-Kings and then participating in public service (*shi* 事) to transform the broader world in accordance with the Confucian moral principles.⁵ Regarding the desire for *ming*, although Confucius suggests that a *junzi* should not be frustrated even if he is unacknowledged by others, he still expresses a *junzi*'s anxiety about dying without being known.⁶ This paradigm and the pursuit of prestige became an object of criticism, particularly in the *Zhuangzi*. Since the *Zhuangzi* was one of the major sources of intellectual inspiration in the Wei-Jin period, it is worthwhile to examine some passages from the *Zhuangzi*.⁷

The first example of anti-conventional discourse is found in the chapter “Pian mu 駢拇”:

In general, the small confusion will alter [one's sense of] direction, whereas the great confusion will alter one's human instinct. How do I know this? Ever since Yu (Shun 舜) summoned the humane and righteous to disrupt the order of the world, everyone in the world has been throwing their life into [chasing the ideal of] humaneness and righteousness. Isn't this the alternation of human instinct by [teachings of] kindness and righteousness?

I shall try to explain it. Since [the end of] the three dynasties (Xia, Shang and Zhou), there has not been anyone in the world who could resist altering one's basic instinct under external influences. The petty person would sacrifice his life for profits; the gentleman would sacrifice his life for repute; the ministers would sacrifice their life for the household; and the sage would sacrifice his life for the world. Thus, regarding the fact that they all distort their human instinct and sacrifice their life [for external things], these people, despite having different duties, names, and titles, are all the same.

夫小惑易方，大惑易性。何以知其然邪？自虞氏招仁義以撓天下也，天下莫不奔命於仁義，是非以仁義易其性與？故嘗試論之，自三代以下者，天下莫不以物易其性矣。小人則以身殉利，士則以身殉名，大夫則以身殉家，聖人則以身殉天下。故此數子者，事業不同，名聲異號，其於傷性以身為殉，一也。⁸

In this paragraph, the author regards kindness and righteousness, the core moral values advocated by the Confucian tradition, as “the great confusion” that alters one's *xing* 性. *Xing* here appears to

⁵ Lewis, *Honor and Shame*, pp. 48–61.

⁶ *Lunyu* 1.1: [If a person] is not known by others but does not feel frustrated, isn't he also a *junzi*? (人不知而不慍，不亦君子乎). Also *Lunyu* 15.20: The Master said: “A *junzi* was afraid of dying without having his name propagated” (子曰：君子疾沒世而名不稱焉).

⁷ Gao Ruihui 高瑞慧, “Huangmiu ji chaoyue: Weijin mingshi de sixiang shijie 荒謬及超越：魏晉名士的思想世界,” in *Wei-Jin Nanbeichao wenxue yu sixiang xueshu yanjiuhui lunwenji (di liu ji)* 魏晉南北朝文學與思想學術研究會論文集(第六輯) (Taipei: Liren shuju, 2010), pp. 658–659.

⁸ *Zhuangzi*, *pian* 8, “Pian mu,” in *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, p. 332.

denote the basic human instinct of avoiding danger and preserving life. The author makes a juxtaposition of four groups who prioritise different things and are assigned to different statuses: the petty person, the gentleman, the aristocrat/minister, and the sage.⁹ The author deconstructs the boundaries between the four groups from a consequentialistic point of view, noting that their aspirations lead to the common outcome of doom. According to the *Zhuangzian* value orientation, pursuing moral perfection and social prestige is deemed abnormal and absurd in opposition to the primal nature of humanity and the higher and naturalistic order of the universe.

In the anti-conventional discourse, the Confucian moral ideal *junzi* becomes the object of ridicule and satirical criticism. Another example can be found in the chapter "Dao Zhi 盜跖." The chapter consists of three parts. The first part begins with a conversation between Confucius and Liuxia Ji 柳下季 (Ji of the Liuxia Household), where the two discuss the controversial figure of Robber Zhi, the younger brother of Ji and a powerful hegemon and supposedly a despised "petty person" (*xiaoren* 小人). Confucius blames Ji for failing to guide his younger brother correctly. Later, Confucius approaches Robber Zhi in person and attempts to convert him to Confucian moral discourse. Not only untouched by Confucius's persuasion, Robber Zhi responds with an eloquent counterargument. Robber Zhi first describes an idyllic past where people had little desire and lived in harmony with the animals and each other. This picture of a harmonious past ended because the cultured sages spoiled the true nature of people and brought disorder to the world through wars, imposition of morality and rites, as well as recruitment of officials like Confucius, "who deceives the ruler of the world with false words and hypocritical actions in order to pursue wealth and prestige."¹⁰ Confucius is rendered speechless.

Such confrontation between a *junzi* and a *xiaoren* continues into the second part of the chapter, where Zizhang 子張, a disciple of Confucius, has a conversation with a man named Man Goude 滿苟得 whose name literally means "the greedy person who is satisfied with gaining reputation and profits through unjust means." A part of their conversation goes as such:

⁹ A similar representation also appears in the "Ke yi 刻意" chapter, which states a proverb: "The majority of people value profits; the upright gentleman values good repute/prestige; the worthy person honours his aspiration; the sage values his inner essence." (眾人重利, 廉士重名, 賢人尚志, 聖人貴精). The commentary by Cheng Xuanyin 成玄英 suggests that this is Zhuangzi who intends to categorise and evaluate (*geliang* 格量) different types of people. The *Zhuangzi* outlines four prototypes and expresses them through the words of a village person. *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 546.

¹⁰ *Zhuangzi jishi*, pp. 996–1003.

Zizhang asked Man Goude: “Why don’t you take some action? Without action, [others] will not trust [you]; without [others] trusting [you], you will not receive any official appointment; without taking an official appointment, you will not make any profit. So, [if] one contemplates [the way of accumulating] reputation and estimates the profits [brought by the accumulation of reputation], then [the act of] righteousness is truly it (that which one should undertake). If you forget [the pursuit of] reputation and profit and think about it in your mind, then there should not be a single day where you do not take the actions of righteous gentlemen.”

Man Goude said: “The shameless grows rich. The well-trusted prevails. In general, people who have attained great repute and profits are mostly those who receive others’ affirmation without any sense of humility. So, [if] one contemplates [the way of accumulating] reputation and estimates the profits [brought by the accumulation of reputation], then [that which brings] social affirmation is truly it (that which one should undertake). If you forsake [the pursuit of] reputation and profits and think about it in your mind, then the actions and practices of gentlemen are to preserve their Heaven (heavenly given allotments).”

子張問於滿苟得曰：“盍不為行？無行則不信，不信則不任，不任則不利。故觀之名，計之利，而義真是也。若棄名利，反之於心，則夫士之為行，不可一日不為乎。”

滿苟得曰：“無恥者富，多信者顯。夫名利之大者，幾在無恥而信。故觀之名，計之利，而信真是也。若棄名利，反之於心，則夫士之為行，抱其天乎。”¹¹

In Zizhang’s advice to Man Goude, the accumulation of reputation, the acquisition of official appointments and material profits are depicted as mutually correlated. They are all based upon conduct (*xing* 行). According to the Tang dynasty commentator Chen Xuanying 成玄英 (608–669), *xing* here refers to practices of the Confucian moral values of kindness and righteousness. Notably, in this conversation, Zizhang does not explicitly deny Man Goude’s aspiration. Instead, he tries to offer advice by actively engaging with Man Goude. However, Man Goude demonstrates a pragmatic mentality and stresses that the basis of reputation is *duo xin* 多信. The word *xin* 信 in this passage can function both as a noun, meaning “trust” or “credibility,” and as a verb, meaning “to trust” or “being trusted by others.” Chen Xuanying glosses *xin* with *yan* 言 (words and language) and suggests that if one aims to attain reputation and profits, one needs to rely on external verbal appraisals and one’s own shameless flaunt instead of humbly concealing oneself. Thus, the multiplicity of verbal appraisals is essential for the acquisition of reputation and profit.¹² In addition, by the quantifier *duo*, the text suggests that for a person like Man Goude, what matters is the quantity, instead of the authenticity, of appraisals. In the end, Man Goude ridicules Zizhang,

¹¹ *Zhuangzi*, pian 29, “Dao zhi,” in *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 1005.

¹² *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 1005.

saying: “The actions and practices of gentlemen are to preserve their heavenly given allotments” (*bao qi tian* 抱其天). Usually, the preservation of heavenly-given allotments in the *Zhuangzi* is something highly praised. However, in this context, the phrase appears to be satirical. It probably connotes the sense of “daydreaming.”¹³

Dialogues between a conventionally despised or socially marginalised figure and a Confucian moral exemplar are common motifs in the *Zhuangzi*. One more famous example can be found in the “Yu Fu 漁父” chapter, where Confucius and his disciples have a conversation with an old fisherman regarding the issue of authenticity (*zhen* 真).¹⁴ The fisherman, with a milder tone in comparison to that of Robber Zhi, questions the issue of hypocrisy in Confucian rites and morality. Instead of suppressing one’s genuine feelings for the sake of following ritual protocols, the fisherman advocates authenticity manifested through spontaneous expression of emotions. The fisherman’s argument is summarised as follows:

Following rites is the deed of the mundane. True One relies on what is received from Heaven; it is *ziran*, which is intrinsically unchangeable. Therefore, the Sage emulates Heaven and values the authentic instead of being confined by what is mundane. The unenlightened, on the other hand, goes against this. He fails to emulate Heaven and yet tries to empathise with others; he is busy with trivial matters and becomes alienated by [following] the mundane (rites) instead of valuing what is authentic. Hence, he is incomplete. How pitiful! You (Confucius) have been aware of human hypocrisy early but only heard of the Great Way so late.

禮者，世俗之所為也；真者，所以受於天也，自然不可易也。故聖人法天貴真，不拘於俗。愚者反此，不能法天而恤於人，不知貴真，祿祿而受變於俗，故不足。惜哉，子之早湛於人偽，而晚聞大道也。¹⁵

An apparent anti-conventional spirit is indicated in the text, as the text draws on a comparison between followers of rites and the True One to undermine the normative authority of the *junzi*. The text presents the socially disadvantaged fisherman as the spiritual mentor to Confucius, which

¹³ Interestingly, browsing through the entire chapter of “Dao Zhi,” one notices that the Wei-Jin commentator Guo Xiang 郭象 is almost absent from the commentary section except briefly stating “this chapter talks about those who know contentment will always be self-sufficient” (此章言知足者常足) at the end of the third section of the chapter. The third section is a conversation between Wuzu 無足 (the person who never contents) and Zhihe 知和 (the person who knows moderation and integrity). Guo Xiang seems to deliberately ignore the criticism of Confucian values, which implicitly demonstrates Guo Xiang's standpoint. *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 1015.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion on the notion of *zhen*, see Kim-chong Chong, “The Concept of ‘Zhen’ 真 in the *Zhuangzi*,” *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 2 (2011), pp. 324–346.

¹⁵ *Zhuangzi*, pian 31, “Yu fu,” in *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 1036.

already debases the status of the Confucian moral exemplar. The text then offers an alternatively envisioned Sage referred to the True One.¹⁶ The Zhuangzian Sage relies on that given by Heaven, which is the higher, ultimate order of the universe. In contrast, the unenlightened follower of ritual protocols is deficient in attaining insight into the Great Way because he is blinded by the lower, transient order constructed by men. The source of the spiritual authority of the Zhuangzian Sage is Heaven, which cannot be challenged, whereas the normative authority of the followers of rites comes from human society and can be challenged. Such a contrast makes the category of *li* and *su* inferior to that of *zhen*.

The Wei-Jin conception of *mingshi* was likely inspired by the anti-conventional spirit in the *Zhuangzi*. The dialogue between an unenlightened mundane gentleman and an enlightened worthy also became a common motif in the writings of Wei-Jin intellectuals. In the next part, I will examine three ideal personalities in the writings of prestigious gentlemen at the time and show how these representations agree with the tradition of anti-conventionalism.

III. The Selfless Expresser

The first ideal personality can be found in the writings of Ji Kang. Ji Kang, courtesy name Shuye 叔夜, was from the Qiao 譙 Principality (present-day Anhui 安徽 Province), which is also the hometown of the Cao family. His family gained prestige as Ji Kang's father served as Censor Expediter of Army Supplies under the Cao-Wei regime. Ji Kang eventually married a great-granddaughter of Cao Cao and was given the title of Grand Master of Palace Leisure (*zhongsan dafu* 中散大夫).¹⁷

Earlier, we witnessed Ji Kang's contempt against the mundane and mediocre and his admiration for the immortals in his pentasyllabic verses. Although Ji Kang may have strongly wished to leave the polluted, mundane world, he remained trapped and eventually became a victim of contemporary political struggle. Nevertheless, Ji Kang still managed to transcend the world within his own capacity by fully engaging in discussions of metaphysical subjects in search of the higher truth of

¹⁶ Such spiritual ideal is also referred to as *zhi ren* 至人 (Perfect Man) or *shen ren* 神人 (Spirited Man). See Michael Puett, "‘Nothing Can Overcome Heaven’: The Notion of Spirit in the *Zhuangzi*," in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*, ed. Scott Bradley Cook (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 257–259.

¹⁷ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 21, pp. 605–607.

the universe on the one hand and by engaging in various idle activities such as literary composition, social drinking, and playing music on the other hand. Known for socialising with his friends in a local bamboo grove, Ji Kang and his cohort eventually became known as “the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves.” Besides his dedication to spiritual cultivation, Ji Kang did not forsake his commitment to an ethical life. He preserved his integrity by staying loyal to his disadvantaged friend and refusing the offer by Shan Tao 山濤 to serve under the rising Sima Zhao 司馬昭.¹⁸ Ji Kang’s striving for perfection came with a fatal price. Apprehensive of Ji Kang’s influence among the *shi* community, Sima Zhao decided to execute Ji Kang in public. According to the *Shishuo xinyu*, Ji Kang played his zither while maintaining his elegant demeanour and composure right before the execution, and three thousand students in the Imperial Academy pleaded for him.¹⁹ Ji Kang’s outstanding reputation for being pure, both morally and spiritually, and socioculturally distinct makes him one of the most influential intellectuals and idols among Chinese literati prior to the Song dynasty.²⁰

This section examines the ideal personality put forward in one of Ji Kang’s most researched essays: the *Shisi lun* 釋私論 (“Essay on Dispelling Self-Interest”).²¹ An outline of this essay is included in Ji Kang’s official biography in the *Jinshu*.²² My analysis is primarily based on the outline.

The *Sishi lun* begins with the depiction of an ideal gentleman (*junzi*) who distinguishes himself from the conventional moral exemplar who seeks social recognition through public service:

In general, one who calls himself *junzi* is someone whose mind is not concerned about the right and the wrong; nevertheless, his conduct does not deviate from the Way. Why do I say so? In general, if one’s *qi* (vital pneuma) is at peace and one’s spirit is empty, then one’s mind will not fixate on self-importance; If one’s body is brightened and one’s mind is untrammelled, then one’s emotions will not be bound by desires. When there is no self-importance in one’s mind, then one can transcend the teaching of names and give free rein to one’s intrinsic nature.

¹⁸ See Ji Kang, “Letter to Shan Tao” and “Letter to Lü Xun,” *Ji Kang ji xiaozhu* 嵇康集校注, pp. 194–199, 230–231.

¹⁹ *Shishuo xinyu* 6.2. In *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 378–379.

²⁰ David Chai, *Reading Ji Kang’s Essays: Xuanxue in Early-Medieval China* (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 6.

²¹ *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, pp. 402–406.

²² *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, pp. 1369–1370.

夫稱君子者，心無措乎是非，而行不違乎道者也。何以言之？夫氣靜神虛者，心不存於矜尚；體亮心達者，情不繫於所欲。矜尚不存乎心，故能越名教而任自然。²³

Here, we find the first trait of Ji Kang's ideal personality—selflessness. The key word in this passage is *cuo* 措. Previous scholarship has offered two translations. Robert Henricks translates *cuo* as “concern.”²⁴ David Chai considers Henricks's translation of *cuo* “too passive in meaning” and offers his philosophical reading of *cuo* as “to employ,” rendering the line 心無措乎是非 as “whose heart-mind does not employ right and wrong.”²⁵ Modern scholar Dai Mingyang 戴明揚, who produced one of the two primary editions of Ji Kang's *Collected Works*, notes that in some other previous editions of Ji Kang's works, the word *xi* 惜, meaning “to regret,” was used in place of *cuo*.²⁶ Considering the possibility that *cuo* could be read as *xi*, as well as the basic meaning of *cuo* as “to place,” I adopt Henricks's translation. Therefore, the line 心無措乎是非 can be understood as “the Gentleman's mind is unconcerned about whether his actions and feelings are right or wrong in conventional terms.”

In other words, Ji Kang's ideal gentleman is someone who does not conform to external standards in order to gain social recognition (name and prestige). Instead, he focuses on a sort of self-cultivation to get rid of the self. By appeasing his *qi* (vital pneuma), emptying his spirit, cleaning his body and unburdening his mind, the gentleman dispels his egotistic impulse of wanting to feel important in the eyes of others and liberates his emotion. By doing so, he then achieves a state of selflessness. This is why the gentleman is not confined by *mingjiao* 名教 (“the teaching of names”) but relies on his intrinsic nature (*ziran*), just like the True One depicted in the “Yu Fu” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* who emulates that which is given by Heaven instead of being confined by ritual protocols.

Ji Kang continues to elaborate on the virtue of the gentleman as follows:

When one's emotion is not bound by desires, then one can carefully examine what is noble and what is mean and thoroughly comprehend the conditions of things. If the conditions of things are

²³ *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, p. 402.

²⁴ Robert G. Henricks, *Philosophy and Argumentation in Third-Century China: The Essays of Hsi K'ang* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 107.

²⁵ David Chai, “Chapter 12: Ji Kang's ‘On Dispelling Self-Interest,’” in *Dao Companion to Xuanxue* 玄學 (*Neo-Daoism*), ed. David Chai (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), p. 233.

²⁶ *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, p. 406.

comprehended without obstacle, then very likely there will not be deviation [of the Way]. If one transcends one's names (identities and titles given by the society) and gives free rein to the mind, then matters of right and wrong will not cause one to feel concerned.

Therefore, I say: The gentleman takes "being unconcerned" as his principle and regards comprehending [the conditions of] things as pleasing. The petty person, on the other hand, misleads [others] by concealing the conditions of things and makes mistakes by deviating from the Way. Why? Therefore, the ultimate evil of the petty person lies in concealing the conditions of things, arrogance, and stinginess; the sincere action of the gentleman entails emptying his mind and becoming unconcerned. Therefore, the *Great Way* states: "When I had no body, what would I be afraid of?" [And] "Not regarding life as something precious is better than valuing life."²⁷ To speak on the basis of this, it is certain that when the Perfect Man deploys his mind, he will not be concerned about anything.

情不繫於所欲，故能審貴賤而通物情。物情順通，故大無違。越名任心，故是非無措也。是故言君子則以無措為主，以通物為美；言小人則以匿情為非，以違道為闕。何者？匿情矜吝，小人之至惡；虛心無措，君子之篤行也。是以大道言：“及吾無身，吾又何患？”“無以生為貴者，是賢於貴生也。”由斯而言，夫至人之用心，固不存有措矣。²⁸

When one is no longer bound by one's egoistic impulse, one can finally perceive the conditions of things as they truly are (*wu qing* 物情) instead of projecting one's desire upon things to distort reality. It is by fully understanding the true conditions of things that the gentleman can live and act in accordance with the Great Way. Later in the essay, we can see that the natural course of things envisioned by Ji Kang is a benign cosmic force.²⁹ When the gentleman acts spontaneously without estimating the effect of his action, he becomes unconcerned, and things naturally come together to create positive results. In contrast, the petty person only brings chaos to the world because of his selfishness and arrogance. Unlike the gentleman who embraces spontaneity and takes joy in revealing the true conditions of things, the petty person leads himself and others astray, as he purposely hides the *qing* that probably includes the petty person's emotions and the true conditions of things.

²⁷ This is a reference to *Laozi* 13 and *Laozi* 75.

²⁸ *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, p. 402.

²⁹ The text reads: "The gentleman's conduct is noble [because] he does not first look into what is prescribed and then take an action. Giving free rein to his mind without malice, he does not make a judgment according to what is morally good and then corrects his action. Revealing his emotions without feeling concerned, he does not make an argument according to what is correct and then takes action. For this reason, he haughtily forgets his noble conduct, and then his noble conduct concurs with what is prescribed; he gives free rein to his mind without awareness, and then his mind coincides with what is good. When he is absentminded without concern, then his affairs and correctness will come together." 君子之行賢也，不察於有度而後行也；任心無邪，不議於善而後正也。顯情無措，不論於是而後為也。是故傲然忘賢，而賢與度會；忽然任心，而心與善遇；儻然無措，而事與是俱也。 *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, p. 403.

Besides the trait of selflessness, Ji Kang's gentleman is characterised by his prioritising of *gong* 公 above *si* 私. Although the discussion on the issue of *gong* and *si* had already existed in early Chinese texts,³⁰ Ji Kang's notion of *gong* and *si* means more than the conventional definitions of *gong* as "public-spirited" or "unselfish" and *si* as "self-interest." Ji Kang briefly explains what he means by these terms near the end of his essay: "In general, *si* is named from not speaking out. *Gong* is designated from fully expressing everything through words. Goodness is manifested by not being stingy. Wrongness is defined by feeling concerned (*cuo*)" 夫私以不言為名, 公以盡言為稱; 善以無名(慙)為體, 非以有措為負(質).³¹ As the text indicates, Ji Kang's notion of *gong* and *si* is distinguished on the basis of whether one chooses to openly express oneself or to keep things to oneself. Hence, Ji Kang's notion of *going* seems to connote "openness" and "honesty"; and *si* seems to connote "secrecy" and "reservedness."

Returning to the outline of the essay, Ji Kang begins his discussion of *gong* and *si* by presenting two paradoxical cases:

So, to discuss *gong* and *si*, although one may set one's will on the way and preserve [the thought of] goodness without hiding [oneself] because one has no malice nor cares, still one can be said to be *si* (selfish and reserved). Although one's desire may lack goodness and one's emotion is opposed to the Way, if one does not reveal oneself because one [has claimed that] there is nothing reserved, still one can be said to be *gong* (honest and unselfish).

故論公私者，雖雲志道存善，□無凶邪無所懷而不匿者，不可謂無私。雖欲之伐善，情之違道，無所抱而不顯者，不可謂不公。³²

The subject in the first case appears to be a morally good gentleman, for he sets his mind on the Way and dedicates himself to acting good. Although he claims to hide nothing, he can still be considered selfish and to have some secrecy. The subject in the second case appears to be a morally defective person whose desire and emotion deviate from the Way. However, he may still be considered unselfish if he pretends to be honest. Here, Ji Kang probably suggests that the matter of *gong* and *si* has little to do with someone being morally good or bad, and it is difficult for others to judge whether a person is truly honest/unselfish or not.

³⁰ See Chai's survey of the concepts of public (*gong* 公) and private (*si* 私) in Classical Daoism: Chai, "Chapter 12: Ji Kang's 'On Dispelling Self-Interest,'" In *Dao Companion to Xuanxue*, pp. 230–233.

³¹ *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, p. 406.

³² *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, p. 403.

In spite of the ambiguity, Ji Kang argues that it is still better to be open and honest instead of hiding one's emotions and defects for two reasons:

If one values one's name and treasures one's mind, then one must clarify the conditions of right and wrong. When [the conditions of] right and wrong are clarified, then the person who has done good will not make the mistake of hiding his emotion; the person who has done wrong will not add to the severe wrongness of not being open. When nobody makes the mistake [of hiding oneself], then goodness will be attained. When there is no severe wrongness [of not being honest], then [the wrong] will not exceed his misdeed. This is, therefore, the means by which the wrong can correct his misdeed. Not only is this (being honest) the way to be thoroughly good, but also it is the way to motivate those who are not good. In general, [by being honest,] the good can be thoroughly good, and the wrong can be corrected, let alone the case for those who are at the extremes of being right and wrong. So, being [purely] good or evil is rather the extreme case. If one falls between the two extremes and chooses one direction to proceed, one will necessarily succeed by being honest and fail by holding back. People rely on the same capacity, but some will succeed, and others will fail. [The choice of] being honest/unselfish or reserved/selfish is indeed the path to success or failure and the gate to good or bad fortune.³³

重其名而貴其心，則是非之情不得不顯矣。是非必顯，有善者無匿情之不是，有非者不加不公之大非。無不是，則善莫不得；無大非，則莫過其非，乃所以救其非也。非徒盡善，亦所以厲不善也。夫善以盡善，非以救非，而況乎以是非之至者。故善之與不善，物之至者也。若處二物之間，所往者必以公成而私敗。同用一器，而有成有敗。夫公私者，成敗之途而吉凶之門乎。³⁴

The first reason is stated in the opening line. In order to understand Ji Kang's reasoning, we need to first contemplate the meaning of the phrase *shi fei zhi qing* 是非之情 ("the conditions of right and wrong"). There can be two interpretations. The first interpretation is that one must open up with others regarding how one feels and reacts when facing issues of right and wrong. By doing so, one can avoid suspicion and being misunderstood by others, hence protecting one's reputation and setting one's mind at ease. The second interpretation is that *qing* here refers back to the earlier usage of *wu qing* 物情, meaning "the true conditions of things," so the message can be: "Once one makes clear of the true conditions in matters of right and wrong, one can protect one's reputation and mind." In either case, Ji Kang believes that being *gong* (honest and unselfish) is beneficial both inwardly and outwardly.

The second merit of being *gong* is that one can have a better chance of improving oneself and exerting good influences on others in spite of being an average person with inherent goodness (*you*

³³ This translation is based on Henricks's translation with minor modifications. See Henricks, *Philosophy and Argumentation in Third-Century China*, p. 110.

³⁴ *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, p. 403.

shan 有善) and faults (*you fei* 有非). Since most people fall in between the extreme ends of good and evil and their “vessel” (*qi* 器), or capacity, is the same, everybody has the potential to either succeed or fail depending on whether the person embraces *gong* or *si*. By being honest and unselfish, those who are inherently good can be even better, while those who are faulty can rectify their mind and conduct in time instead of holding on to their mistakes to the point of failure and self-destruction. The reason behind this is probably because by revealing oneself and dispelling one’s arrogance, one embraces the Great Way, which is a benign force that generates and nourishes myriad things. This is why Ji Kang puts forward the punch line: “[The choice of] being *gong* or *si* is indeed the path to success or failure and the gate to good or bad fortune.”

Thus far, we have seen that the ideal personality in Ji Kang’s essay is marked by the traits of selflessness and honesty. He is not only a spiritual being, for he has liberated his spirit and emotion from worldly concerns by dispelling his egotistic impulse and becoming one with the Way, but also an ethical being who transforms both himself and others by being open. He shares a similar standpoint to the realised sage in the *Zhuangzi*, as he also prioritises nourishing what is intrinsically natural in humans (*ziran*) instead of conforming to social conventions. Thus, we can name Ji Kang’s ideal personality “the selfless expresser.”

IV. The Untrammelled Wanderer

Having identified the selfless expresser in Ji Kang’s essay, I will turn to the writing of Ji Kang’s older friend Ruan Ji (210–263), who is said to have also been a member of the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves.

Ruan Ji, courtesy name Sizong 嗣宗, was from Weishi 尉氏 in Chenliu 陳留 Commandery (present-day Kaifeng 開封 in Henan Province). His father, Ruan Yu 阮瑀 (a. 165–212), once studied under the prominent scholar-official Cai Yong 蔡邕 and was known for literary composition and music. For this reason, Ruan Yu was named one of the Seven Masters of the Jian’an period by Cao Pi and was selected to be Cao Cao’s secretary. It is even said that many of Cao Cao’s writings, such as memorials, letters, essays and poetry, were, in fact, composed by Ruan Yu.³⁵ In spite of being favoured by the ruling Cao family, Ruan Ji’s family neither became rich nor powerful, as his

³⁵ Xin Qi 辛旗, *Ruan Ji ping zhuan* 阮籍評傳 (Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 2012), p. 2.

father died of illness when Ruan Ji was three years old. Like his father, Ruan Ji was gifted with literary composition and music. His official biography in the *Jinshu* states that Ruan Ji once had the aspiration to save the world. However, in his 30s, the faction struggle at court between the two regents, Cao Shuang 爽 and Sima Yi 懿, escalated. In order to evade the danger of political life, Ruan Ji refused to affiliate himself with either faction. He took the nominal post of Infantry Commandant (*bubing xiaowei* 步兵校尉) and became an excessive drinker.³⁶

Like his younger friend Ji Kang, Ruan Ji also found his intellectual inspiration in philosophical Daoism and took an anti-conventional standpoint. One of his works that has received scholarly attention is the “Biography of Master Great Man” (*Daren Xiansheng zhuan* 大人先生傳; hereafter, *Biography*).³⁷ The *Biography* focuses on a mysterious person referred to as “Master Great Man” who resided in the Sumen 蘇門 Mountains and his interactions with three interlocutors. According to the *Weishi chunqiu* quoted by Pei Songzhi, Ruan Ji composed the *Biography* after returning from a meeting with an anonymous hermit in the Sumen Mountains.³⁸ Ruan Ji and the anonymous hermit discussed the way of *wuwei* 無為 (non-deliberate action) of High Antiquity and the virtue of the Five Legendary Sovereigns and Three Sage Kings. A true spiritual resonance between the two occurred as they communicated their mind by uttering a long cry (*chang xiao* 長嘯) to each other.³⁹ Although the *Biography* was written as a hagiography, the figure of Master Great Man was likely a fictional, ideal character created by Ruan Ji, serving as the literary representation of the author himself.⁴⁰ As Donald Holzman points out, Master Great Man is undeniably the crystallisation of Ruan Ji’s conscious and unconscious yearnings.⁴¹ It is, hence, appropriate to regard Master Great Man as the ideal personality in Ruan Ji’s thought.

So what kind of person is Master Great Man? At the beginning of the *Biography*, Ruan Ji writes:

The Master lives on his own sublimely by the means of adapting to changes, going along with harmony, and taking Heaven and Earth as his shelter, even though his fortune has disappeared and his power

³⁶ *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, p. 1360.

³⁷ For a thorough study of the *Biography*, see Donald Holzman, *Poetry and Politics: The Life and Works of Juan Chi, A.D. 210–263* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 185–226.

³⁸ The *Jinshu* identifies the anonymous hermit with a person named Sun Deng 孫登. See *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, p. 1362; and *juan* 94, p. 2426.

³⁹ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 21, p. 605.

⁴⁰ Xin, *Ruan Ji ping zhuan*, pp. 85–88.

⁴¹ Holzman, *Poetry and Politics*, p. 185.

declined. He believes that he is capable of advancing and shifting along with [the flow of] transformation. Hence, he seeks the potency of the Way in silence and refuses to conform to the mundane. The self-important negate him, and the ignorant find him odd, for they do not understand the marvellous subtlety of his transformation. Nevertheless, the Master does not change his priority because of the negation and rejection of the mundane. The Master thinks that the central district existing in the world is just like flies and mosquitos stopping on the curtain. So, he never engages in worldly affairs but carries his mind to exotic lands. He wanders and takes joy in those unseen by the mundane and goes round and about [in the realm] that has no limit and end.

先生以應變順和，天地為家，運去勢隕，魁然獨存。自以為能足與造化推移，故默探道德，不與世同。自好者非之，無識者怪之，不知其變化神微也。而先生不以世之非怪而易其務也。先生以為中區之在天下，曾不若蠅蚊之著帷，故終不以為事，而極意乎異方奇域。遊覽觀樂非世所見，徘徊無所終極。⁴²

This passage shows two defining traits of Master Great Man. First, the Master exemplifies the Zhuangzian spiritual ideal, cultivating himself to live in the world like a free-wandering spirit. The opening line may be an allusion to the idea in the *Zhuangzi* that “the Sage dwells in things instead of inflicting harm on things” (聖人處物不傷物).⁴³ Because the Master cultivates his spirit and gets along with things, instead of trying to control things, he becomes unaffected by the phenomenal world. This is why he can survive independently and make his spirit wander freely in the universe. Second, the Master is a critical thinker who perceives the world from a higher perspective. He understands that the centre of civilisation of men (*zhongqu* 中區) in comparison to the magnitude of the universe is as insignificant as the size of a flying insect in comparison to that of the bed curtain. This comparison is likely an allusion to the “Qiu Shui 秋水” (autumn flood) chapter in the *Zhuangzi*, which I will illustrate shortly later.⁴⁴

In order to further elucidate the two traits of Master Great Man, it is necessary to examine the personalities of the three interlocutors that serve as foils to the personality of the Master in the *Biography*. The interaction between the Master and the first interlocutor unfolds with the interlocutor’s polemic letter to the Master. In the letter, the interlocutor first elucidates the superiority of a prestigious *junzi* in conventional, normative discourse. The path of such a *junzi* is

⁴² *Ruan Ji ji jiaozhu* 阮籍集校注, p. 162.

⁴³ *Zhuangzi*, pian 22, “Zhi bei you 知北遊.” In *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 766.

⁴⁴ The opening passage of the *Biography* is also a rendition of similar ideas in earlier works such as the *Chuci* 楚辭, *Huainanzi* 淮南子, and the *Daren fu* 大人賦 by Sima Xiangru 司馬相如. See Fukunaga Mitsuji 福永光司, “‘Daijin Fu’ no shisōteki keifu: jifu no bungaku to Rō Sō tetsugaku 『大人賦』の思想的系譜: 辭賦の文學と老莊の哲學,” *Tōhō Gaku Hō* 41 (1970), pp. 97–126.

defined by ordinariness and conventionality (*chang* 常). He has a conventional appearance and wears conventional clothes; he speaks and acts according to conventional standards. Prudently and constantly, he cultivates himself, observes ritual protocols, and follows the path of the ancient Sage-Kings and the moral teachings of Duke Zhou and Confucius. He devotes himself to serving the ruler, governing the people, and nourishing his family. By embracing conventionality, he is rewarded with social status and wealth and eventually achieves an immortal reputation. Upon celebrating the *façon d'être* of the conventional *junzi*, the interlocutor then questions the eccentricity of the Master. In the view of the interlocutor, the Master's deviation from conventionality is the cause of the Master's downfall and humiliation. At the end of the letter, the interlocutor reasserts the superiority of being a conventional *junzi* by taking pity on the "suffering" situation of the Master.⁴⁵

In response to the interlocutor, the Master first asserts the spiritual transcendence of being a Great Man. The Great Man can transform himself and wander freely in the world, for he embodies the everlasting flow of cosmic transformation and becomes complete together with the Way. He dwells in the permanence of Heaven and Earth (*tian di zhi yong* 天地之永) that is beyond the reach of the mundane. Besides, the Master points out the limit of the notion of conventionality and the temporality of mundane knowledge when facing the unpredictable future. The Master tells the story that Heaven and Earth were once upside down; they continued to reverse their position and caused mountains and rivers to appear and disappear. The Master then asks rhetorically—if the cosmos itself is never static, then how can one regard social conventions, rites, and morality as something constant? To further enhance his argument, the Master draws an analogy between the *junzi*'s world and a pair of trousers inhabited by a flea. The former consists of the family, local communities, and the state. Similar to a *junzi* in uncertain times, the flea may believe that shabby clothes are pleasant shelters. But if unexpected disasters like wildfires occur, the flea cannot escape but perish.⁴⁶

The Master's argument here once again mirrors the famous conversation between the River God He Bo 河伯 and the God of North Sea Beihai Ruo 北海若 at the beginning of the "Qiu shui" chapter in the *Zhuangzi*.⁴⁷ There, He Bo is exceptionally proud of himself when hundreds of streams converge into the Yellow River in autumn. He then encounters the inexhaustible vast sea and realises his own insignificance. Contrary to the conceited He Bo, Beihai Ruo understands and

⁴⁵ *Ruan Ji ji jiaozhu*, pp. 163–164.

⁴⁶ *Ruan Ji ji jiaozhu*, pp. 165–167

⁴⁷ *Zhuangzi jishi*, pp. 563–593.

humbly accepts his own limits and place in the universe despite his greatness in comparison to rivers. Beihai Ruo draws on what Dan Lusthaus calls “the aporetic deconstruction” of norms and embraces a “perspectival model,” noting that evaluative standards such as big and small, good and bad, are not absolute and invariant once taking issues of temporality and perspective into consideration.⁴⁸ In addition, Beihai Ruo advocates what is called the *daren zhi xing* 大人之行 (“actions of the Great Man”) defined by the *yuefen zhi zhi* 約分之至 (“the perfection of moderating proportions”).⁴⁹ In other words, the Great Man in Beihai Ruo’s description embraces the perspectival perception and avoids the traps of oppositional extremism.

The second interlocutor who serves as the foil to the personality of Master Great Man is a hermit (*yinzhe* 隱者) who withdraws from the world because he feels indignant at the chaos in society and the degeneration of the Way of Purity and Simplicity of High Antiquity. The hermit is delighted upon meeting the Master in the wildness and seeks the Master’s affirmation, for he believes that the Master also shares the same sentiment. However, the Master states that a truly enlightened person resides without avoiding things and finds peace in whatever he witnesses; he does not consider things his burden but feels self-sufficient in that which brings him leisure; he does not make a differentiation between right and wrong, good and evil. The *façon d’être* of the hermit is still flawed because the hermit detests those who differ from himself and favours those of his own kind; he considers himself right and others wrong and justifies his argument with indignation; he honours his self-righteous aspiration while failing to nourish his naturally endowed body. In the Master’s view, the hermit is essentially the same as those whom he denies because of the lack of self-possession; they all neglect and lose their precious life energy because they “look down on the benefit of inner tranquillity while holding the pursuit of social recognition in high esteem” (薄安利以忘生，要求名以喪體).⁵⁰

The third interlocutor the Master encounters is a firewood picker (*xin zhe* 薪者). Unlike the previous two interlocutors who actively approach the Master, this time, it is the Master who is intrigued by the interlocutor. The Master asks the firewood picker whether he is going to end his life doing nothing else but picking firewood on a mound. The firewood picker sees no shame in his current situation and replies in a rather witty manner: “Will I end my life doing this? Or will I not

⁴⁸ Dan Lusthaus, “Aporetic Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*,” in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*, ed. Scott Bradley Cook (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 164, 186.

⁴⁹ *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 576.

⁵⁰ *Ruan Ji ji jiaozhu*, p.174.

end my life doing this?” What underlies the firewood-picker’s carefree attitude is his thorough understanding of the transience of the myriad things. Suppose the blooming and withering of flowers and trees are simply momentary events in the endless cycle of cosmic transformation. In that case, prosperity or poverty, superiority or inferiority, and good or bad fortunes are all constantly shifting. For example, Sun Bin 孫臏 once lost his feet from amputation but still defeated Pang Juan 龐涓. Another example is Fan Sui 范雎, who suffered from a fracture of his ribs but was eventually promoted to a prominent position. It is due to the uncertainty of the future that the firewood picker remains optimistic about his destiny. Hence, he sings:

When the sun sinks down behind the Buzhou Mountains, the moon comes out of the Dan River.
When the essence of *yang* is concealed and cannot be seen, the light of *yin* becomes great and powerful. How graceful and high up the moon is for a moment, then the glimmering [sun] will rise again from the East. Alas! Look at the dispersion and convergence of clouds and fog. They come and go like floating air. [If] prosperity and superiority only exist in the moment of nodding one’s head, then how could it be certain that I will end my life in poverty and inferiority?

日沒不周方，月出丹淵中。陽精蔽不見，陰光大為雄。亭亭在須臾，厭厭將復東。離合雲霧兮，往來如飄風。富貴俛仰間，貧賤何必終？⁵¹

Compared to his criticism of the gentleman and the hermit, the Master perceives the firewood picker in a more positive light. Upon hearing the firewood picker’s song, the Master is pleased. He remarks with laughter: “Although you cannot match the great, perhaps you can exceed the small” (雖不及大，庶免小也). The “great” here obviously refers to the path of the Master, whereas the “small” refers to the paths of the gentleman and the hermit.

The paths of the three contrastive personalities may have all been derived from the beginning of the “Ke yi 刻意” (ingrained ideas) chapter in the *Zhuangzi* that describes the likings of five different groups.⁵² The path of the gentleman may derive from the liking of travelling scholars and educators who aspire to bring peace to the world and the liking of court officials who devote themselves to honouring their rulers, strengthening their states, and expanding their achievements to the utmost to incorporate everything. The path of the hermit corresponds to the liking of scholars who banish themselves to mountains and valleys as if withered trees flowing into deep pools and always reproach the world. The path of the firewood-picker corresponds to the liking of scholars who escape from the mundane world into rivers and seas and spend their time at leisure. In fact, the

⁵¹ *Ruan Ji ji jiaozhu*, p. 177.

⁵² *Zhuangzi*, pian 15, “Ke yi”; In *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 539.

path of the Great Man may allude to the liking of scholars who manipulate their breath and nourish their form in hopes of achieving the longevity of Peng Zu. Although Ruan Ji's writing may have been inspired by the *Zhuangzi*, the originality in Ruan Ji's rendition should not be neglected. In the *Zhuangzi*, the practices of all five groups are considered equally insufficient and unmatchable to the practice of the Sage defined by the essence of the potency of the Way (*dao de zhi zhi* 道德之質), which includes qualities such as tranquillity (*tiandan* 恬淡), stillness (*jimo* 寂寞), emptiness (*xuwu* 虛無), and non-deliberate action (*wuwei* 無為). In other words, neither has acted and achieved their goals spontaneously without deliberate intentions. In contrast, the four paths in Ruan Ji's writing are clearly differentiated and ranked.

In sum, according to Ruan Ji's direct description of Master Great Man, the Master is someone who wanders in the universe freely without being confined by space, time, and social norms. Besides, according to the representations of the three contrastive personalities: the gentleman, the hermit, and the firewood-gatherer, we have also seen that which the Master is not. First, the Master stands in opposition to the obstinate gentleman who has blind faith in conventionality and temporary knowledge. Second, the Master denies the self-righteous hermit who dwells in nature but still alienates himself from the Way because he has yet severed attachments to worldly affairs and his desire for social recognition. Finally, the Master distinguishes himself from the firewood picker who, despite seemingly embracing the spirit of *wuwei* and being self-possessed, still hopes for the arrival of good fortune. I will call Ruan Ji's ideal personality "the untrammelled wanderer."

V. The Playful Sage

The last but certainly not the least celebrated personality in the Wei-Jin period is epitomised in a work titled *Dongfang Shuo hua zan* 東方朔畫贊 ("Eulogy to the Portrait of Dongfang Shuo") composed by the less well-known literatus Xiahou Zhan 夏侯湛 (243–291).⁵³

Xiahou Zhan, courtesy name Xiaoruo 孝若, was also from the Qiao Principality. He was a descendant of Cao Cao's cousin, the famous general Xiahou Yuan 淵. Despite the fall of the Cao-Wei regime, the Xiahou clan managed to maintain its prominent status by forming marriage ties with the new ruling Sima family. As a man of pedigree, Xiahou Zhan received the title of Cavalier

⁵³ *Wenxuan* 文選, *juan* 47, pp. 668–669.

Attendant-in-ordinary (*sanqi changshi* 散騎常侍), which was a prestigious status given to favoured aristocratic gentlemen who served as the companions and advisors of rulers in the Wei-Jin period. Xiahou Zhan was known for his handsome look and outstanding talent in literary composition. Along with his close friend Pan Yue 潘岳, Xiahou Zhan received the nickname “paired jade-discs” (*lianbi* 連璧) from those in the capital.⁵⁴

Before diving into Xiahou Zhan’s *Eulogy to the Portrait of Dongfang Shuo* (hereafter *Eulogy*), it is necessary to briefly introduce Dongfang Shuo, the main object of literary representation in the *Eulogy*. According to the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*, the historical Dongfang Shuo was a famous jester at the court of Emperor Wu of the Han 漢武帝. The earliest account about Dongfang Shuo appears in the “Biographies of Smooth Talkers” (*huaqi liezhuan* 滑稽列傳) in the *Shiji*.⁵⁵ According to Sima Qian’s account, Dongfang Shuo came from the area of the ancient State of Qi 齊. He entered the capital, Chang’an 長安, during the reign of Emperor Wu and was selected to serve in the palace as a gentleman attendant. As a smart talker and a well-read man of comprehensive scholarship, he was favoured by Emperor Wu and was frequently summoned to have idle conversation (*tanyu* 談語) with the emperor. Somewhat eccentric in conventional terms, Dongfang Shuo was alienated by his colleagues in the palace and was given the nickname “the lunatic” (*kuangren* 狂人). For example, he once claimed: “Those of my kind hide from the world in the middle of the court. [Whereas] those in antiquity hid from the world in deep mountains.”⁵⁶ He was once challenged by a group of Confucian erudites and eloquently defended himself. The record of the debate became later known as one of Dongfang Shuo’s two representative works, the *Da ke nan* 答客難 (“In Response to the Interlocutor’s Challenge”).

Compared to Sima Qian’s account, Ban Gu dedicates an entire *juan* to Dongfang Shuo in the *Hanshu*. Ban Gu’s “Biography of Dongfang Shuo” is about six times longer, for it incorporates several anecdotes, as well as the other representative discourse by Dongfang Shuo called the *Feiyou Xiansheng lun* 非有先生論 (“The Discourse of Master Non-Existence”). Regarding the proliferation of anecdotes pertaining to Dongfang Shuo, Ban Gu explains at the end of the biography: “Meddlers (*haoshi zhe* 好事者) in the later generations tend to attribute eccentric speech

⁵⁴ *Jinshu*, *juan* 55, p. 1491.

⁵⁵ For a thorough survey into the “Array of Biographies of Smooth Talkers,” see David R. Knechtges, “Wit, Humor, and Satire in Early Chinese Literature (to a. D. 220),” *Monumenta Serica* 29 (1970), pp. 82–89.

⁵⁶ *Shiji*, *juan* 126, pp. 3205–3208.

and unconventional stories to Dongfang Shuo, so there are more detailed records here.”⁵⁷ Ban Gu’s account shows that Dongfang Shuo had already become an object of popular fascination in the Eastern Han period. This fascination continued into the Wei-Jin period. Under the vogue of social eremitism (*jiaoyou*) and the rise of intellectual interest in the *San xuan* 三玄 (“Three Texts of Profundity”), the famous “lunatic” Dongfang Shuo likely became a popular cultural symbol and social model in the elite circle. For example, differentiating himself from traditional gentlemen who venerated the ancient Sage Kings and Confucius, Ji Kang regarded Laozi and Zhuangzi as his teachers and held Liuxia Hui and Dongfang Shuo in high esteem.⁵⁸ The other example is Xiahou Zhan. In the preface of the *Eulogy*, Xiahou Zhan explains the context of literary composition as follows:

My father came to station in this principality.⁵⁹ When I returned from the capital (Luoyang) and paid a visit to my father, I witnessed the Master’s hometown and thought of his lofty style. When I walked around in the front hall, I saw a portrait of the Master. Wandering freely in the city, I visited the Master’s memorial temple. I was deeply emotional and then composed this eulogy here.

大人來守此國，僕自京都言歸定省，睹先生之縣邑，想先生之高風。徘徊路寢，見先生之遺像。逍遙城郭，觀先生之祠宇。慨然有懷，乃作頌焉。⁶⁰

This passage is particularly interesting as it indicates that a certain enshrinement and worship of Dongfang Shuo existed at the time. Besides the *Eulogy*, Xiahou Zhan composed a text titled *Di yi* 抵疑 (“Opposing Doubts”) where he rebuts a critic, which is clearly modelled after Dongfang Shuo’s *Da ke nan*.⁶¹

Now, we turn to the analysis of the *Eulogy* preserved in the *Wenxuan* 文選. The *Eulogy* consists of the preface and the quatrasyllabic verses, which can be divided into two themes: 1) the representation of Dongfang Shuo and 2) the description of the author’s sentiment upon visiting Dongfang Shuo’s hometown. Here I focus on the former theme. Let me begin with the preface, which commences with a brief introduction of Dongfang Shuo’s name and ancestral origin. Then Xiahou Zhan writes:

⁵⁷ *Hanshu*, juan 65, p. 2874.

⁵⁸ Ji Kang, “Letter to Shan Tao,” *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, p.196.

⁵⁹ The principality here refers to Yueling 樂陵, present-day northwestern Shandong.

⁶⁰ *Wenxuan*, juan 47, p.669.

⁶¹ *Jinshu*, juan 55, pp. 1491–1496.

Extraordinary like jade, the Master was omniscient, thoughtful, and flexible. He understood that one should not obtain wealth and recognition by polluting the world, so he wandered carelessly while taking his official position. [He understood that] one cannot straighten the Way by carelessly following an official career, so he soared high and swooped low to look down on the world. [He understood that] one cannot pass down the teachings [of the Sage] by looking down on the world, so he rectified his admonition to clear up his integrity. [He understood that] one cannot preserve peace and safety by clearing up one's integrity, so he bantered and joked around to please others. He cleaned up his way and yet blemished his trace, purified his essence and yet polluted his words. He relaxed and stretched but did not partake in what is vicious; he advanced and retreated but did not disengage from the crowd.

先生瑰瑋博達，思周變通，以為濁世不可以富貴也，故薄遊以取位；苟出不可以直道也，故頡頏以傲世。傲世不可以垂訓也，故正諫以明節。明節不可以久安也，故談諧以取容。潔其道而穢其跡，清其質而濁其文。弛張而不為邪，進退而不離群。⁶²

This passage is an allusion to Dongfang Shuo's discourse of practicing the way of seclusion in the phenomenal world, which also exemplifies the spirit of social eremitism. In Xiahou Zhan's description, the Master's way of worldly seclusion is manifested through a sequence of actions, starting from carelessly taking an official position to bantering and joking around to please his surroundings. What underlies the Master's way of worldly seclusion is his thorough wisdom and flexibility (*sizhou biantong* 思周變通). It is by relying on such wisdom and flexibility that the Master can have timely realisations and remain adaptive in the capricious world of court politics without being confined to formalism and the sense of shame. In addition, the Master's way of worldly seclusion is essentially ethical, for he only injures his own reputation but never inflicts any harm on others, regardless of his situation. Such a selfless attitude allows him to actively engage with his surroundings while preserving his integrity and self-possession.

After expounding on the Master's practice of worldly seclusion, Xiahou Zhan proceeds to compliment the Master on his comprehensive scholarship and capability as follows:

Besides, with his mind set in a distance and his manner unconfined, as well as his abundant wisdom and outstanding talent, he was extraordinarily knowledgeable and capable in every respect. He stayed in correspondence with the transformation of the cosmos to understand the counting-tally (results of divination); he received divine blessings in the dark, so he knew what was to come. From the ancient texts of *Sanfen*, *Wudian*, *Basuo*, and *Jiuqiu*,⁶³ the studies of yin-yang and prognostication, and the discourses of the hundred schools, to [the skill of] eloquent argumentation, the calculation of

⁶² *Wenxuan*, *juan* 47, p. 668.

⁶³ According to the *Shangshu xu* 尚書序 ("Preface to Shangshu") by Kong Anguo 孔安國, the *Sanfen*, *Wudian*, *Basuo*, and *Jiuqiu* are the oldest books attributed to the legendary sovereigns and kings of the high Antiquity. See *Wenxuan*, *juan* 45, p. 638.

disintegration and turning of the adversity, the mastery of bodily circulation and medicine, and the techniques of archery, horse-riding, documentation, and mathematics, he examined their essences and delved into their principles to the utmost; he exhausted their merits without taking them for granted; he read and recited, listened and memorised.

若乃遠心曠度，瞻智宏材，倜儻博物，觸類多能。合變以明筭，幽贊以知來。自三墳五典八索九丘，陰陽圖緯之學，百家衆流之論，周給敏捷之辯，支離覆逆之數，經脈藥石之藝，射御書計之術，乃研精而究其理，不習而盡其功，經目而諷於口，過耳而闇於心。⁶⁴

The Master's comprehensive scholarship and capability may remind the reader of the image of the universalist (*tongren* 通人 or *tongshi* 通士) mentioned in the previous chapter that became the intellectual ideal since the Eastern Han. The Master and the universalists are alike in reading widely and being equipped with knowledge in every genre, ranging from ancient legendary books to technical texts of medicine and the Six Arts. Besides, the phrase "he stayed in correspondence with the transformation of the cosmos to understand the counting-tally (results of divination); he received divine blessings in the dark, so he knew what was to come" (合變以明筭，幽贊以知來) seems to emphasise the relative importance of the scholarship on the *Zhouyi* 周易 (Book of Changes). Xiahou Zhan may be implying that the Master attained good foresight from studying texts like the *Zhouyi* so he could act timely and flexibly as he practiced his way of worldly seclusion.

Xiahou Zhan's Master further distinguishes himself as follows:

He was benevolent and open-minded, tolerant and generous. He rode roughshod over officials and ministers and sneered at heroes and knights. He kept his hat on in front of the extravagant and trampled on the noble and powerful. When he was promoted, he did not flaunt [his privilege]; when he was demoted, he did not lament [over his fate]. He bantered with [the person of] ten thousand chariots (the emperor) as if [the emperor] was his official friend and considered [appraisals of] his fellow peers insignificant like straw. His magnificent integrity far exceeded the ordinary kind, and the world was overshadowed by his supreme aura. He can be said to have been preeminent in his community and the one who wandered outside the mundane realm.

夫其明濟開豁，包含弘大；凌轢卿相，譟哂豪桀；籠罩靡前，跼蹐貴勢；出不休顯，賤不憂戚。戲萬乘若寮友，視儔列如草芥。雄節邁倫，高氣蓋世。可謂拔乎其萃，遊方之外者已。⁶⁵

At first glance, Xiahou Zhan's representation of Dongfang Shuo here resembles that of Ruan Ji's untrammelled Master Great Man, who embraces the higher perspective, looks down on the

⁶⁴ *Wenxuan*, juan 47, p. 668.

⁶⁵ *Wenxuan*, juan 47, p. 668.

conventional social order and wanders beyond the mundane realm. However, Xiahou Zhan's Master is further characterised by the spirit of playfulness expressed through *xi* 戲. In a narrow sense, *xi* refers to Dongfang Shuo's signature act of bantering and joking around (*huixie* 詼諧). However, as discussed in the introduction chapter, *xi* in the Wei-Jin period can be identified with the idea of play defined by Huizinga.⁶⁶ Hence, in a boarder sense, *xi* in the current context also includes a series of playful acts, such as riding roughshod (*lingli* 凌轢), sneering (*chaoshen* 嘲哂), and tramping (*taiji* 踮躅). These acts are essentially transgressive but ambiguous. Through these playful acts, the playful agent could temporarily challenge the established social hierarchies and prescribed norms and avoid being held accountable for committing such offences. Furthermore, by being playful, the Master could continue to express himself and preserve his agency in the oppressive environment of court politics.

As we approach the end of the preface, Xiahou Zhan mentions the anecdotes about Dongfang Shuo eventually extricating himself from the mundane world and ascending to immortality by cultivating his breath. However, in Xiahou Zhan's view, such accounts are peculiar and confusing and cannot be fully explained. This shows us that the image of Dongfang Shuo is appealing to Xiahou Zhan because of the practicality and pragmaticality of the path of worldly seclusion. This also explains why there is no mention of the Master's association with immortality in the verse section:⁶⁷

- 1 How preeminent was the Master! He withdrew from the world to live with integrity.
 He retreated without ever isolating [himself]; he advanced while avoiding being conceited.
 He descended into the world to wash his feet, looking up to the ancient fisherman who shook his hat.
- 4 [The water] blackened, yet there were no dregs; since [the water] had been polluted, then it could be
 purified.
 How could there be no dregs? [Because the Master was] brilliant and flexible.
 How could it be purified? [Because the Master] perceived dirt as floating foams.
- 7 He took joy in what must be done; [even although] he was submerged [in the mundane world], he
 felt no worries.
 He surpassed and looked down on his contemporaries while dancing in the distance and wandering
 alone.
 He looked up to the previous generations and then contemplated their lasting traces.
- 10 How ethereal was the Master! His path was [as marvellous as] the dragon.
 Tainting his footprints and secluding himself at court, he stayed in harmony with the world while
 remaining distinguished.
 Lingering long at lower positions, yet he was comfortable and calm.

⁶⁶ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (rpt. 1949 ed.; London: Routledge, 1998).

⁶⁷ *Wenxuan*, juan 47, p. 669.

- 1 矯矯先生，肥遯居貞。
退不終否，進亦避榮。
臨世濯足，希古振纓。
- 4 涅而無滓，既濁能清。
無滓伊何，高明克柔。
能清伊何，視汙若浮。
- 7 樂在必行，處淪罔憂。
跨世凌時，遠蹈獨游。
瞻望往代，爰想遐蹤。
- 10 邈邈先生，其道猶龍。
染跡朝隱，和而不同。
棲遲下位，聊以從容。

The intertextuality between the verses and the preface is apparent. The beginning and ending of the verses (lines 1-2, 10-13) correspond to the description of the Master's way of worldly seclusion in the preface. In the middle section (lines 3-9), Xiahou Zhan elaborates on the Master's spirit of playfulness by alluding to the "Fisherman" piece in the *Chuci* 楚辭 (*Verses of Chu*) where the fisherman, in response to the lament of the dis-spirited noble official Qu Yuan 屈原, smiled and sang: "When the water of surging waves is pure, I can use it to wash my hat. When the water of the surging waves is turbid, I can use it to wash my feet."⁶⁸ The spirit of the fisherman is indeed a playful one. He is not fixated on the imperfection of the world but shifts along the world, actively and creatively engaging with things with a positive mind. In Xiahou Zhan's rendering, the Master follows the path of the fisherman and changes his subjective perception of the world. The world is still polluted, but if one perceives the pollution as something temporary like floating foam, then the world in one's subjective perception becomes dynamic and pure. In addition, by dancing and wandering without worries, one can make the most out of defective situations.

In short, Xiahou Zhan's Master is indeed an exemplar of social eremitism and a suitable social model for elite gentlemen who wished to preserve their integrity and subjectivity on the one hand and, on the other hand, had to actively participate in various social contests and literary activities for the accumulation of social capitals. Although the *Eulogy* is dedicated to a historical figure, Xiahou Zhan likely projected contemporary cultural values and inclinations onto the past. I would like to call the ideal personality epitomised by the literary representation of Dongfang Shuo "the playful sage."

⁶⁸ *Chuci jiaoshi* 楚辭校釋, pp. 307–309.

So far, I have identified three ideal personalities—the selfless expresser, the unaffected wanderer, and the playful sage in the writings of the leading *mingshi*. These three personality types are by no means exclusive from one another. In fact, they can all be subsumed under the Zhuangzian spiritual ideal if one considers the shared traits such as selflessness, openness, expressiveness, and the spirit of anti-conventionalism and playfulness. Although representations of these personality types may have been inspired by motifs in earlier texts, these writings nevertheless reflect the authors' own ethical philosophy and contemporary value orientations. By celebrating the three personalities as spiritually and ethically pure and distinguishing them from the unenlightened followers of social conventions and ritual protocols, prominent writers like Ji Kang, Ruan Ji, and Xiahou Zhan contributed to the construction of a new sociocultural paradigm. I will call it the *mingshi* paradigm.

Having explored the new *mingshi* paradigms at a theoretical level, one may wonder to what extent the paradigm had influenced the conception of the prestigious and the economy of reputation in practice. In the following three chapters, I will move into the field of sociocultural practice and examine the significance of three forms of play that prevailed in social arenas and were deemed the emblematic activities of *mingshi* in the Wei-Jin period.

Chapter 3 Playing with Words

Having outlined the personality models and character traits of *mingshi*, we now progress to exploring how individuals could transform and present themselves as *mingshi* through concrete social practices. Given my argument that individuals attained the status of *mingshi* by engaging in playful activities in the non-institutional public space, one may wonder what kind of playful activities were associated with the making of *mingshi*. To pinpoint the specific playful activities, let us pay heed to the Daoist master Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–363), who provides a comprehensive account of *jiaoyou* and his attitude on the contemporary ethos in his *Baopuzi* 抱朴子 (“Master of Embracing Simplicity”):

In general, the difference in commitment and aspiration is like the sinking of gold in contrast to the floating of a feather. The divergence in resolution and hobby is like the difference between the rising movement of fire and the falling movement of water. These can never be reconciled; even the transformative power (of the Way) and a marvellous craftsman are unable to make [these differences] the same, then how can you force [the reconciliation between me and other people]?

I am intrinsically defective like a stammering horse. Additionally, I am by nature sluggish. The many social contests and play, [such as] *tanqi* (pellet chess) and board games, are all things that I detest to see. As for sending an eagle to fly or making a horse gallop, playing hunting games, and travelling for sightseeing, I engage in none of these. In particular, I dislike deriding and insulting others. These activities are generally loved by the contemporaries, and everybody indulges themselves in playing. Since I am absent from all [idle gatherings and social contests], my close friends become exceptionally distant from me. In addition, because I press [my friends] to be upright and tend to speak out honestly, there are very few who are willing [to approach me], [as if I was] a cluster of bitter remedies. Furthermore, I want to urge [my friends] to study hard; I admonish them for chasing prestige and wealth, try to stop them from playing board games, and push them to be moderate with their indulgences. Everything I do is what ordinary people cannot enjoy.

夫操尚不同，猶金瀋羽浮也。志好之乖次，猶火升而水降也，苟不可同。雖造化之靈，大塊之匠，不可使同也。何可強乎？

余所稟訥馬矣，加之以天挺篤懶，諸戲弄之事，彈棋博弈，皆所惡見。及飛輕走迅，游獵傲覽，鹹所不為，殊不喜嘲褻。凡此數者，皆時世所好，莫不耽之。而余悉闕焉，故親交所以尤遠也。加以挾直，好吐忠藎，藥石所集，甘心者鮮。又欲勉之以學問，諫之以馳競，止其樗蒲，節其瀋湎，此又常人所不能悅也。¹

Above is Ge Hong’s response to an imaginary interlocutor who questioned the Master’s self-isolation. We can see that Ge Hong considered a person’s taste in idle activity a definitive manifestation of one’s character and aspiration. He also perceived people who have different

¹ *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian shang* 抱朴子外篇校箋(上), pp. 434–435.

interests and hobbies as absolutely incompatible with each other. Ge Hong's own statement corresponds to his official biography in the *Jinshu*, which states: "[Ge Hong] was different from his contemporaries; he was intrinsically disinterested and had nothing that he would enjoy playing. He did not know the number of crossings on a *weiqi* board nor the names of spikes/dices in *shupu*. As a person, he was introverted and had no interest in [seeking] honour and prestige. He shut his gate, refused to receive any guests and never participated in *jiaoyou*."² As a lofty, self-righteous, and probably socially awkward individual, Ge Hong refused to participate in playful activities or literary salons and distanced himself from his peers. In spite of acting like the selfless expresser advocated by Ji Kang who openly expressed his opinions on things and insisted on his own way of living without giving in to peer pressure, Ge Hong excluded himself from the economy of reputation and prestige and was never known as a "gentleman of distinction" like those in the Yuan Hong's *Mingshi zhuan*. Besides confirming the significance of the social network, Ge Hong's account also sheds light on playful activities such as speech play, board games, hunting games, horse-riding and falconry, which prevailed in the social world of Wei-Jin elites.

In light of Ge Hong's account, this chapter examines the role of speech play, or playful utterances, and the significance of humour in challenging and deconstructing conventional moral authority and power dynamics in the context of idle conversation (*qingtan* 清談).

I. On Speech Play and Humour

Language, linguistic signs, or words (*wen* 文), whether in oral or written forms, occupy a paramount position in the Chinese tradition. The Confucian classic *Zhouyi* attributes the ultimate origin of the Chinese language to the invention of the trigrams and, thereby, to the first of the legendary sages Fu Xi 伏羲, which renders language "not one technology among others, but rather the ultimate form of those capacities that made possible all the sagely inventions and institutions."³ Words are both descriptive and prescriptive; they represent both what-is and what-should-be. In the classical Chinese textual tradition, written texts from the distant past are regarded as something sacred that should only be transmitted rather than altered or challenged. Hence, in the political

² *Jinshu*, *juan* 72, p. 1911.

³ Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 197–199.

realm, written texts function as the source of legitimacy for the state to assert, exercise, and maintain its power. In society, social order is constructed by “correctly” naming things and clarifying the power relations among the designated entities through verbal expressions and then actualising these power relations through social practices.

For the ruling authority, language is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, authority can be constructed, legitimised, and sustained by referring to and re-interpreting words transmitted over generations of masters and disciples. On the other hand, such authority can still be challenged, deconstructed, and even negated by creative and skilful use of wordplay and argumentation. Regarding wordplay, since the Chinese character is pictographic, ideographic and phonologic, the different radicals may function as individual morphemes when a character consists of multiple radicals. The meaning of each morpheme and their combined meanings can be further philosophised or coded into riddles, and large linguistic units like phrases and sentences always leave room for metaphoric association and speculation.⁴ For this reason, classical Chinese texts, even the seemingly “short and simplistic” ones like the *Lunyu* and the *Daodejing*, continue to invite alternative interpretations. While textual analysis of ancient classics always sparks scholastic interest throughout history, the significance of wordplay in the leisure sphere receives relatively less interest. Before examining accounts of wordplay in the Wei-Jin era, I want to first discuss the pertinent terminologies and conceptualisation of the genre of playful literature in early medieval China.

Regarding speech play, contemporary audiences in the twenty-first century may think of words such as jokes, comedy, talk show, and humour. Among these words, humour contains the most conceptual complexity, and because of this, it has become a subject of serious academic research in various humanities and social sciences disciplines.⁵ Since humour is localised to historical and cultural contexts, if one intends to study humour and its related discourse in premodern societies, the identification of primary sources is the primary challenge. For example, if one were to sift through the corpus of texts in early and medieval China, hoping to find the occurrence of the word

⁴ Lü Zongli, *Power of the Words: Chen Prophecy in Chinese Politics, AD 265-618* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 114–116.

⁵ For examples of humour studies, see Maria Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire: Laughing and Lying* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously* (London: Routledge, 1994); David R. Knechtges, “Wit, Humor, and Satire in Early Chinese Literature (to a. D. 220),” *Monumenta Serica* 29 (1970): pp.79–98; Guy Halsall, *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Daniel Derrin and Hannah Burrows eds, *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020).

youmo 幽默, the translation of the English word “humour,” then one’s effort would be in vain.

There are three major reasons behind this “absence of humour” in Chinese texts. First, *youmo* is a modern word. According to Yu Shujing, *youmo* is a transliterated word of “humour” coined by Chinese translator Ling Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976) in 1924.⁶ Second, humour as a literary theme has been long marginalised by Confucian moralists.⁷ Third, there are problems with textual history, classification, terminology, and contextual knowledge.⁸

Notably, what we recognise today as “humour” did widely exist in premodern Chinese texts. In fact, previous scholarship has pointed out that literary playfulness has a long history in China and can be traced back at least to the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*.⁹ In particular, considering the numerous writings that exhibit a carnivalesque function, literary playfulness can be seen as the definitive element of early medieval elite culture. For example, Fukui Yoshio 福井佳夫 identifies nearly 70 verses that thematise on the spirit of playfulness and argues that the literary field in the Six Dynasties period is marked by the proliferation of what he calls “playful literature” (*yūgi bungaku* 遊戲文學).¹⁰ Before exploring the function of playful utterance in specific social contexts, a discussion on the pertinent terminologies and concepts is necessary.

First of all, what I mean by playful utterance in early medieval China is in reference to a series of discursive practices associated with the word *xi*. These discursive practices include *xixue* 戲謔, *huixiao* 談笑, and *paitiao* 俳/排調 in early and medieval texts. In terms of semantics, *xue* 謔, *pai*

⁶ Yu Shujing 於淑靜, *Shiqing de xixue: ershi shiji sanshi niandai Zhongguo youmo xiaoshuo yanjiu* 世情的戲謔: 20世紀30年代中國中國幽默小說研究 (Beijing: Renmin ribao chubanshe, 2018), p. 5.

⁷ David Knechtges, “Wit, Humor, and Satire,” pp. 80–81.

⁸ Guilia Baccini, “Approaching Jokes and Jestbooks in Premodern China,” in Daniel Derrin and Hannah Burrows, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), pp. 201–207.

⁹ Anders Hansson, “Introduction,” in Anders Hansson et al eds. *The Chinese at Play: Festivals, Games, and Leisure* (London: Kegan Paul, 2002), p. 8.

¹⁰ In his book, Fukui examines all the verses mentioned in the treatise on “Satires and Riddles” by Liu Xie 劉勰 in the *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 and classifies the playful literature into three categories: 1) satirical rhetorics that convey social and political criticism through “sugar-coated” language; 2) subtle mockery, teasing, personal insult; and 3) witty expression with the intention to entertain one’s patron or peers in social contexts such as literary salon and private banquet. Other than the titles mentioned in the *Wenxin diaolong*, Fukui suggests that more than half of the pentasyllabic verses in the Six Dynasties period can be called “hidden playful literature” that centres on playfulness instead of pedagogical function and political propaganda. Playful literature occupies a substantial place in mainstream elite culture. Unfortunately, playful literature and other idle activities are largely undervalued and overlooked in both premodern China and modern literary studies. Fukui Yoshio 福井佳夫, “Preface,” in *Rikuchō no yūgi bungaku* 六朝の遊戲文學 (Tōkyō: Kyūko Shoin, 2007), pp. 11–24.

俳, *tiao* 調, and *hui* 詼 all share the semantic network with *xi*. For example, in the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, both *xue* and *pai* are glossed with *xi*, basically meaning “to entertain with words.”¹¹ The graphic composition of the word *xue* is noteworthy in particular. Since the character 讕 consists of the speech radical 言 言 and the graph 虐 虐, which means “cruel,” “oppressive,” or “excessive” when functioning as an adjective; “to abuse” when functioning as a verb; and “affliction” or “catastrophe” when functioning as a noun. Considering the meanings of its morphemes, the word *xue* can, therefore, be defined as an utterance that transgresses certain boundaries.

The earliest occurrence of the compound word *xixue* is found in a poem named “Qiyu 淇奥” that praises the literary excellency of a cultivated gentleman in the *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of Odes). One of the exemplifications of the literary virtuosity of the gentleman is that he is “good at playing with words without being excessive” (善戲謔兮, 不為虐兮). Although *xixue* is listed among the exemplifications of literary virtuosity in the *Shijing*, we know that literary practices other than the exegetics of classics and formulating administrative documents were generally held in contempt by elite society. Such attitude is clearly indicated in the following example of biographical writing in the *Hanshu* 漢書:

[Bing 柄] Gao was not proficient in the classics. [Instead, he] bantered like a jester. [He] employed himself in composing rhapsodies and hymns and was fond of indecent games, because of which he was disgraceful but favoured by the aristocrats. [He could] match someone like Dongfang Shuo and Guo Sheren but could not match eminent officials like Yan Zhu.

皋不通經術, 談笑類俳倡, 為賦頌, 好嫚戲, 以故得嬖黷貴幸。比東方朔、郭舍人等, 而不得比嚴助等得尊官。¹²

Although the general perception of literary composition and other idle activities began to shift in the Eastern Han, the disdain for *xixue* persisted in the genre of official historiography, as we can see in the next two examples in the *Sanguo zhi*:

1. Guan Lu, courtesy name Gongming, was from Pingyuan Commandery. He was vulgar and hideous in his appearance. He drank, ate, and bantered without decent etiquette. He did not choose those who were not of his kind [to associate with]. Thus, people mostly loved him but did not respect him.

¹¹ *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), pp. 99, 384.

¹² *Hanshu*, juan 51, p. 2366.

管輅字公明，平原人也。容貌粗醜，無威儀而嗜酒飲食言戲，不擇非類，故人多愛之而不敬也。¹³

2. Li Zhuan, courtesy name Qinzong, was from Fu County of Zitong Commandery... The Crown Prince was partial to his knowledgeableness and extremely favoured him. However, his manner was frivolous, and he liked teasing. Therefore, people could not respect him.

李譔字欽仲，梓潼涪人也...太子愛其多知，甚悅之。然體輕脫，好戲調，故世不能重也。¹⁴

The first account concerns Guan Lu 管輅 (209–256), a famous divination master and a specialist of the *Zhouyi*. He was received by many powerful officials and eminent gentlemen in the Wei Kingdom, such as Wang Ji 王基, Zhong Shu 鍾毓, and He Yan 何宴. Guan Lu was arguably one of the earliest *qingtian* conversationalists.¹⁵ The second account concerns Li Zhuan 李譔 (d. 258–263), a close attendant of the Heir-Apparent of the Shu 蜀 Kingdom. His father studied under eminent scholars like Sima Hui 司馬徽 (173–208). Li Zhuan inherited his father's scholarship and became well-immersed in the studies of the Five Classics and other philosophical traditions, as well as arts, mathematics, divination, medicine, military technology and mechanics.¹⁶ Based on the two entries of biographical writing in the *Sanguo zhi*, we can see that a person who bantered with others could acquire certain prestige because of his ability to entertain and impress his superiors. However, the person's excessive conduct and personal connections with those in power would unavoidably make him a target of contempt (and probably jealousy), which would alienate him from the broader *shi* 士-community.

As we have seen in official histories, playful utterance is usually presented as a manifestation of one's moral flaw. Other than implying contempt against speech play, official histories provide very little information on the cultural significance of speech play. A more detailed elucidation on playful utterance and the corresponding literary genre can be found in a treatise on *xieyin* 諧譔 ("humorous writings and riddles") in the literary anthology *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 ("The Literary Mind Carves Dragons") by Liu Xie 劉勰 (late fifth to early sixth century).¹⁷ Since the *Wenxin diaolong* is

¹³ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 29, p. 811.

¹⁴ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 42, pp. 1026–1027.

¹⁵ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 29, pp. 811–829.

¹⁶ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 42, pp. 1026–1027.

¹⁷ *Wenxin Diaolong jiaozhu* 文心雕龍校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021), pp. 212–222.

regarded as the most important early medieval work of literary theory,¹⁸ a detailed reading of the treatise on *xieyin* can provide us with more information about how playful utterance was conceptualised and perceived by an early medieval Confucian literatus.

Considering the overall structure, Liu Xie's treatise on *xieyin* follows a quadripartite structure elucidated in the postface "Xu zhi 序志" ("Expositions of My Intentions") of the *Wenxin diaolong*: 1) tracing the origin of the genre back to the Confucian classics and stating the genre's historical development from the past to his present-day; 2) defining and explaining the meaning of the genre's name; 3) selecting critical references to define the genre; and 4) teasing out the common logic that underlines the sub-genres to shed light on the key characteristic of the major genre.¹⁹

Regarding the origin of the genre, Liu Xie traces the origin of *xieyin* to satirical rhymes recorded in the *Liji* 禮記 ("Records of Rites"). Intending to moralise the genre, Liu Xie explains that these satirical rhymes became incorporated into the Confucian literary canon because they are spontaneous creations of the populace who felt resentful while living under the rule of tyrannical rulers. Since popular rhymes represent "the genuine voice" of the people, they are supposed to possess didactic values for scholar-officials who aspire to save the world.²⁰

Having clarified the origin of *xieyin*, Liu Xie moves to define the meanings of the two sub-genres, *xie* 諧 and *yin* 譏 and then lists the critical references in each sub-genre from the Warring States period to the recent past (third-fourth centuries). Beginning with the sub-genre of *xie*, Liu Xie glosses the word *xie* with *jie* 皆 and defines *xie* as "shallow expressions and vulgar meanings that entertain and make everybody laugh" (辭淺會俗, 皆悅笑也).²¹ Liu Xie then outlines the development of *xie*, starting from the famous "smooth talkers" such as Chunyu Kun 淳于髡 and Song Yu 宋玉, who employed playful utterances to admonish their rulers for over-indulgence in alcohol or feminine beauty. Liu Xie affirms the didactic values of these earlier examples of using

¹⁸Antje Richter, "Wenxin diaolong 文心雕龍," in Keith Nathaniel Knapp et al. eds, *Early Medieval Chinese Texts A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2018), p. 389.

¹⁹*Wenxin diaolong jiaozhu*, pp. 680–681.

²⁰ This is a typical Confucian conception of popular rhymes. However, as contemporary scholarship points out, the idea that popular rhymes were created, propagated and sung by the populace is largely exaggerated. In fact, the contents of most popular rhymes are limited to local agendas and character appraisals of local elites. Although popular rhymes represent unofficial public discourse, they do not necessarily reflect the views of the lower strata of society. In other words, "public" here means the wider *shi* community, which includes minor elites and educated members who still had a certain degree of political participation. See Lü Zongli 呂宗力, *Handai de yaoyan 漢代的謠言* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2011), pp. 87–92.

²¹ *Wenxin diaolong jiaozhu*, p. 212.

implicit expression and satirical rhetorics to rebuke the ruler. However, he points out that “since the substance of *xie* still lacks decency, the genre can be easily abused” (但本體不雅, 其流易弊).²² As for the negative examples, Liu Xie lists the famous Han jesters, Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 and Bing Gao 柄皋 and argues that the works of these men bring nothing constructive but derogation and entertainment. The degradation of *xie* eventually reached its lowest point in the Wei-Jin period, which is manifested in the ethos of bantering and the proliferation of hundreds of humorous writings modelled after the works of literati such as Pan Yue 潘岳 (247–300) and Shu Xi 束皙 (262–300).

Turning to the meaning of the sub-genre of *yin* 譏, Liu Xie identifies the word *yin* with *yin* 隱, noting that *yin* is characterised by “manipulating expressions to conceal one’s true intention and drawing on analogies/metaphors to point at things” (遁辭以隱意, 譎譬以指事也).²³ Like the development of *xie*, the genre of *yin* also began with the “golden age” of the Warring States period, where writers harnessed their words and wisdom for the sake of the greater good. For example, when the Wu 吳 official Shen Shuyi 申叔儀 entreated provisions from the State of Lu 魯, he used the phrase “plenty of jade” to stand for the abundance of food in the State of Lu; in the reply by the State of Lu, the official used the phrase *genggui* 庚癸 to stand for water and grains. After the “golden age,” the genre entered into a stage of gradual degradation. Liu Xie describes the ethos of Wei-Jin as follows:

From the Wei dynasty onward, jesters and entertainers were rather rebuked. However, educated gentlemen [took part in turning] jeers and satires into riddles. The notion of *mi* means to twist around one’s rhetoric to make [the audience] confused. Some played word games by splitting and recombining components of characters. Some laid out images to comment on things. [They drew on] subtle words to manipulate the thoughts of others and [took advantage of others’] shallow insights to show off their literary composition.

自魏代以來, 頗非俳優。而君子嘲隱, 化為謎語。“謎”也者, 迴互其辭, 使昏迷也。或體目文字, 或圖象品物。纖巧以弄思, 淺察以炫辭。²⁴

Clearly, literary history conceived by the Confucian literatus is a process of gradual moral decline. If riddles in the distant past reflect the spirit of a golden age of prosperity and order, those in the

²² *Wenxin diaolong jiaozhu*, p. 212.

²³ *Wenxin diaolong jiaozhu*, p. 213.

²⁴ *Wenxin diaolong jiaozhu*, p. 213.

recent past stand for nothing but symbols of social chaos and moral decadence. For Liu Xie, figurative writings and speeches in the Wei-Jin are problematic for two reasons. First, playful literature in the Wei-Jin is deceptive, manipulative, and self-conscious. In other words, in contrast to the public-spirited literature in the past, Wei-Jin authors used playful literature primarily as a rhetorical instrument to serve their own personal interests in social contests. Second, unlike playful literature in the Han dynasty, which only circulated within the small community of palace attendants, playful literature in the Wei-Jin period became a universal enterprise among elite officials and literati.

Liu Xie's anxiety toward the prevalence of playful literature is well apparent. Such anxiety is further implied at the end of the treatise, as we can see in the following:

In general, when authors in antiquity crafted riddles, [they did it in order to] assist in sorting out important matters. How would they engage in children's playful utterance, hitting each other with their buttocks and laughing elatedly? Nevertheless, having *xieyin* in the world of literature is like having *xiaoshuo* ("the Tradition of Petty Sayings") in addition to the Nine Schools of Thoughts. Presumably, [both *xieyin* and *xiaoshuo*] were collected by low-ranking officials to broaden their inspection of the world. If one constantly takes [*xieyin*] as a model, then isn't he becoming the disciple of [Chunyu] Kun and [Dongfang] Shuo and the close friend of Jester Zhan and Jester Meng?

觀夫古之為隱，理周要務，豈為童稚之戲謔，搏髀而忤笑哉！然文辭之有諧譌，譬九流之有小說。蓋稗官所采，以廣視聽。若效而不已，則髡朔之入室，旃孟之石交乎？²⁵

Considering Liu Xie's earlier observation that there had already been hundreds of humorous writings by the end of the third century, the number of playful literature might have increased even more by the end of the fifth century.²⁶ Regarding the prevailing trend of composing satires and riddles for selfish purposes and entertainment, Liu Xie's attitude as a Confucian literatus is highly conflicted. On the one hand, he insists on criticising the genre by re-emphasising the distinction between the idealised distant past and the perceived decline in the recent past. On the other hand, since the popularity of playful literature had become something inevitable, he was forced to accommodate playful literature in his moralistic literary scheme. Earlier, we have seen that Liu Xie moralises the genre by tracing its origin to popular rhymes in the Confucian classics. Once again,

²⁵ *Wenxin diaolong jiaozhu*, p. 213.

²⁶ Fukui, *Rikuchō no yūgi bungaku*, p. 110.

we observe his moralising effort as he analogises playful literature to the Tradition of Petty Sayings, which ranked at the bottom of the Nine Schools of Thoughts.²⁷

Thus far, this section has demonstrated early medieval conception and attitude on playful utterance and humour. Liu Xie conceives playful utterances as verbal expressions that transgress boundaries (*xue*) and stimulate humorous effects manifested in emotional responses of the audience, such as laughter and surprises (*xie*); playful utterances often involve hidden messages or double meaning embellished by wordplay and figurative rhetorics (*yin*). According to the standard of Confucian protocols that a gentleman should stay prudent with his speech and action, the act of playing with words is undoubtedly indecent and should be discouraged. Even though playful utterance is largely denied and suppressed in formal genres, it appears in a good number of accounts about speech play in collections of anecdotes such as the *Xiaolin* 笑林 (“Forest of Laughter”)²⁸ and the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語. Unlike official histories and moralistic treatises, speech play in anecdotal writings is depicted as value-neutral and a signature of distinctive gentlemen (*mingshi* 名士). The rest of the chapter turns to the “Pai tiao 排調” chapter in the *Shishuo xinyu*, which preserves the highest concentration of accounts about speech play in a single work. I aim to understand the significance of speech play for three groups in Wei-Jin elite society: elite gentlemen, monks, and women.

II. Gentlemen's Speech Play

²⁷ The idea of *Jiuliu Shijia* 九流十家 (“The Nine Schools of Thought and the Tenth Tradition”) can be traced back to the “*Yiwen zhi* 藝文志” chapter in the *Hanshu* by Ban Gu. In his bibliographical catalogue, Ban Gu classifies the extant scrolls of books into ten traditions and argues that only the first nine traditions can be held in high regard. The excluded tradition is named the *xiaoshuo jia* (“The Tradition of Petty Utterance”), which includes anecdotes based on gossip and rumours of the streets. With reference to *Lunyu* 19.4, Ban Gu argues that such a tradition belongs to the minor paths (*xiao dao* 小道). The minor paths may have a certain value, but a gentleman should not engage in them because they can hamper the gentleman's greater pursuit. Besides his moralistic concern, there is a certain bias against the lower class that underlies Ban Gu's exclusion of *xiaoshuo*, as he describes *xiaoshuo* as “what is provided by villagers who know a thing or two” (閭里小知者之所及) and “the discourse of straw-gatherer and maniac” (芻蕘狂夫之議). *Hanshu*, *juan* 30, p. 1745.

²⁸ The *Xiaolin* by the Wei literatus Handan Chun 邯郸淳 (fl. 220) is the first-ever compilation of humorous stories in Chinese history. The complete text had disappeared by the Song dynasty, but nearly thirty stories survive in encyclopedic works such as the *Taiping yulan* and the *Taiping guangji*. Guilia Baccini, “Approaching Jokes and Jestbooks in Premodern China,” p. 208.

To enter the world of speech play, let us begin with a famous anecdote in the “Pai tiao” chapter in the *Shishuo xinyu*:

Ji [Kang], Ruan [Ji], Shan [Tao] and Liu [Ling] were carousing in the bamboo grove. Later, Wang Rong went to join [the gathering].

The Infantry Lieutenant (Ruan Ji) said: “Again, here comes the vulgar one to spoil our joyful mood.”

Wang laughed and replied: “Is your fellows’ joyful mood something that can be spoiled again?”

嵇、阮、山、劉在竹林酣飲，王戎後往。

步兵曰：“俗物已復來敗人意！”

王笑曰：“卿輩意，亦復可敗邪？”²⁹

This short episode depicts a leisure gathering of the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves. When the youngest, Wang Rong 王戎, joined the gathering later, he was taunted by Ruan Ji for being the unwelcome one. The commentary quotes the *Weishi chunqiu* 魏氏春秋 (“Spring and Autumn of the Wei Dynasty”) by Sun Sheng 孫盛 (302–373), saying that “the contemporaries considered that Wang Rong has yet transcended the ordinary (*chao su* 超俗).” The commentary does not explain why Wang Rong was perceived in this way. Nevertheless, it is possible to speculate that this evaluation is connected to Wang Rong’s controversial public image mentioned in other sources.³⁰

The way in which Wang Rong responded to Ruan Ji’s challenge is worth pondering. Instead of reacting with negative emotions, Wang Rong first reacted with laughter and then replied to Ruan Ji’s taunting in a playful way by asking a rhetorical question: “Is your fellows’ joyful mood something that can be spoiled again?” Wang Rong’s playful utterance achieves multiple effects. First, with the presumption that the gentlemen in the bamboo grove should have already reached the state of spiritual transcendence, their mood should have become immune to external influences. If the group’s mood was indeed spoiled by the so-called “vulgar one,” then it only implies that the

²⁹ *Shishuo xinyu* 25.4, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 861.

³⁰ Born in the renowned Wang lineage of Linyi Langye 琅邪臨沂, Wang Rong was praised for being a gifted conversationalist and character appraiser from a young age. He befriended Ji Kang and Ruan Ji and became known as a *mingshi* of the Bamboo Grove. The public image of Wang Rong appears somewhat controversial. The *Jinshu* documents that Wang Rong first became known for refusing a funerary gift worth several hundred cash given by his father’s past subordinate officer. Paradoxically, he was condemned for corruption in office after migrating to the South. He was not charged guilty but became an object of gossip in the elite network, which blemished his reputation. A few anecdotes in the *Shishuo xinyu* even depict him as the primary example of “stinginess and meanness.” See *Jinshu*, *juan* 43, pp. 1232–1233, and *Shishuo xinyu* 29.2, 29.3, 29.4 and 29.5.

group was not as extraordinary as assumed, which would degrade the group's status to that of the one they mocked. Besides, by laying emphasis on the word *fu* 復 ("again"), which implies that the same spoiling mood event had indeed happened before, Wang Rong turned Ruan Ji's statement upside down and ridiculed him and their joyful mood.³¹ Second, by receiving Ruan Ji's taunting in a positive way, Wang Rong manifested his competency in emotional management and his possession of a playful spirit, which implicitly refutes Ruan Ji's insult and thereby proves that he deserves to be respected as a distinctive gentleman. In short, not only did Wang Rong's playful reaction successfully defend himself against Ruan Ji's subtle challenge, but it also amused the rest of the audience and animated the mood of the group.

The humour in this story involves a mechanism of incongruity. According to the Incongruity theory in humour studies, humour comes about when there is a mismatch between what is expected and what actually occurs.³² As we have seen in the last chapter, the *mingshi* paradigm is largely defined by the binary discourse of *qing* 清 and *su* 俗. Since the category of *su* is considered inferior and undesirable, the audience would expect Wang Rong to feel embarrassed or offended when being called a *suwu* 俗物 by his elder peer, even though Ruan Ji may not have any malicious intention to insult Wang Rong. What is expected did not happen in the story, as Wang Rong surprised the audience with his playful reaction.

While Wang Rong's playing on the simple situation of incongruity is relatively easy to be understood, the humour in other anecdotes, such as the one below, demands more contextual information and literary knowledge:

When Zhuge Jin was serving as the governor of Yu Province, he was about to send his administrative aide to the court. He spoke to the aide: "My son knows how to converse. You can go to talk with him." The aide went several times in line to visit [Zhuge] Ke, but Ke refused to meet him. Later, they met at a gathering hosted by General Zhang.

The aide called out to Ke: "Tut-tut! Young Master."

Ke then jeered at the aide, saying: "Yu Province has risen in revolt. What to tut-tut about?"

The aide replied: "The governor is enlightened, and his subjects are worthy. I have not heard of any revolt."

³¹ Many thanks to my examiner, Professor Joachim Gentz, for this insightful interpretation of the joke.

³² There are three major theories in humour studies: Superiority theory, Relief theory, and Incongruity theory. Superiority theory predicates that one laughs at what is inferior to oneself. Relief theory focuses on the cognitive and psychological aspects of laughter and argues that humour functions to overcome sociocultural inhibitions and release pressure. Incongruity theory focuses on the element of surprise and predicates that humour is generated when a violation of expectations and rules occurs. See Daniel Derrin, "Introduction," *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology*, pp. 11–13.

Ke said: “In antiquity, when Sage Yao was on the throne, the Four Vicious Beings³³ were among his subjects.”

The aide replied: “There were not only the Four Vicious Beings but also (Yao’s imbecile son) Dan Zhu.”

At this, the audience all burst into laughter.³⁴

諸葛瑾為豫州，遣別駕到臺。語云：“小兒知談，卿可與語。”連往詣恪，恪不與相見。後於張輔吳坐中相遇。

別駕喚恪：“咄咄郎君。”

恪因嘲之曰：“豫州亂矣，何咄咄之有？”

荅曰：“君明臣賢，未聞其亂。”

恪曰：“昔唐堯在上，四凶在下。”

荅曰：“非唯四凶，亦有丹朱。”

於是一坐大笑。³⁵

This story describes the scene of a verbal confrontation between Zhuge Ke 諸葛恪 and a nameless minor official. In order to understand how early medieval audiences made sense of the story, we need to first retrieve some information about the story’s historical and cultural context from other extant sources. In terms of historical context, we need to know the identities of the actors, their respective sociopolitical positions in the world, and the relationship between them. Regarding the cultural context, we need to know the underlying social rules and expectations that prescribe the appropriate behaviour on the occasion. Once we acquire sufficient contextual information, we can speculate how the actors in the story were expected to behave and, thereupon, realise the mismatch between what was expected and what happened.

There are three major figures in the story. The first is Zhuge Jin 瑾 (174–241), who was from the Yangdu 陽都 County of Langye 琅邪 Commandery (present-day southern Shandong). He was the elder brother of Zhuge Liang 亮, the famous Prime Minister of the Shu Kingdom. As an eminent statesman in the Wu Kingdom and arguably one of the most intimate and trusted advisors of Sun Quan 孫權 (182–252), Zhuge Jin had a successful career almost comparable to that of Zhuge Liang.

³³ According to the *Shiji* by Sima Qian, the Four Vicious Beings refers to Hundun 渾沌, Qionqí 窮奇, Taowu 檮杌 and Taotie 饕餮, who were unworthy, evil subjects under the rule of Sage King Yao. See *Shiji*, *juan* 1, pp. 36–37. The Four Vicious Beings may be persons or mythical monsters depending on different textual traditions. Nevertheless, in all traditions, they were banished to exotic lands by Yao’s successor Shun.

³⁴ The quotation is based on Mather’s translation with minor modifications. Richard B. Mather trans., *A New Account of Tales of the World* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), p. 432.

³⁵ *Shishuo xinyu* 25.1, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 859–860.

He received the title of General-in-Chief (*da jiangjun* 大將軍) and was posted to govern Yu 豫 Province (present-day southeastern Henan), a strategic region for the Wu, from 229 to 241.³⁶ Although not as brilliant as Zhuge Liang, Zhuge Jin had a good reputation for his frugality, elegance, and virtue.³⁷ As the eldest son of Zhuge Jin, Zhuge Ke enjoyed remarkable privileges. The third-century *Jiangbiao zhuan* 江表傳 (“History of the South of Yangtze”) by Yu Pu 虞溥, quoted as the commentary of *Shishuo xinyu* 25.1 states that Zhuge Ke was well-known since young age and had a reputation for being an unmatched debater.³⁸ He was favoured by Sun Quan and became extremely powerful. However, according to the *Sanguo zhi*, he was not thought of highly by his father, who remarked that he is “not the one who can protect the family.”³⁹ The third actor in the story is Zhuge Jin’s administrative aide. Considering that he does not have a name in the story, one can only assume that he is not someone of noticeable status and rank.

The event unfolded as Zhuge Jin recommended the nameless aide to converse with Zhuge Ke. When the nameless aide finally met Zhuge Ke at the leisure gathering, the aide voiced his complaint by crying out “tut-tut” (*duoduo*). The aide’s initial protest was in vain, as Zhuge Ke wittily replied with a rhetorical question, which enabled Zhuge Ke not only to evade the complaint against his questionable conduct but also to lay the subject for later ridicule. Zhuge Ke likely anticipated the aide’s reply because, considering the actual reality in Yu Province or the pressure for the aide to defend his superior in public, the aide’s response could only be positive. Zhuge Ke thereupon revealed his insinuation consisted of two parallels: the world ruled by Yao corresponds to Yu Province governed by Zhuge Jin; the Four Vicious Beings hence refers to the aide, Zhuge Jin’s subordinate. However, out of Zhuge Ke’s expectation, the aide took in the satire and turned the table around by adding one more parallel. If the two parallels are true, then accordingly, Zhuge Ke, as Zhuge Jin’s oldest son, can only equate with Yao’s oldest son, Dan Zhu, who was known for being an imbecile. The event ended with Zhuge Ke being insulted by the joke he initially designed, which caused the audience to laugh.

We can speculate that the significance of the story for earlier medieval audiences is two-fold. First, there is the humorous significance. The reader can find joy not only in the satirical dialogue

³⁶ Rafe De Crespigny, *A Biographical Dictionary of Later Han to the Three Kingdoms (23-220 AD)* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 1171–1172.

³⁷ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 52, pp. 1231–1235.

³⁸ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 859.

³⁹ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 52, p. 1235.

between the two gentlemen but also in the irony that Zhuge Ke, the prestigious gentleman known for his outstanding argumentative and conversational skills, lost the quarrel to a nameless minor official. Furthermore, the reader can find entertainment in the punishment of the morally questionable Zhuge Ke by the morally neutral aide.⁴⁰ Second, the story shows that a gentleman in a disadvantageous position can temporarily subvert the existing social hierarchy determined by the existing power structure through playful acts, in this case, through playful utterance. Wit in a gentleman's playful utterance serves as a rhetorical weapon that insults the counterpart's status and affirms one's own status. For this reason, anecdotes about speech play are instructive and appeal to Wei-Jin elites, especially those who were deeply fascinated with the economy of prestige and reputation in the social arena.

Using playful utterances and understated humour to challenge the authority of an elite peer is a common theme in the "Pai tiao" chapter in the *Shishuo xinyu*. Some playful utterances involve using historical references, and others focus on wordplay. Let us look at one example of wordplay:

Emperor Wen of Jin (Sima Zhao) rode with the two Chens in a carriage. When they passed by [Zhong Hui's place], they asked Zhong Hui to join them and immediately drove the carriage off, leaving [Zhong Hui] behind. By the time [Zhong Hui] came out, [the carriage] was already far away. After [Zhong Hui] had caught up with the carriage, [the Emperor] teased Zhong Hui, saying: "Having an appointment to travel with us, how can you be so tardy? I looked for you, but you were so far, far away (*yaoyao*) and never came."

[Zhong] Hui replied: "I am strong (*jiao*), virtuous (*yi*) and honest (*shi*). Why should I keep company with the group (*qun*)?"

The Emperor asked [Zhong] Hui again: "How is Gao Yao compared to others?"

[Zhong Hui] answered: "He cannot match those at the top scale like Sage-Kings Yao and Shun nor catch up with those at the lower scale like King Wen of Zhou and Confucius. Nevertheless, he is a virtuous (*yi*) gentleman of an era."

晉文帝與二陳共車。過，喚鍾會同載，即駛車委去。比出，已遠。既至，因嘲之曰：“與人期行，何以遲遲？望卿遙遙不至。”

會答曰：“矯然懿實，何必同群？”

帝復問會：“皋繇何如人？”

⁴⁰ Zhuge Ke's conduct renders him morally questionable in three ways. First, since the provincial governor sent the aide to Zhuge Ke on an errand, Zhuge Ke's refusal to receive the aide arguably hampered the governor's official affairs. Second, taking Zhuge Jin and Zhuge Ke's father-son relationship into account, Zhuge Jin's act can also be perceived as lacking respect for his father. Finally, his continuous refusal to receive a visitor violates the etiquette of receiving a guest. For example, the *Liji* prescribes that when people of different statuses meet, they should treat each other respectfully. Unless on occasions of mourning or meeting a ruler, people should always respond to other people's greetings. See *Liji*, "Quli 曲禮," 90.

答曰：“上不及堯、舜，下不逮周、孔，亦一時之懿士。”⁴¹

This is a typical example of punning on the taboo names of other people's fathers. According to the annotation by Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝標, the two Chens refer to Chen Qian 騫 and Chen Tai 泰 (d. 260). The personal name of Zhong Hui's deceased father is Yao 繇, so Sima Zhao and the two Chens used the homonym *yaoyao* 遙遙 to tease Zhong Hui. In response to the subtle insult, Zhong Hui punned on four words: *jiao* 矯, *yi* 懿, *qun* 群 and *shi* 實. The first three correspond to the taboo names of Chen Qian's father Chen Jiao, Sima Qian's father Sima Yi, and Chen Tai's father Chen Qun. The fourth word, *shi*, is a homonym of *shi* 寔, the taboo name of Chen Tai's grandfather.⁴² Sima Zhao's second question regarding Gao Yao, the minister of Sage-King Shun, is another allusion to Zhong Yao.⁴³ Once again, Zhong Hui used the taboo name of Sima Yi to praise his own father.

Naming, especially for elites, is a serious matter directly related to questions of social and political hierarchy in imperial China. Like speech, dress, and manner, name is an explicit marker of elite status and should not be an object to play with. A person's name was tabooed for the person's social inferiors. This is especially the case for the emperor's name because its characters were tabooed for the rest of the population.⁴⁴ In the social space, educated elites were expected to address their peers properly and avoid using taboo names. For example, the *Liji* 禮記 (“Records of Rites”) prescribes that on entering the door, one should ask what names are taboos (入門而問諱).⁴⁵ However, playing with the semantics and phonetics of people's names, titles, and taboo names of others' deceased relatives (*hui* 諱) is not a rare practice in social arenas of the Wei-Jin period.⁴⁶ Let us examine another famous example:

⁴¹ *Shishuo xinyu* 25.2, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 860.

⁴² *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 860.

⁴³ Mather, *A New Account*, p. 433.

⁴⁴ Endymion Porter Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2015), p. 119.

⁴⁵ “Quli shang 曲禮上,” in *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, p. 91.

⁴⁶ For more accounts on playing with personal and taboo names, see *Shishuo xinyu* 4.50, 23.50, 24.14, 25.2, 25.3, 25.33.

Xun Minghe (Yin 隱) and Lu Shilong Yun (Yun 雲) had never met before. They both went to a gathering host at Zhang Maoxian's (Hua 華) home. Zhang asked them to speak to each other, [and demanded that] because they both had great talent, so they should not converse in an ordinary way.

Lu raised his hand and said: "I am Lu Shilong, the Gentleman Dragon among the Clouds."

Xun responded and said: "I am Xun Minghe, the Crying Crane beneath the Sun."

Lu continued: "Since you have opened up the blue clouds and witnessed the white pheasant, why don't you stretch out your bow and fit your arrow to the string?"

Xun replied and said: "Initially, I expected a vigorous dragon in the clouds, but now it turns out to be a deer in the wildness. The beast is weak, and my crossbow is strong, so I hang back to shoot."

Hearing this, Zhang clapped his hands and laughed aloud.⁴⁷

荀鳴鶴、陸士龍二人未相識，俱會張茂先坐。張令共語，以其並有大才，可勿作常語。

陸舉手曰：“雲間陸士龍。”

荀荅曰：“日下荀鳴鶴。”

陸曰：“既開青雲覩白雉，何不張爾弓，布爾矢？”

荀荅曰：“本謂雲龍騖騖，定是山鹿野麋。獸弱弩彊，是以發遲。”

張乃撫掌大笑。⁴⁸

The story consists of two playful actors, Lu Yun and Xun Yin, and the audience, Zhang Hua.⁴⁹ The verbal contest began with Lu Yun's declaration of his identity. We know that Lu Yun was the grandson of Lu Xun 遜, Prime Minister of the Wu Kingdom, and the younger brother of the famous literatus Lu Ji 機 (261–303).⁵⁰ As the descendant of one of the most prestigious lineages in the

⁴⁷ This translation is based on Mather's translation with minor modifications. Mather, *A New Account*, p. 439.

⁴⁸ *Shishuo xinyu* 25.9, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 870.

⁴⁹ According to the *Jinshu*, Zhang Hua (232–300) came from a rather humble background. He spent his early years as a sheep herder after his father, who served as a local governor, died. He gained a reputation after being appraised by Ruan Ji and was recommended for the position of the grand ordinary erudite (*taichang boshi* 太常博士) to take charge of imperial rites, music and astrology. He also served as the official historian in the Western Jin court and was also known for compiling the encyclopaedic work *Bowu zhi* 博物誌 ("Records of Diverse Matters"). It was said that Zhang Hua was highly concerned about the perceived downfall of conventional rites and social order, and he frequently antagonised the *qingtian* conversationalists of his day. See *Jinshu*, *juan* 36, pp. 1068, 1070, 1076, 1077.

⁵⁰ After the fall of the Wu Kingdom, the two brothers lived in exile for about ten years. In 289, they travelled to Luoyang and visited Zhang Hua, who thought of them highly and recommended them into officialdom. As Southern nobles, the brothers were extremely proud of their pedigree and Southern background, which caused them to have conflicts with some Northern elites. Lu Yun was known for his literary talent and moral integrity from a young age. He had a successful official career under the Sima regime, holding posts in the centre and the provinces and serving the royal princes. He was executed under the law of shared responsibility because of his brother Lu Ji, who was involved in the War of Eight Princes. *Jinshu*, *juan* 54, pp. 1481–1485.

South, Lu Yun was extremely proud of his pedigree, and so he added the modifier “among the clouds” before his full name. His line highlights both his high social standing and exceptional literary virtuosity.

In response to Lu Yun’s declaration, Xun Yin also declared his identity in the form of a couplet to match Lu Yun’s line. Although there is no biographical information on Xun Yin in official histories, according to the *Xunshi jiazhuan* 荀氏家傳 (“Genealogy of the Xun Clan”) quoted as the commentary of the *Shishuo xinyu* account, we know that Xun Yin was a member of the Xun clan known for their classical scholarship in Yingchuan 潁川 Commandery in the North.⁵¹ Although Xun Yin’s pedigree may not be as impressive as that of Lu Yun, he and his father both held positions in the Jin palace and central government. If “the sun” is a metaphor for the emperor, it is still appropriate for Xun Yin to label his position “beneath the sun.”

So far, the first round of the two gentlemen’s verbal match ended in a draw. In the second round, Lu Yun and Xun Yin upgraded their play of figurative language, rendering the dialogue more obscure. Lu Yun first posed a rhetorical question woven by metaphors such as “blue clouds,” “white pheasant,” “stretching out the bow,” and “fitting the arrow.” According to Richard Mather, the phrase “blue clouds” was occasionally used as a metaphor for the hermit who lived high in the mountains. Since Xun Yin’s name “*Yin*” means “hidden” or “living in seclusion,” Mather speculates that it may be a reference to Xun Yin.⁵² Alternatively, I suspect that “blue clouds” may refer to a certain lofty aura of Lu Yun himself since there is “cloud” (*yun*) in his name. The second metaphor, “white pheasant,” according to Mather’s annotation, originally means a rare bird of the South formerly brought as tribute to the Zhou Kings.⁵³ Here, the white pheasant clearly refers to Lu Yun himself. As an outstanding gentleman from the South, Lu Yun was surely a “rare bird.” The last two metaphoric phrases, “stretch out your bow” and “fit your arrow,” may evoke the audience to think of the highly alarmed posture that one is ready to face a threat or fight an enemy. Overall, one can translate Lu Yun’s line into: “Since you have left seclusion and beheld me, an outstanding gentleman from the South, why don’t you get ready to confront me?”

⁵¹ According to the *Xunshi jiazhuan* 荀氏家傳, Xun Yin’s grandfather held the post of local governor, and his father served as a gentleman-attendant in the Palace Secretariat. Xun Yin himself served as Secretariat Drafter of the Crown Prince and the aide to the Chamberlain for Law Enforcement. The *Xunshi jiazhuan* also records the event in the story where Lu Yun was continuously humiliated by Xun Yin in the gathering hosted by Zhang Hua. Xun Yin’s rhetorics were aesthetically pleasing, and Zhang Hua praised him highly. *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 870.

⁵² Mather, *A New Account*, p. 439.

⁵³ Ibid.

Xun Yin certainly understood Lu Yun's coded message, so he replied with a satirical remark on Lu Yun's name. "Dragon in the clouds" (*yunlong* 雲龍) obviously refers to Lu Yun's personal and courtesy names. The word "deer" (*lu* 鹿) may be a pun for Lu Yun's surname since the two characters are homonyms. Moreover, considering that the South was often perceived as an uncivilised region far from the Central Plain by northerners, "the wildness" may be a metaphor for the South. Therefore, Xun Yin's reply can be translated as: "Initially, I expected to see a distinctive noble gentleman, but now it turns out to be a vulgar common man from the uncivilised South. You are not well-cultivated, and my erudition is profound, so I am taking my time to deal with you (I do not consider you my equal rival)."

Modern scholarship has pointed out that names, identity, and one's sense of self are closely related.⁵⁴ One's name constitutes the vital part of what Jacques Lacan calls "the Symbolic order" that one gains when acquiring a language and becoming accustomed to the basic rules of social behaviour.⁵⁵ It is through having names that a subject can have a sense of existence and identity in the world. By the same token, losing one's name or being called by derogatory nicknames can lead to humiliation and even the disastrous dissolution of the self.⁵⁶ Back to the *Shishuo xinyu* story, by replacing the words (*yun*, *long*, *lu*) that represent the source of Lu Yun's pride with "deer in the wildness" (*shanlu* 山鹿/*yemi* 野麋), Xun Yin symbolically lowered Lu Yun's position to that of the inferior. This sarcastic remark on Lu Yun's name undoubtedly diminished Lu Yun's "face," insulted his status, and undermined his self-image in public.⁵⁷

Jack Chen points out that the figures in the *Shishuo xinyu* are often praised for their discursive virtuosity and social competency exemplified by voicing adequate praise and insult at the right moment, which "may be considered one of the defining features of 'gentlemen of repute' whose graceful conduct in the social arena determines whether they truly belong to the community."⁵⁸ Praises and insults function as social judgements that determine the relative status of all those

⁵⁴ Kenneth L. Dion, "Names, Identity, and Self," *Names* 31, no. 4 (1983), pp. 245–257.

⁵⁵ Adrian Johnston, "Jacques Lacan," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/lacan/>.

⁵⁶ Manfred Weidhorn, "The Relation of Title and Name to Identity in Shakespearean Tragedy," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 9, no. 2 (1969), p. 304.

⁵⁷ For the idea of self in public, see Barry R. Schlenker, "Self-Identification: Toward an Integration of the Private and Public Self," in *Public Self and Private Self*, ed. Roy F. Baumeister (New York: Springer, 1986), pp. 21–62.

⁵⁸ Jack W. Chen, *Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance: Essays on the Shishuo Xinyu* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021), p. 123

involved in a given social interaction. The use of insult, in particular, puts one's social capital at stake, for "the one who loses face loses social standing, and as a result, finds him or her place altered within the network of social relations."⁵⁹ In addition to Chen's insightful observation that a defining feature of *mingshi* is "to say the right thing at the right moment," I would like to add one more modifier to the equation, that is, in a playful way.

III. Monks' Speech Play

The presence of Buddhist monks is also noteworthy throughout the social arena of the *Shishuo xinyu*. The *Shishuo xinyu*, including Liu Xiaobiao's commentaries, contains a total of 84 accounts about Buddhist monks, among which more than half (52 accounts) involve the eminent gentleman-monk Zhi Dun 支遁 (314–366). During the Eastern Jin period, monks were significant participants in literary salons and leisure gatherings. Because of their association with the literary community, many monks eventually came to possess the double identity of eminent monk (*mingseng* 名僧) and distinctive gentleman *mingshi*.⁶⁰ Sun Chuo 孫綽 (320–377), for example, composed a text called *Dao xian lun* 道賢論 ("Discourse on Monks and Worthies") in which he matches seven eminent monks in the Eastern Jin with the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove.⁶¹

In the social arena, some monks became the objects of derision, while others became known as prominent conversationalists who impressed the audience not only with their intelligence in providing profound remarks on metaphysical topics but also with their playful spirit manifested in witty utterances. This section examines three accounts of speech play that involve Buddhist monks.

The first account concerns the monk Kang Sengyuan 康僧淵:

Kang Sengyuan's eyes were deep, and his nose was tall. Prime Minister Wang teased him all the time. Sengyuan said: "Nose is the mountain of the face; Eyes are the valley of the face. If the mountain is not tall, then it is not ethereal. If the valley is not deep, then (its water) is not pure."

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 140.

⁶⁰ Zhou Daxin 周大興, "Jise yu youxuan: Zhi Dun Fojiao Xuanxue de quanshi 即色與遊玄: 支遁佛教玄學的詮釋," *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 24 (2004), p. 186; Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 93–95; Cai Yanfeng 蔡彥峰, *Zhonggu zaoqi shi seng jiaowang yu wenxue* 中古早期士僧交往与文学, (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2021), p. 4.

⁶¹ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 246.

康僧淵目深而鼻高,王丞相每調之。僧淵曰:“鼻者面之山,目者面之淵。山不高則不靈,淵不深則不清。”⁶²

In the first chapter, we encounter the story of Kang Sengyuan, who established his name after conversing with some influential gentleman-officials in Jiankang, the capital of the Eastern Jin.⁶³ We remember that the narrative highlights Kang Sengyuan's self-possession and personal agency in a disadvantageous situation. Such a demeanour is a defining feature of a *mingshi*. The current account continues to characterise Kang Sengyuan as a *mingshi*.

Some contextual knowledge can be useful to our understanding of the current account. Based on his surname, Kang, one can speculate that Kang Sengyuan was probably ethnically Sogdian. According to the sixth-century Buddhist hagiography *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (“Biographies of Eminent Monks”), Kang Sengyuan was particularly distinguished by his exotic facial features, which made him the target of mockery and insult. Although his physical appearance retained features of a foreigner, Kang Sengyuan was, in fact, born in Chang'an and could speak fluent Chinese.⁶⁴ From the perspective of modern audiences, Kang Sengyuan is hardly a total foreigner since he grew up in Chang'an and fully immersed himself in the Chinese language and culture.

In the current account, Wang Dao 王導 (276–339), the Prime Minister of the Eastern Jin and regent during the reign of Emperor Cheng 成 of Jin (r. 325–342), taunted Kang Sengyuan in regard to his foreign facial features. The high nose and deep eyes were perceived as the stereotypical physical markers for foreign ethnicities, particularly for those from the *xiyu* 西域 (“Western Regions”).⁶⁵ Marc Abramson points out that using physical criteria to determine social standing was a common practice among literary elites, especially in the courts of the southern dynasties, where elites faced the pressure of ostensibly “preserving” Chinese culture while the North was controlled by non-Han dynasties.⁶⁶ Facing what could be a racial antagonism, Kang Sengyuan's reply is remarkably witty and creative, for he overwrote the negative perception of his physical features

⁶² *Shishuo xinyu* 25.21, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 881.

⁶³ *Shishuo xinyu* 4.47, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 255.

⁶⁴ *Gaoseng zhuan*, *juan* 4, p.149.

⁶⁵ Marc Samuel Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 87

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

with positive analogies, turning the marker of his ethnic identity into positive symbols of the *mingshi* paradigm.

Kang Sengyuan literally defended his face. From the perspective of the primary audience of the anecdote, who were likely elite Chinese in the South holding a certain prejudice against non-Chinese groups, Kang Sengyuan, a highly distinguishable foreigner with no backing from the elite community in the southern capital, was expected to be embarrassed and remain silent when being taunted by the most powerful minister at court. However, judging from the monk's playful reply, the audience could experience an expectation discrepancy, which ultimately fostered their respect for Kang Sengyuan. At the end of the same account preserved in the *Gaoseng zhuan*, there is an additional punchline: "The contemporaries regarded this an exceptional reply" (時人以為名答).⁶⁷ This suggests that Kang Sengyuan's playful utterance was indeed well-received by elite societies.

The second account centres on an idle talk between the prestigious gentleman-monk Zhi Dun and two contemporary gentlemen:

When Wang Zixian (Huizhi 徽之) went to visit Xie Wan's place, Master Lin was already seated. He looked around with his head up and appeared extremely lofty.

Wang said: "If Master Lin had all his beard and hair intact, wouldn't his spirit and expression be even better than this?"

Xie said: "Lips and teeth need each other. One cannot lose either of them. What do beard and hair have anything to do with spiritual insight?"

Master Lin was extremely unhappy and said: "Today, my seven-feet body is in service of you two worthy gentlemen."

王子猷詣謝萬，林公先在坐，瞻矚甚高。

王曰：“若林公鬚髮並全，神情當復勝此不？”

謝曰：“脣齒相須，不可以偏亡。鬚髮何關於神明？”

林公意甚惡，曰：“七尺之軀今日委君二賢。”⁶⁸

Zhi Dun, courtesy name Daolin 道林, was born in a Buddhist family in the North. Like many northern elite families, Zhi Dun's family emigrated to the South and settled in Kuaiji 會稽 Commandery (present-day Suzhou), which eventually became the second sociocultural centre next

⁶⁷ *Gaoseng zhuan*, *juan* 4, p. 149.

⁶⁸ *Shishuo xinyu* 25.43, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 893–894.

to Jiankang. Known for his outstanding literary virtuosity, exegesis of the *Zhuangzi*, and lecture on the *Prajñāpāramitā* doctrine and the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, Zhi Dun was one of the leading intellectuals in the Kuaiji elite community and was well-connected with the most prominent officials and literati of the Eastern Jin, such as Wang Meng 王濛 (309–347), Liu Dan 劉惔, Xie An 謝安 (320–385), Sun Chuo (314–371), and Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361).⁶⁹ Considering his intellectual accomplishments and the extension of his personal network, Zhi Dun was probably the most prestigious monk in the Eastern Jin.

In the current anecdote, Zhi Dun was present at a leisure gathering hosted by Xie Wan 萬 (320–361), the younger brother of Xie An, where he met Wang Huizhi 徽之 (338–386), the fifth son of the famous calligrapher Wang Xizhi. The tension between the three unfolded as Wang Huizhi, who was displeased by Zhi Dun's haughtiness, ridiculed Zhi Dun's physical appearance and manner. In order to decode Wang Huizhi and Xie Wan's satire, we need to know the symbolic significance of beard and hair in early and medieval China.

First of all, the Confucian text *Xiaojing* 孝經 ("Classic of Filial Piety") prescribes that a person should keep his/her body and hair intact because one receives his/her body from one's parents; therefore, not inflicting harm on one's body is the beginning of filial piety.⁷⁰ In other words, a person's hair symbolises the person's connection with his/her parents and, therefore, symbolises one's humanity. By extension, people who lose a part of their bodies are considered non-human. For example, Robin Yates notes that in Qin and Han, a person who suffered mutilating punishments, such as shaving the beard and head (*xingren* 刑人), was reduced to non-human and even considered socially dead, because "by this mutilation, even in the cutting off of the facial whiskers, the individual was rendered unwhole and therefore polluting and unable to serve at and participate in the religious observances of ancestor worship."⁷¹ Besides, the beard was vested with further

⁶⁹ About this community, the *Jinshu* states: "There were marvellous mountains and waters in Kuaiji, and most eminent gentlemen resided there. When Xie An had not yet taken any official appointments, he also lived there. Those like Sun Chuo, Li Yun, Xu Xun, and Zhi Dun surpassed the mundane with their literary virtuosity. Together, they built their homes in the eastern lands and had the same hobbies as Wang Xizhi. The community held leisure gatherings at the Orchid Pavilion on the northern side of the Kuaiji Mountains. Wang Xizhi composed a preface by himself to express his mind." 會稽有佳山水, 名士多居之, 謝安未仕時亦居焉。孫綽、李充、許詢、支遁等皆以文義冠世, 並築室東土, 與羲之同好; 嘗與同志宴集於會稽山陰之蘭亭, 羲之自為之序, 以申其志。 *Jinshu*, *juan* 80, pp. 2098–2099.

⁷⁰ *Xiaojing Zheng zhushu* 孝經鄭注疏, p. 13.

⁷¹ Robin Yates, "Slavery in Early China: A Socio-Cultural Approach," *Journal of East Asian Archaeology* 3, no. 1 (2001), p. 299.

symbolic and aesthetic values for medieval elite males. As Abramson points out, thin but long beards and moustaches were considered not only a sign of gravitas and wisdom but also a marker of masculinity; they constitute the indispensable parts of the appearance of a figure of rank.⁷²

Coming back to the anecdote, Wang Huizhi's remark on Zhi Dun's presumptuous manner and "imperfect" appearance is undoubtedly satirical. With the conventional assumptions about hair and beard, Wang Huizhi may be implying that the monk with his shaved hair and beard was not only deficient in wisdom and spirituality but also incomplete as a human. The next line of Xie Wan questioning whether there is any connection between beard and hair and one's possession of spiritual insight is somewhat ambiguous. It is hard to judge whether Xie Wan intended to defend Zhi Dun by posing a rhetorical question to Wang Huizhi or he was in line with Wang Huizhi to deride Zhi Dun by drawing an analogy between the connection of lips and teeth and that of beard/hair and spiritual insight. In any case, Zhi Dun was deeply offended by Wang Huizhi and Xie Wan. Thus, he referred to them as "the two worthy gentlemen," which is clearly ironic.

Although Zhi Dun was well respected by Wang Xizhi,⁷³ their cordial relationship did not extend to the next generation. Neither Wang Xizhi's son nor Zhi Dun held each other in good regard.⁷⁴ Considering Zhi Dun's remarkable reputation and status, it is unsurprising that he faced more rivalry than other monks. For example, Wang Tanzhi 王坦之 (330–375), a Confucian scholar-official and one of Zhi Dun's major rivals, refused to accept Zhi Dun as an eminent gentleman (*gaoshi* 高士) and composed a polemic discourse arguing that monks could not be considered eminent gentlemen. Wang Tanzhi stated that being an eminent gentleman meant liberating one's mind and wandering freely with joy. Although monks claimed to have transcended the ordinary world, they were nevertheless more bound by rules, which conflicted with the idea of being self-possessed in one's nature and emotions.⁷⁵

⁷² Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China*, p. 88.

⁷³ *Shishuo xinyu* 4. 36.

⁷⁴ On a different occasion, Zhi Dun was asked by somebody about his impression of Wang Xianzhi and his brothers, Zhi Dun described them as "a group of white-neck birds who only made husky noise." See *Shishuo xinyu* 26.30.

⁷⁵ See *Shishuo xinyu* 26.25. Wang Tanzhi's reasoning is that since monks still abided by established rules, they failed to attain the ideal state of mental freedom and spiritual transcendence, which were the criteria for being distinctive gentlemen. However, from the perspective of Buddhist monks, "being bound by rules," that is, following the Buddha's teaching and observing the Vinaya, were the essential means to manage one's desires and severe mental afflictions and attachments to worldly existences. It was precisely by doing so that one could be liberated from the phenomenon world and achieve the ultimate state of transcendence.

Wang Tanzhi was a descendant of the Taiyuan 太原 Wang clan and later became a prominent minister at court. He was known as a Confucian-legalist official who advocated the *xingming* 刑名 thought, a tradition that focuses on the study of laws and punishments associated with Warring States thinkers such as Guan Zhong 管仲, Shang Yang 商鞅 and Shen Buhai 申不害. He was strongly against the contemporary vogue of abandoning ritual protocols and public duties to pursue spiritual transcendence and composed a polemic discourse to criticise Zhuangzi's thoughts.⁷⁶ He appears as one of Zhi Dun's major rivals in the *Shishuo xinyu*. Another account even describes the relationship between the two as “absolutely incompatible.”⁷⁷ It should be noted that the tension between Wang Tanzhi and Zhi Dun should not be interpreted as a conflict between the three traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. As Zürcher points out, Wang Tanzhi did entertain relations with other monks; his antipathy against Zhi Dun was perhaps fuelled by Zhi Dun's reputation as one of the *Zhuangzi* specialists of his time as well as personal reasons rather than ideological motives.⁷⁸ It is also possible that Wang Tanzhi simply saw Zhi Dun as the competitor for prestige within the cultured upper class. Or perhaps Wang Tanzhi was concerned about the privileges given to monks (for example, monks did not need to prostrate themselves before the emperor), which might further destabilise the social hierarchy and power of the sovereignty.⁷⁹

The last example of speech play serves an epitome of the rivalry between Zhi Dun and Wang Tanzhi:

Zhi Daolin composed the *Jise lun* (“Discourse on Matter as Such”). Upon the completion of his work, Zhi Dun showed it to Court Gentleman Wang (Tanzhi). The Court Gentleman responded with no words.

⁷⁶ *Jinshu*, *juan* 75, pp. 1964–1966.

⁷⁷ See *Shishuo xinyu* 26.21: Wang Zhonglang (Tanzhi) and Master Lin were absolutely incompatible with each other. Wang attacked Master Lin for sophistry, while Master Lin spoke of Wang in the following words: “Wearing a dirty greasy hat and wrapping himself in a single-cloth rope, he carries the *Zuozhuan* under his armpit and chases after the carriage of Zheng Kangcheng (Xuan 玄). You ask what this thing is. It's a dirty dust bag.” 王中郎與林公絕不相得; 王謂林公詭辯, 林公道王云: “箸膩顏貶, (紕 翁)布單衣, 挾左傳, 逐鄭康成車後。問是何物? 塵垢囊。”

⁷⁸ Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, pp.119, 143, 150.

⁷⁹ Anti-Buddhist polemics existed in early Eastern Jin. For example, during his regency, Prime Minister Yu Bing 庾冰 attempted to impose an official measure to force monks to follow ritual protocols, especially to prostrate themselves before the emperor. Opposed by other pro-Buddhist officials, Yu Bing failed to impose his measure. See Cai, *Zhonggu zaoqi shi seng jiaowang yu wenxue*, pp. 126–129.

Zhi asked: “Are you ‘learning it in silence’?”⁸⁰

Wang replied: “Since there is no presence of Mañjuśrī, then who can be appreciated?”

支道林造即色論，論成，示王中郎。中郎都無言。

支曰：“默而識之乎？”

王曰：“既無文殊，誰能見賞？”⁸¹

In comparison to the two aforementioned accounts, the playful utterances in the current conversation contain more philosophical allusion. The conversation began as Zhi Dun presented his essay, which is probably an elucidation of the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) doctrine, to Wang Tanzhi.⁸² Initially, Wang Tanzhi did not provide any comments. This silence might be perceived by Zhi Dun as a sign of either awe or incomprehension, which indicates Zhi Dun’s scholastic excellence and Wang’s intellectual inferiority. Perhaps in the hope of provoking Wang Tanzhi, Zhi Dun asked about Wang Tanzhi’s silence by referring to a line in the *Lunyu* where Confucius speaks of his ability to learn in silence. Instead of affirming nor denying Zhi Dun’s question, Wang responded with a playful remark, alluding to the famous Vimalakīrti’s silence at the end of the ninth chapter, “The Dharma-Gate of Non-Duality,” in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*. In the scripture, after numerous bodhisattvas proclaimed their ways of entering the Dharma gate of non-duality, Mañjuśrī asked Vimalakīrti to explain his method. Vimalakīrti responded with no words. His silence impressed Mañjuśrī, who exclaimed in awe: “Not even to have words or speech is the true entrance into the Dharma gate of non-duality.”⁸³ As Mather points out, Vimalakīrti’s silence also corresponds to Laozi’s notion of the “nameless” Way and Zhuangzi’s dispensing with words after comprehending the meaning.⁸⁴ Bearing the significance of Vimalakīrti’s silence in mind, one can then interpret Wang Tanzhi’s reply as: “I stayed in silence like Vimalakīrti as I have fully understood your exposition of the non-duality between

⁸⁰ This is an allusion to *Lunyu* 7.2.

⁸¹ *Shishuo xinyu* 4.35, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 245.

⁸² Zhi Dun is known as the founder of the Jise “school” (即色宗), one of the “Six Sects and Seven Schools” (六家七宗) of early Chinese Buddhism that all are in fact particular methods of exegesis to define the Mahāyāna concept of Emptiness 空. Zhi Dun’s idea is basically that matter (*se* 色), or the phenomenal world, is identical to Emptiness because the phenomenal world does not exist by itself but as ephemeral moments in the endless chain of cause and effect. For more details about Zhi Dun’s thought, see Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, pp. 123–130.

⁸³ Diana Y. Paul and John R. McRae trans, *The Sutra of Queen Śrīmālā of the Lion’s Roar; The Vimalakīrti Sutra* (Berkeley, Calif.: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004), p. 148.

⁸⁴ Richard B. Mather, “Vimalakīrti and Gentry Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 8, no. 1 (1968), p. 71

Matter and Emptiness and am entering the gate of non-duality. Since you are not an enlightened being like Mañjuśrī, you cannot appreciate my silence here.” Considering that Zhi Dun was known as a master of the *Prajñāpāramitā* doctrine, including the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, Wang Tanzhi’s playful utterance was indeed an effective challenge to Zhi Dun’s reputation and intellectual authority.

IV. Ladies’ Speech Play

So far, I have analysed the significance of speech play for male conversationalists. One may wonder whether elite women could also draw on playful utterances for their own interests in idle conversations. The last section examines three accounts of women’s speech play.

The first account is the only record of women’s speech play in the “Pai tiao” chapter in the *Shishuo xinyu*:

Wang Hun and his wife, Lady Zhong, were sitting together. They saw [their son] Wuzi (Wang Ji) pass by the front courtyard. Hun gladly said to his wife: “That you gave birth to a son like this is enough to meet my anticipation.”

The wife laughed and said: “If I, your new wife, were married to the Adjutant, then I would surely give birth to a son who is more than this.”

王渾與婦鍾氏共坐，見武子從庭過，渾欣然謂婦曰：“生兒如此，足慰人意。”
婦笑曰：“若使新婦得配參軍，生兒故可不啻如此。”⁸⁵

In chapter 1, we encounter Wang Hun and his son Wang Ji 濟, who were members of the prominent Wang clan in Langye. According to her official biography in the *Jinshu*, Wang Hun’s wife, Lady Zhong Yan 鐘琰, was the great-granddaughter of the esteemed Grant Tutor Zhong Yao 鐘繇 (151–230), who served in the Wei court. She was well read and had a reputation for ritual propriety. She also appears to have the ability to discern people’s capacity and character.⁸⁶ Her clan remained extremely powerful until 264. As Zhong Hui was defeated in the rebellion against Sima Zhao, most

⁸⁵ *Shishuo xinyu* 25.8, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 869.

⁸⁶ *Jinshu*, juan 96, p. 2510.

of the male members of the Zhong clan were purged under the law of mutual responsibility (*lianzuo* 連坐).

In the story, Lady Zhong compared her husband, Wang Hun, to the Adjutant. The commentary quotes the *Wangshi jiapu* 王氏家譜 (“Genealogy of the Wang Clan”), explaining that the Adjutant refers to Wang Hun’s younger brother Wang Lun 淪 (233–257), who served as adjutant of General-in-Chief Sima Zhao. Wang Lun seems like a typical *mingshi*. He was said to be spiritually pure and lofty and was fond of the studies of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. Sima Zhao favoured him and wept for him when he died at 25 *sui*.⁸⁷ Wang Hun, on the contrary, was relatively mediocre and unimpressive. Although ranking two gentlemen was a common practice in the Wei-Jin social arena, Lady Zhong’s satirical remark is particularly unexpected given her gender role and reputation for ritual propriety. The *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* quotes a late Qing commentary, describing Lady Zhong’s reply as “adulterous words” that even lower-class women would feel too ashamed to speak.⁸⁸ Moriya Mitsuo 守屋美都雄 perceives this anecdote differently. He suggests that this anecdote demonstrates the characteristic of the family culture of Wei-Jin aristocratic clans that individualism and self-actualisation, rather than observance of social hierarchy, were prioritised; Lady Zhong’s harsh comment on her husband highlights her reputation as an outstanding appraiser of human character.⁸⁹ Due to the lack of contextual information, we do not know how Lady Zhong’s words were received by her husband and early medieval audiences. One can only speculate that from a conventional, moralistic point of view, this account may have blemished Lady Zhong’s reputation as well as the reputation of Wang Hun and Wang Ji. However, from an alternative point of view, this account may be perceived as a positive remark on Lady Zhong’s anti-conventional spirit.

The second account is easier to decipher, and one can find similarities between its playful rhetoric and those examined in the previous sections.

The wife of Wang Anfeng (Rong) often called Anfeng “*qing*” (you). Anfeng told his wife: “That a wife calls her husband ‘*qing*’ is not respectful according to ritual protocols. You should not do this anymore.”

⁸⁷ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 869.

⁸⁸ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 870.

⁸⁹ Moriya Mitsuo 守屋美都雄, *Liuchao menfa: Taiyuan Wangshi jiaxi kao* 六朝門閥: 太原王氏家系考, trans. Liang Chenxue 梁辰雪 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2020), pp. 66–69.

The wife replied, "I am intimate with you, and I love you. If I don't call you 'qing,' then who should call you 'qing'?" Eventually, Wang Rong always allowed it.

王安豐婦常卿安豐。安豐曰：“婦人卿婿，於禮為不敬，後勿復爾。”
婦曰：“親卿愛卿，是以卿卿。我不卿卿，誰當卿卿？”遂恆聽之。⁹⁰

This account records a conversation between Wang Rong and his wife regarding the wife's improper use of the second-person pronoun *qing* 卿. As mentioned earlier, personal identity and social hierarchy are encoded and reflected in the language of premodern China. The choice of pronoun signifies one's identity and relation with the interlocutor. For example, the first-person pronoun of *zhen* 朕 is only used by the emperor. First-person pronouns such as *wu* 吾, *wo* 我, and *yu* 余 are usually used by male elites, while *qie* 妾 is a humble self-reference used by elite women. When addressing others, if the speaker is talking to someone of lower social status or someone of a familiar relationship, then he or she can use familiar second-person pronouns such as *ru* 汝 and *qing*. If the speaker addresses someone of higher social status, then he or she should use honorific second-person pronouns such as *jun* 君 and *gong* 公.

In his examination of playing with pronouns in the *Shishuo xinyu*, Jack Chen points out that “to call someone *qing* when one expects a *jun* in response is to interpellate the other as the inferior in terms of discursive subjectivity.”⁹¹ While some male conversationalists deliberately use improper pronouns to achieve the effect of symbolically debasing the status of their rivals,⁹² the intention of Wang Rong's wife is different. Considering the prescribed hierarchical relation between husband and wife, the wife addressing Wang Rong by “qing” is certainly a breach of the ritual protocols. Seeing Wang Rong oppose his wife, early medieval audiences would expect the wife to feel embarrassed. However, like the gentlemen mentioned in the earlier sections, Wang Rong's wife is neither muted nor shamed. Instead, she openly expresses her desire for love and intimacy. She gains what she wants in the end, as she not only successfully convinces her husband that no offence was intended but also likely amuses him with her rhythmical wording.

In the *Shishuo xinyu*, Wang Rong's wife is not the only woman who uses her rhetorical competence to gain what she wants in marriage. The following is another example:

⁹⁰ *Shishuo xinyu* 35.6, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 1015.

⁹¹ Chen, *Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance*, p. 142.

⁹² For example, see *Shishuo xinyu* 5.20 and 25.5.

Xu Yun's wife was the daughter of Mr. Ruan (Gong 共), the Chamberlain for the Palace Garrison, and the younger sister of Ruan Deru (Kan 侃). She was extraordinarily ugly. Once the marriage ceremony was finished, Xu Yun no longer entered (her room) to pay attention to her. The family was deeply concerned. By chance, Xu Yun had a guest arrive. The wife sent a maiden to take a look. [The maiden] returned and answered: "It was Mr. Huan." Mr. Huan was Huan Fan. The wife said: "Do not worry. Mr. Huan will certainly persuade [my husband] to come inside." Huan, as expected, spoke to Xu Yun: "The Ruan family has married their ugly daughter to you. There must be some intentions. You'd better investigate it."

Xu Yun then went back and entered the wife's room. Upon seeing his wife, he immediately wanted to go out. The wife presumed that [if] he went out now, he would never return to pay attention to her again, so she grabbed his sleeves to stop him. Xu Yun then spoke to her: "A wife should have four virtues. How many do you have?" The wife said: "Your new bride only lacks a beautiful appearance. However, a gentleman should have a hundred moral conducts. How many do you have?" Xu Yun said: "Fully equipped." The wife said: "In general, virtue is the head of the one hundred moral conducts. You are fond of physical attractiveness instead of virtue. How can you say that you are fully equipped?" Xu Yun appeared ashamed. Eventually, they respected each other.

許允婦是阮衛尉女，德如妹，奇醜。交禮竟，允無復入理，家人深以為憂。會允有客至，婦令婢視之，還答曰：“是桓郎。”桓郎者，桓範也。婦云：“無憂，桓必勸入。”桓果語許云：“阮家既嫁醜女與卿，故當有意，卿宜察之。”

許便回入內。既見婦，即欲出。婦料其此出，無復入理，便捉裾停之。許因謂曰：“婦有四德，卿有其幾？”婦曰：“新婦所乏唯容爾。然士有百行，君有幾？”許云：“皆備。”婦曰：“夫百行以德為首，君好色不好德，何謂皆備？”允有慚色，遂相敬重。⁹³

This extended story centres on the interaction between the prominent gentleman Xu Yun 許允 (d. 254) and his wife, Lady Ruan. According to the mid-third-century *Weilüe* 魏略 ("A Brief History of Wei") quoted as the commentary of the *Sanguo zhi*, we know that Xu Yun had a remarkable pedigree and was designated the *mingshi* of his home Ji 冀 Province since a young age. He served in the central government as a gentleman-attendant in the Ministry of Personnel during the reign of Emperor Ming of the Wei dynasty (Cao Rui 叡, r. 226–239) and as the close attendant of the young emperor Cao Fang 芳 (r. 239–254). He was a close associate of the two factionists, Li Feng 李豐 and Xiahou Xuan 夏侯玄. After the factionists lost to the Sima family in the power struggle, Xu Yun was also purged under the law of shared responsibility. He died on the way to exile.⁹⁴ Regarding Lady Ruan, we do not know any additional biographical information except that her

⁹³ *Shishuo xinyu* 19.6, in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 741.

⁹⁴ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 9, pp. 302–304.

brother Ruan Kan 侃 was a friend of Ji Kang and had a reputation for outstanding literary talent and elegant style.⁹⁵

The story can be divided into two parts. In the first part, Lady Ruan is neglected by her husband, Xu Yun, because of her physical appearance. The second part tells how Lady Ruan manages to gain her husband's respect by debating the notion of virtue (*de* 德). The "Four Virtues" mentioned by Xu Yun likely refers to the idea of "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" (*sancong side* 三從四德). The concept of Three Obediences derives from the *Yili* 儀禮, which states: "Before marriage, a woman follows her father; after marriage, she follows her husband; when her husband dies, she follows her son." The idea of "Four Virtues" originates in the *Zhouli* 周禮 and refers to "wifely virtue" (*fude* 婦德), "wifely speech" (*fuyan* 婦言), "wifely beauty" (*furong* 婦容), and "wifely work" (*fugong* 婦功).⁹⁶ Since the meanings of these terms are not specified in the classics, arguably, there is no canonical interpretation.⁹⁷

While the humour in the last story is explicit, the humour in this story is somewhat implicit. In order to understand whether Lady Ruan has been playful with her speech, we need to know whether her speech involves a breach of social norms. According to Bret Hinsch's study on women in early China, there are three paradigms that influenced gender norms and attitudes toward women in the long term: cosmology, patrilinealism, and pragmatism.⁹⁸ Cosmology is the most significant force that shaped gender dichotomy, as dualistic cosmological concepts, such as Heaven and Earth, yin and yang, gradually became gendered concepts in Eastern Han, probably due to the anti-female rhetoric generated in the political struggle between appointed scholar-officials and empress dowagers at court. For example, the *Baihu tongyi* 白虎通義 ("Discourse of the White Tiger Hall") rationalises the notion of Three Obediences with correlative cosmology.⁹⁹ By placing women in

⁹⁵ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 741.

⁹⁶ See Keith N. Knapp, "Sancong side 三從四德," in *RoutledgeCurzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, ed. Yao Xinzong (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 524–25.

⁹⁷ The most influential interpretation of these concepts in the early medieval period likely came from the *Nüjie* 女誡 ("Admonitions for Women") by the Han female scholar Ban Zhao 班昭. In terms of "wifely virtue," Ban Zhao stresses the wife's integrity and loyalty towards her husband. Regarding "wife speech," Ban Zhao argues that women should speak words that are appropriate, prudent and timely rather than being clever conversationalists. As for "wifely beauty," Ban Zhao states that keeping oneself clean and tidy is more important than being attractive. See *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 84, p. 2789.

⁹⁸ Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), pp. 10–14.

⁹⁹ Knapp, "Sancong side 三從四德," p. 525.

secondary positions to men in accordance with the cosmological order, the *Baihu tongyi* predicates the gender hierarchy that women should not challenge male authority due to their natural inferiority.¹⁰⁰

Another source of behavioural protocols for women in early medieval China is the *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (“Biographies of Exemplary Women”) by Liu Xiang 劉向.¹⁰¹ According to Robin Wang’s philosophical analysis, the ideal womanhood in the *Lienü zhuan* can be understood from three perspectives: fundamental virtue (*de* 德), necessary talent (*cai* 才) and constructive beauty (*se* 色). Among the three elements, *de* is the utterly crucial attribute that fundamentally defines a human being in the Confucian tradition. Wang notes that Liu Xiang’s narratives “authorise models for women seeking to practice Confucian virtues culminating in a rendering of the ideal person (*junzi*) epitomised now as a woman.”¹⁰² In other words, *de* is not exclusive to either gender. Men and women are equal in their ability to possess and cultivate virtue.

Returning to the anecdote, one can argue that from the perspective of the gender hierarchy predicated by correlative cosmology, Lady Ruan’s utterance certainly has a humorous effect on the audience since her act of arguing with her husband is a trespassing of the social rule that a woman should always stay subordinate to her husband and never challenge his authority. Lady Ruan may impress the audience, for she debates with and surpasses her husband, a renowned conversationalist. Besides, Lady Ruan is the agency of her own desire. She wanted to be cared for and respected by her husband, and she drew on her rhetorical competence to achieve her wish. On the other hand, Lady Ruan’s behaviour is entirely fitting from the perspective of the gender-neutral notion of virtue (*de*). Her speech is appropriate, for her satirical remark on her husband’s moral inferiority reaffirms

¹⁰⁰ However, the question regarding women’s status can be far more complicated concerning the other two factors. Regarding patrilinealism, Hinsch argues that women’s status in early China was determined by the social roles that they played in patrilineal kinship structure and ceremonial circumstances. Some roles, such as mother and mother-in-law, elevated a woman’s status while others, such as daughter-in-law, depressed her status. Besides, there is pragmatism, the most dynamic and influential force that directs a woman’s life. In historical sources, one can easily detect the constant tension and gap between the normative conception of ideal womanhood and the actual behaviours of women in practice. Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ *Lienü zhuan* is a collection of 125 biographical accounts of exemplary women from the legendary period to the Han dynasty. Contemporary scholarship generally agrees that the text was compiled by Liu Xiang during the reign of Emperor Cheng 成 (33–7 BCE). The text consists of eight chapters. The first six chapters contain stories of exemplary women who possess virtues and talents. The seventh chapter contains negative examples of women who brought chaos and destruction. The eighth chapter is not considered part of the original text but a supplement by later authors.

¹⁰² Robin Wang, “Virtue 德 (*de*), Talent 才 (*Cai*), and Beauty 色 (*Se*): Authoring a Full-Fledged Womanhood in *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Biographies of Women),” in *Confucian Cultures of Authority*, ed. Peter D Herschok and Roger T Ames (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), p. 98.

the conventional Confucian teaching that both men and women should prioritise their virtue over other traits like physical beauty and also help others cultivate their virtue.

The characterisation of intelligent, courageous, and active women in Wei-Jin anecdotes seems to be a continuation of the cultural-historical representation of women in earlier works such as the *Lienü zhuan*.¹⁰³ Lady Ruan's rhetorical competence can remind the audience of the famous Zhongli Chun 鍾離春 and the lump-necked woman who became the wife of King Min of Qi in the "Skilful Argument" (*biantong* 辯通) chapter. There is another anecdote that celebrates Lady Ruan's possession of sagacious foresight, intelligence, and emotional capacity in critical situations.¹⁰⁴ This representation of Lady Ruan mirrors representations of exemplary women in the "Maternal Rectitude" (*mu yi* 母儀), "Sagely Intelligence" (*xianming* 賢明) and "Benevolent Wisdom" (*renzhi* 仁智) chapters in the *Lienü zhuan* that focus on women's intelligence in instructing their sons and husbands as well as helping her family and state to survive in disasters.¹⁰⁵ What is novel about the Wei-Jin period is that some writings explicitly state that elite women did surpass their male counterparts and gained respect because of their cultivated virtues, while the *Lienü zhuan* only implies that women were not inferior to male authorities in practice. For example, the story of *Shishuo xinyu* 19.8 is also quoted by Pei Songzhi in his commentary on the *Sanguo zhi*. At the end of Pei Songzhi's account, there is a remark: "Although there was Zhong Hui's discernment of character, [he] still lost to the wisdom of a worthy woman."¹⁰⁶

Overall, the celebration of wise, eloquent, and literarily gifted women is a general trend in early medieval elite society.¹⁰⁷ It is unsurprising that Qian Nanxiu highlights that the two genders in this period were evaluated on "equal terms."¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the reality of gender equality should not

¹⁰³ For detailed analysis of the two types of representation of women in the *Lienü zhuan*, see Lisa Ann Raphals, *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998).

¹⁰⁴ *Shishuo xinyu* 19.8 tells that when Lady Ruan was told of Xu Yun's exile, she remained calm and kept weaving. She said that she had foreseen what was coming. Sima Shi 師 sent Zhong Hui to examine Xu Yun's sons. If they turned out to be as capable as their father, the children would also be purged. Thanks to their mother's critical advice, the sons were able to be exempted from punishment.

¹⁰⁵ For more examples, the representations of women in *Shishuo xinyu* 19.1, 19.5, 19.8, 19.10, 19.12 and 19.19 mirror that of the "Maternal Rectitude" chapter in the *Lienü zhuan*; The portraits of Women in *Shishuo xinyu* 19.2, 19.3, 19.7, 19.11, 19.16, 19.17 and 19.23 exemplify virtues of those in the chapters of "Sagely Intelligence" and "Benevolent Wisdom."

¹⁰⁶ See *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 9, p. 304.

¹⁰⁷ Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), pp. 74–75.

¹⁰⁸ Qian Nanxiu, *Spirit and Self in Medieval China*, p. 11.

be exaggerated. Although women could claim prestige and establish a reputation by demonstrating their social and cultural competence in idle conversations, women's speech was still primarily celebrated for its didactic values instead of playfulness and humorous value. Moreover, in contrast to elite men who could freely travel afar to foster personal connections with peers (*jiaoyou*), elite women were still largely confined to households and private sectors. Even the most prestigious woman like Lady Xie Daoyun 謝道韞 (d. 409), who outshone all her male siblings and her husband, had to hide behind a dark blue curtain when assisting her brother-in-law in debating with a visitor.¹⁰⁹ The non-institutional public space, such as the quasi-literary salon, remained very much a male-exclusive space.

This chapter has demonstrated the role of wordplay in the construction of *mingshi*. Because of its carnivalesque attribute, wordplay in the political and institutional sphere is presented as an indication of one's moral flaw unless it is done for ethical purposes, such as exhorting a ruler who abuses his power. However, wordplay in the leisure sphere is depicted in a neutral and even positive light, as seen in the anecdotal accounts of speech play in the *Shishuo xinyu*. According to the *Shishuo xinyu*, we see that elite members, depending on their different identities and ascribed status, faced different challenges in the social world. Here, speech play was a common means through which Wei-Jin elites could tackle their challenges while approximating the *mingshi* paradigm. Speech play can be an effective rhetorical weapon regardless of an agent's identity and status. It serves as the "shield" that preserves the agent's subjectivity and dignity in disadvantageous situations, as well as the agent's "sugar-coated bullets" that defy the power dynamic and the symbolic order of hierarchical society. In addition to fulfilling the personal interest of the playful agent, speech play also entertains the audience, whether those directly present at the scene or later readers of the anecdote. The entertaining value renders accounts of speech play the objects of gossip, which fosters the propagation of the playful agent's reputation in the wider elite social network and increases the playful agent's social capital. This should explain why playing with words is among the defining activities of "distinctive gentlemen."

¹⁰⁹ *Jinshu*, *juan* 96, p. 2516.

Chapter 4 Playing on the Board

Sometime between 242 and 250 when Sun He 孫和 (224–253) was the Crown Prince of the Wu Kingdom, he commissioned his gentleman-attendant, the moralist scholar-official Wei Yao 韋曜, to write a polemic essay titled *Boyi lun* 博弈論 (“Discourse on Board Games” or “Discourse on Liubo 六博 and Weiqi 圍碁”) to criticise the contemporary popularity of playing board games among elites in the South.¹ For critics like Wei Yao, *boyi* was used as a compound word, which implies that *liubo* and *weiqi* were undifferentiated and equally condemned. Nevertheless, by the time of the Southern Dynasties, playing board games, particularly playing *weiqi*, became remembered as one of the emblematic forms of play among the distinguished gentlemen in the Wei-Jin period, as shown in the *Qiping xu* 碁品序 (Preface to ‘the Appraisal of Weiqi’) by Shen Yue’s 沈約 (441–513).² In this chapter, we enter the world of board games. Considering the importance of *weiqi* in early medieval elite society, this chapter explores how *weiqi* became associated with the celebration of *mingshi* and its function in the social arena. In the last section of the chapter, I revisit Wei Yao’s *Boyi lun* and tease out the ambivalence of board games from the perspective of third-century moralists.

I. A Brief History of Weiqi

Weiqi, or encirclement chess as we know it today, is a territorial board game involving two players alternatively placing black and white stones on the intersection of the grid lines. The player’s goal is to occupy space on the board while preventing being surrounded by the enemy.

Weiqi has a remarkably long history in the Chinese tradition. The earliest records of playing *weiqi* can be dated to the Spring and Autumn period, as shown in sources such as the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 and the *Lunyu* 論語. The word for “weiqi” in early sources is *yi* 弈. The graph 弈, according to the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, originates from 艸, which resembles two people holding stones in their hands to play a game.³ The word *qi* (碁 or 棋) should not be confused with *yi* for *weiqi*. Unlike

¹ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 65, pp. 1460–1461.

² *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, *juan* 74, p. 1274.

³ *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, p. 105.

medieval sources that use *qi* to refer to *weiqi*, the word *qi* in early Chinese text does not specifically mean “weiqi” but may have been a generic term that often appears along with *bo* 博 to designate gambling or board games that involve using stones.⁴ In early China, *weiqi* was viewed primarily as a trivial game. The general perception of *weiqi* was likely a contemptuous one. For example, in the *Mencius*, playing *weiqi* was listed as one of five unfilial deeds, for people would indulge in playing board games, gambling, and drinking while ignoring their duty to care for their parents.⁵

A new attitude toward *weiqi* emerged during the Eastern Han, as reflected in the writing of Ban Gu 班固, which will be explored in detail later. This change in elite perception epitomises the broader intellectual shift from the specialisation of one exegetical tradition of the Confucian classics to a broader, universalistic scholarship mentioned in chapter 1. This general intellectual trend further interacted with the socio-political realities in the second half of the Eastern Han and gave rise to the vogue of travelling around to participate in various social engagements and foster personal connections with potential patrons and peers in the elite society.

The next crucial stage of development for *weiqi* began when the central government of Eastern Han was impaired by a series of natural disasters, religious-inspired rebellions, and the full-scale civil war that brought the dynasty to its end. During a time when warfare became increasingly frequent, it is unsurprising that *weiqi*, as a war simulation game and a medium through which military tactics can be rendered and reflected on, became highly popular among the martial elites and literati who received commissions to lead military campaigns. In the North, the Cao family and their close associates played a crucial role in promoting the spread of *weiqi*, which can be proved from both textual and material evidence.⁶ In the South, *weiqi* was so popular that it became a social issue in the Wu Kingdom, as seen in the *Boyi lun* and elsewhere in the *Sanguo zhi*.⁷

⁴ Zhang Ru'an 張如安, *Zhongguo weiqi shi* 中國圍棋史 (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 1998), pp. 8–10.

⁵ *Mencius*, “Li Lou xia 離婁下.” *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義, *Zhuji jicheng* 諸子集成, Vol.1, pp. 352–353.

⁶ Cai Zhongmin 蔡中民 et al, *Zhongguo weiqi shi* 中國圍棋史 (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1999), pp. 13, 19.

⁷ See *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 52, p. 1235. This account concerns a prestigious gentleman named Zhuge Rong 諸葛融 (d. 253) and depicts a vivid picture of the socio-cultural life of elites in the Wu Kingdom. Like his brother Zhuge Ke 恪, whom we encountered in chapter 3, Zhuge Rong also lived a rather extravagant life, which was disapproved of by the historian Chen Shou. Regardless of the moralist standpoint, leisure gatherings and quasi-literary salons attracted a wide range of participants, including lower-ranking literati, clerks, and soldiers. Like idle conversation (*qingtán*) mentioned in earlier chapters, board games provide a means for low-status gentlemen to accumulate social capital by impressing potential patrons and interacting with peers.

The Northern and Southern Dynasties period is said to be the “Golden Age” of *weiqi*, as the game finally became widely accepted by the highest authorities and was elevated to the level of art.⁸ In general, emperors in the southern dynasties were *weiqi* lovers and *weiqi* players. To name a few notable figures, Liu Yilong 劉義隆, or Emperor Wen of Liu-Song (宋文帝, r. 424–453) was highly fond of *weiqi*. He gave favour to ministers and officials who demonstrated outstanding skill in the game and was the first emperor to bestow *weiqi* stones to his vassals as a reward. Liu Yu 劉彧, or Emperor Ming of Liu-Song (宋明帝, r. 465–472), established the first official association of *weiqi* referred to as *weiqi zhouyi* 圍碁州邑 (“The Provinces and Districts for Weiqi”), which marks the professionalisation of *weiqi*.⁹ Among all, there was Xiao Yan 蕭衍, Emperor Wu of Liang (梁武帝, r. 502–549), who was well-known for his *Weiqi fu* 圍棋賦 (“Rhapsody on Weiqi”).¹⁰ He also commissioned the compilation of *Qiping* 碁品 (“Appraisal of Weiqi”), which has been lost except for the preface written by Shen Yue in the 6th century. A part of Shen Yue’s words speak as follows:

[It was said that] Master Zhi (Zhi Dun 支遁) took it (*weiqi*) as “conversation through hands.” Sir Wang (Wang Tanzhi 王坦之) called it “reclusion while sitting.” This being the case, there were often high-ranking players among the renowned worthies in the Han and Wei dynasties. During the Jin and the Song dynasties, prestigious gentlemen also joined the contest of *weiqi* in moments when they wished to set their thoughts free.

支公以為手談，王生謂之坐隱。是以漢魏名賢，高品間出。晉宋盛士，逸思爭流。¹¹

Clearly, *weiqi* was remembered as one of the emblematic forms of play among social and cultural elites in the early medieval period. In the Tang dynasty, *weiqi* was professionalised and became recognised as one of the major cultural achievements of literati. According to the “*Bai guan zhi* 百官志” (Chapter on Offices) in the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書, *weiqi* specialists were among the *neijiao boshi* 內教博士 (“Inner Erudite”) during the time of Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690–705) and Tang Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (r. 712–756). The “*Zhi guan zhi* 職官志” (Chapter on Official Positions) of the

⁸ Zhang Ru’an, *Zhongguo weiqi shi*, pp. 95–99.

⁹ *Nanshi* 南史, *juan* 49, p. 1212.

¹⁰ *Yiwen leiju*, *juan* 74, pp. 1907–1908.

¹¹ *Yiwen leiju*, *juan* 74, p. 1910.

Jiu Tangshu 舊唐書 also records that there were *weiqi* specialists inside the Hanlin Academy 翰林院.¹²

The conventional interpretation of the role of *weiqi* in Wei-Jin cultural and intellectual life mainly focuses on *weiqi* and other board games as a voluntary and leisurely activity. For example, Marion Eggert does not differentiate between *weiqi* and *liubo* and defines *weiqi* as “the habitual game of immortals” and claims that it is “the game of the noble and educated per se and insofar as the figure of the immortal is the enlarged self-image of the gentleman at his leisure, *weiqi* is naturally the game these immortals play in blissful forgetfulness of time and self.”¹³ While Eggert’s observation may be true in the case of *liubo* on mural paintings or figurines in Later Han tombs, this may not be the case for *weiqi* during the Wei-Jin period. Regarding the significance of *weiqi* in the early medieval period, He Yunbo 何雲波 offers an insightful observation. He points out that *weiqi* was primarily considered a *xi* 戲. *Xi*, according to He, is “any activity that can bring spiritual and mental pleasure to the literati,” including poetry, drinking, musical performance and *weiqi*, as well as leisure travel into the wilds.¹⁴ I agree with He Yunbo’s interpretation of *xi*. In the Wei-Jin period alone, *xi*, or play, was vested with unique values and became an essential aspect of the daily life of the elites. Moreover, the significance of *weiqi* lies in its philosophical and aesthetic aspects, as playing *weiqi* is often juxtaposed with speech play (*qingtán* 清談) and serves as a way to manifest the so-called “Wei-Jin spirit” (*fengdu* 風度).¹⁵ In light of He Yunbo’s observation, a more careful analysis of textual sources should further enrich our understanding of the association between *weiqi* and the *mingshi* paradigm. The following section examines two significant treatises on *weiqi* that pave the philosophical and aesthetic foundations for the game.

II. Converging Cosmology, Classicism, and History

¹² He Yunbo 何雲波, *Yi jing: Weiqi yu Zhongguo wenyi jingshen* 弈境: 圍棋與中國文藝精神 (Beijing Shi: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2006), pp. 36–37.

¹³ Marion Eggert, “Transcendent, Transgressive, and Expressive: Games and Playing in Premodern Chinese Culture,” in Anders Hansson et al. eds., *The Chinese at Play: Festivals, Games and Leisure* (London: Kegan Paul, 2002), pp. 143–144.

¹⁴ He, *Yi jing*, pp. 30, 84.

¹⁵ For elaboration on the idea of the Wei-Jin spirit, see Qian Nanxiu, *Spirit and Self in Medieval China: The Shih-Shuo Hsin-Yü and Its Legacy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001).

The discourse on *weiqi* in the Pre-Tang period was primarily constituted by the so-called *wufu sanlun* 五賦三論 (“Five Rhapsodies and Three Treatises”). The “Five Rhapsodies” refer to:

1. The *Weiqi fu* by Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166);
2. The *Weiqi fu* by Cao Shu 曹攄 (d. 308);
3. The *Weiqi fu* by Cai Hong 蔡洪 (ca. 3rd century);
4. The *Weiqi fu* by Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (464–549);
5. The *Weiqi fu* by Xiao Cha 蕭詵 (519–562).

The “Three Treatises” refer to:

1. *Yi zhi* 弈旨 (“Significance of Weiqi”) by Ban Gu 班固 (32–92);
2. The *Yi shi* 弈勢 (“Strategic Advantage in Weiqi”) by Ying Yang 應瑒 (d. 217);
3. The *Qiping xu* (“Preface to the Appraisal of Weiqi”) by Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513).

The idea of *wufu sanlun* is said to have been coined by the Song literatus Gao Sisun 高似孫 (1158–1231) in his encyclopaedic work *Wei lue* 緯略 (“Collection of Weft Text”) and is widely accepted in Chinese scholarship on the history of *weiqi*.¹⁶ The texts preserved in the *Wei lue* very much overlap with those preserved in *juan* 74, the chapter on skilful arts (*qiao yi* 巧藝), of the Tang dynasty encyclopaedia *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 with only minor differences.¹⁷

As mentioned earlier, *weiqi* was mainly regarded as a trivial, if not shameful, recreation along with other board games in early China. A new attitude toward *weiqi* emerged in the Eastern Han. The most significant writing on *weiqi* was Ban Gu’s *Yi zhi*. In the *Yi zhi*, Ban Gu not only made a clear distinction between board games and gambling games that involve using stones (referred to as *bo* 博 or *qi* 碁) and *weiqi* (referred to as *yi* 弈), but he was also the first to theorise and philosophise *weiqi*. Since Ban Gu pioneered the subject, his writing should be read and analysed in detail.

The *Yi zhi* starts by linking the game to the greater cosmos:

¹⁶ Gao Sisun 高似孫, *Wei lue* 緯略, *juan* 2, in Zuo Hongtao 左洪濤 ed, *Gao Sisun Wei lue jiaozhu* 高似孫《緯略》校注 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2012), pp. 18–19.

¹⁷ *Yiwen leiju*, *juan* 74, pp. 1270–1274. Besides, the catalogue of the “Jingji zhi 經集志” section in the *Suishu* 隋書 lists at least 11 works of *weiqi* manuals or collections of records of past games under “military writings” 兵書. The authors of these works range from emperors and royal princes to anonymous writers and minor-ranking officials in local administrations. Based on other writings on or pertaining to *weiqi* that survived in official histories, anecdotes, encyclopaedias, and literary anthologies, one can speculate that the discourse of *weiqi* in early medieval China includes a large corpus of texts across different literary genres. *Suishu*, *juan* 34, pp. 1016–1017.

The Northerners call *qi* ‘*yi*.’ They propagate it, expound it, and [use it] to express great ideas.

北方之人，謂碁為弈。弘之說之，舉大略。

The game board must be [made] foursquare, resembling the principle of earth. The paths (crossings) must be [made] upright and straight. This is the potency of divine insight.

局必方正，象地則也。道必正直，神明德也。

The stones appear white and black, reflecting the division of *yin* and *yang*. [The stones] are arranged into patterns on the board, imitating graphs of constellations.

棋有白黑，陰陽分也。駢羅列布，效天文也。

Once the four images have been settled, it is up to the man to engage in the game, which approximates the kings’ governance of the realm.

四象既陳，行之在人，蓋王政也。

Some [players] may lay out [hypothesis] in advance to protect themselves, which approximates Pao Xi’s (Fu Xi) design of the hunting net.

或虛設豫置，以自衛護，蓋象庖犧網罟之制。

To guard against a siege, the player might block all the breaches, which resembles the posture of Xia Hou’s (Great Yu) controlling of the waters.

隄防周起，障塞漏決，有似夏后治水之勢。

[If] there is one missing aperture, [then the entire formation] might collapse and cannot be restored, which resembles the disaster inflicted by the breaching of [Yellow River] dikes at Huzi.¹⁸

一孔有闕，壞頽不振，有似瓠子汎濫之敗。¹⁹

In the first three lines, Ban Gu depicts the physical aspects of *weiqi* in terms of the four images (*sixiang* 四象): 1) the square shape of the game board, which emulates the image of the earth; 2) the straight line of the grid, which emulates the image of the potency of divine insight (*shenming*); 3) colours of the stones, which corresponds to the image of *yin* and *yang*; and 4) the patterns of stones once placed on the board, which resembles the image of celestial patterns. Notably, Ban Gu’s language is not simply descriptive but prescriptive, as is seen in his use of adverbial *bi* 必 with the sentence-final particle *ye* 也. This depiction arguably alludes to two things. The first is the idea of “stimulus and response” (*ganying* 感應) and the epistemological paradigm of correlative cosmology

¹⁸ Much appreciation towards Professor Roel Sterckx, who points out that this refers to the famous lament by Han Wudi when the Yellow River dikes broke at Huzi in 109 BCE, described in *Shiji*, *juan* 29, p. 1409.

¹⁹ *Yiwen leiju*, *juan* 74, p. 1273.

established in the Han dynasty, which stresses the connection between entities and phenomena.²⁰ Compared to everything else that more or less reflects the images of the cosmos, *weiqi* is an elaborately configured system of microcosm. Not only does it mirror the cosmos physically in static form, but its game dynamics require the player to face, adapt to, and prevail in circumstances of unlimited possibility. This equates the process of playing the game with the sagacious kings' engagement with the world.

Ban Gu furthermore alludes to a frequently quoted passage from the *Xici* 繫辭 ("Appended Statements") commentary on the *Zhouyi* 周易.²¹

In antiquity, as for Bao Xi's (i.e., Fu Xi) ruling all under Heaven, looking up, he observed the images in the heavens and looking down, he observed the models in the earth. He observed the markings of the birds and animals and the properties of the earth. At close, he took [inspirations] from his body, and at a distance, he took [inspirations] from other beings. With this, he first made the eight trigrams in order to penetrate the potency of divine insight and to sort out the conditions of the ten thousand beings.²²

古者包犧氏之王天下也，仰則觀象於天，俯則觀法於地，觀鳥獸之文與地之宜，近取諸身，遠取諸物，於是始作八卦，以通神明之德，以類萬物之情。

This passage from the *Xici* concerns Fu Xi's creation of the eight trigrams. Looking at the shared terminologies and semantics (such as the emulations of heaven and earth 象天法地 and the potency of divine insight 神明之德), it is noteworthy that Ban Gu's depiction of *weiqi* echoes this passage in *Zhouyi* classicism. The connection between the two is further evident as the *Xici* texts proceed to describe Fu Xi's making of the knotting of ropes and nets for hunting and fishing (作結繩而為罟). In the *Yi zhi*, Ban Gu rephrases this as Pao Xi's (Fu Xi) design of the hunting net (庖犧網罟之制).

This array of shared terminology and semantics can lead a reader who is familiar with the classical tradition of the *Zhouyi* to associate *weiqi* with the hexagrams created by the legendary sage king Fu Xi. Even though Ban Gu does not identify the agent who designed and configured the game, he nevertheless puts *weiqi* on par with the auto-generative and organic cosmos and the sagely

²⁰ Robin Wang, *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 4; A.C. Graham, *Yin-Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking* (1983 rpt. Melbourne University, Vic: Quirin Press, 2016), p. 1.

²¹ Shaughnessy notes that the *Xici* is one of the four discrete commentaries of the *Zhouyi* with a received version which demonstrates "one of the most sophisticated statements of the correlative thought that has been so fundamental to all of China's philosophical system." Edward Shaughnessy trans., *I Ching: The Classic of Changes* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), p. 1.

²² This translation is based on Shaughnessy's translation with some modifications. Ibid., pp. 204–205.

creation of the hexagrams. The text further stresses the parallel between the function of *weiqi* and the *Zhouyi*, as both can be used to foster the player's understanding of changes and assist in making predictions in accordance with the situation to create desirable outcomes. The hexagrams were created by Fuxi by observing the patterns in the natural world so the sage king could understand the dynamics of the cosmos and thereupon created tools, such as the knotting of ropes and nets, to benefit human societies.²³ This amounts to what Ban Gu calls the king's governance of the world (王政 *wangzheng*). In the case of *weiqi*, Ban Gu implies that when playing *weiqi*, one also needs to thoroughly understand the underlying pattern of changes expressed through metaphors. These metaphors include natural disasters such as floods and the various crises on the battlefield. The player's aim is to continue playing the game (*xing qi* 行碁), just like a gentleman who carries on walking 行 on the Way 道.

After laying out the rationale behind the design of *weiqi*, the Ban Gu proceeds as follows:

The player might pretend to give in while setting up a trap and then break through [the enemy's arrays]. [This resembles] Tian Dan's tactic of surprise attack.

作伏設詐，突圍橫行，田單之奇。

The player might raid the strategic point of the opponent, cutting up the enemy's territory and taking it as a reward. [This resembles] the gesture of Su Qin and Zhang Yi.

要厄相劫，割地取賞，蘇張之姿。

When the player has won two-thirds of the territory yet does not exterminate his enemy, [this resembles] the virtue of King Wen of Zhou, who made a non-aggressive move.

參分有勝而不誅，周文之德，逡巡儒行。

The player might safeguard the corners and take advantage of the sideways. By patching up his own formation, he might be losing but will not be defeated. [This resembles] the wisdom of Duke Mu [of Qin] and the method in the Doctrine of the Mean.

保角依旁，卻自補續，雖敗不亡，繆公之智，中庸之方。²⁴

In this passage, Ban Gu provides the reader with several possible scenarios in the *weiqi* game articulated through historical analogies and offers advice on how one should react according to the situations. The examples are mostly cases of famous military engagements such as that of Su Qin 蘇秦 and Zhang Yi 張儀, Tian Dan's surprise attack, and the expeditions of King Wen of Zhou and

²³ Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2002), pp. 192–193.

²⁴ *Yiwen leiju*, *juan* 74, p. 1273.

Duke Mu of Qin. Ban Gu suggests that one may react to developments in the game by contemplating and emulating the actions of these exemplary figures. Such an analogy is entirely logical, for the gameplay of *weiqi* entails occupying territory on the board while encircling the opponent's stones, which is akin to the dynamics in warfare. This also explains why *weiqi* eventually became associated with military practice and gained popularity, especially among the martial elites and scholar-officials who were commissioned to lead military campaigns in the later periods. *Weiqi* offers a safe environment where crises on the battlefield can be experienced and studied without any real-life consequences. Furthermore, like rituals, *weiqi* constructs a time and space where the player can enter an “as-if” reality and establish connections with the sages and worthies in the past. In the process of playing, one not only empathises with the exemplary figures by being in a similar situation, but one can also temporarily become them.

The ending of the *Yi zhi* states as such:

[Overall, regarding the significance of *weiqi*], first and foremost, it entails the images of heaven and earth. Next, it entails the art of governance by emperors and kings. Then, it shows the equilibrium between the five hegemonies. Finally, it tells the affairs of the Warring States.

上有天地之象，次有帝王之治，中有五霸之權，下有戰國之事。

By observing the gain and loss [on the game board], all [knowledge] of the past and the present is already here.

覽其得失，古今略備。²⁵

As Roger Ames highlights, in the Confucian tradition and the Chinese tradition at large, “knowing” and “knowledge” are pragmatic, participatory, and creative, entailing not only realising and marking out the underlying patterns of the world but also tracing and following such patterns to achieve the ultimate goal of harmony (*he* 和).²⁶ With such presupposition, playing *weiqi* is very much a legitimate means of self-cultivation, which entails thoroughly understanding the changes in the cosmos through active engagement, learning history and becoming one with the exemplary figures in the past. By understanding the cosmos and learning from the past, one can make prognostications and be prepared for present and future challenges. According to the *Yi zhi*, *weiqi*, like the classics, is both philosophical and practical. With *weiqi*, cosmology, classicism, and history all converge and are represented and experienced in the process of playing.

²⁵ *Yiwen leiju*, juan 74, p. 1273.

²⁶ Roger T. Ames trans, *Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), pp. 41-42, 57.

With his writing, Ban Gu successfully established a discourse about doing philosophy through play and using philosophical reflection to justify one's engagement in play.²⁷ The *Yi zhi* remained highly influential throughout the early medieval period. The cosmic symbolism and the game's association with the *Zhouyi* were noted and elaborated further by almost every writer who wrote on *weiqi*. For example, a literatus named Li You 李尤, who was contemporaneous to Ban Gu, composed a verse named *Weiqi ming* 圍棋銘 ("Commemorating Weiqi"):

Reflecting alone in the dark, the poet resonated with the objects and then contemplated. During the intermission of his determination (ethical commitment), he immersed himself in playing [*weiqi*]. The game board serve as the exemplary of square (earth), while the pieces emulate the yin and yang. The crossings mark out the outline of the principle (of the universe) that lines from four directions intersect with each other when setting forth the grid.

詩人幽憶，感物則思。志之空閑，翫弄遊竟。局為憲矩，棋法陰陽。道為經緯，方錯列張。²⁸

The poet, by contemplating the *wu* 物 (objects) in front of him, was able to envision the greater universe. The *wu* here serves as a trigger that induces spontaneous thoughts and emotions on the part of the poet. Poetic composition was, hence, the result of the author's phenomenological reflection. According to the fifth-century literary critic Liu Xie 劉勰, the purpose of *ming* 銘 ("inscription") is to name, honour, and commemorate (*ming* 名) the merits of outstanding figures in the past and present. Liu Xie contrasts Li You with Cai Yong 蔡邕 in this genre. It is unsurprising that Cai Yong, who was well-known for composing inscriptions to commemorate exemplary figures, received the highest appraisal, whereas Li You was depreciated for writing on "shallow" objects such as playing board games and football (*cuju* 蹴鞠).²⁹ Regardless of the moralistic critic, based on the writings of Ban Gu and Li You, one can infer that in early Eastern Han, *weiqi* had already become an object to be elaborated in literary composition and intellectual discourse.

²⁷ It is also noteworthy that there were also links between dice, gambling, divination through the *Yijing*, and the playing of the board game *liubo* in the early period. Lewis draws textual evidence from the *Shiji*, *Hanshu*, and *Huainanzi*, showing that the game board of *liubo* was a replica of Heaven and Earth that "allowed men to situate their place in relation to the dynamic trends of the cosmos and thereby obtain success in their affairs." Mark Edward Lewis, "Dicing and Divination in Early China," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 121 (2002), p. 7. *Liubo* is very similar to *weiqi* in terms of its cosmological configuration. However, the two games are still differentiated because *liubo* was conceived as an engagement with the spirits while playing *weiqi* was primarily a contest against another human.

²⁸ *Yiwen leiju*, *juan* 74, p. 1910.

²⁹ *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, *pian* 11, "Ming zhen 銘箴." *Wenxin diaolong jiaozhu* 文心雕龍校注, pp. 153–157.

III. *Wei qi* and the Art of Warfare

Further enrichment of the discourse on *wei qi* can be witnessed during the period of frequent warfare starting from the end of the Han dynasty. For those in the military, besides its educational significance mentioned earlier, the significance of *wei qi* lies in its attributes as a war simulation game. In particular, *wei qi* is a crucial instrument through which military tactics can be expounded and learned. For this reason, playing *wei qi* became popular among the martial elites in both the North and the South.

In the North, textual evidence implies that the Cao clan and their close associates played a crucial role in the popularisation of *wei qi*. According to the *Bowu zhi* 博物志 (“Records of Diverse Things”) by Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300), Cao Cao competed with many renowned *wei qi* players at the time.³⁰ Although Cao Cao himself did not compose any verse on *wei qi*, Cao Lǔ 攄 (d. 308), the great-grandson of Cao Xiu 休, who was a clansman of Cao Cao, did compose a verse on *wei qi* where he refers to both Ban Gu and Ma Rong 馬融 and underscores the resemblance between playing *wei qi* and the art of governing and military tactics.³¹ Cao Lǔ was favoured by the prominent minister Wang Yan 王衍 and had a reputation for being a benign local governor and an outstanding literatus in the Jin dynasty.³²

In terms of the close associates of the Caos, some distinctive gentlemen in the Jian'an era, such as Kong Rong 孔融 (253–208), Wang Can 王粲 (177–217), and Yin Yang 應瑒 (d. 217), were likely skilled *wei qi* players. Regarding Kong Rong, there is no direct evidence of him playing *wei qi* but an anecdote about his two children playing the game when Kong Rong was arrested due to his offence against Cao Cao. The two children were temporarily exempted from the arrest because of their young age. Facing the sudden disaster, the two children were calm and unmoved. When someone asked the reason behind their calmness, they replied with an insightful line: “How can the eggs be saved when the nest is broken,” which eventually became a proverb. Considering that the children were eventually purged, perhaps they had already foreseen their doom and chose to accept

³⁰ *Yiwen leiju*, juan 74, p. 1905.

³¹ *Yiwen leiju*, juan 74, pp. 1905–1906.

³² *Jinshu*, juan 90, pp. 2333–2334.

the future with composure.³³ This demeanour manifested during playing *weiqi* became a signature of *yaliang* 雅量 (cultivated tolerance) that reoccurs in multiple anecdotes.

More is known about Wang Can, who was a close friend of Cao Zhi 植 (192–232). In a poem in memory of his deceased friend, Cao Zhi writes: “Is there any school of thought that [Wang Can] did not soak himself in? Is there any art that [Wang Can] was not skilful at? His game board was a manifestation of the ingenious. [By engaging in the play of] *bo* and *yi*, he had become the worthy” (何道不洽, 何藝不閑; 綦局逞巧, 博弈為賢).³⁴ Besides, there is a well-known anecdote of Wang Can watching someone play *weiqi*. The game was disrupted, probably because the chessboard was knocked over. It was said that Wang Can resumed the chessboard, and there was no mistake in his memory.³⁵ Wang Can himself might have also composed a verse on *weiqi*, but his writing did not survive.³⁶

Compared to Kong Rong and Wang Can, Yin Yang’s involvement in *weiqi* was even deeper, for he composed the *Yi shi* 弈勢 (“Strategic Advantage of Weiqi”), one of the “Three Treatises” on *weiqi*. The opening of the *Yi shi* states as follows:

In general, what is admired in the arrangement of the *weiqi* game is that it resembles the organisation of soldiers and formations on the battlefield. Once the banners are lined up, anxieties over power balance (the tension between players) will rise like raging wasps. [The players’ stones will be placed on the board like] endless raindrops; [the stones will be laid out like] fish scales and arrays of geese. [The players] will exert themselves to uphold their flanks while consolidating their weaknesses on the edges.

蓋棋弈之制所尚矣，有像軍戎戰陣之紀，旌旗既列，權慮蜂起。駱驛雨集，魚鱗鴈峙。奮維闡翼，固衛邊鄙。³⁷

Unlike Ban Gu, who links *weiqi* with cosmology and the *Zhouyi*, Yin Yang is primarily interested in *weiqi* as a war simulation game. Hence, when describing the physical layout of the *weiqi* game, Yin Yang selects words such as banners, raging wasps, raindrops, fish scales, and arrays of geese, which

³³ *Shishuo xinyu* 2.5; *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 70, p. 2279.

³⁴ *Wang Zhongxuan lei* 王仲宣誄 “Eulogy for Wang Zhongxuan (Can).” See *Wenxuan*, *juan* 56, p. 779.

³⁵ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 21, p. 599.

³⁶ Zhang, *Zhongguo weiqi shi*, p. 57.

³⁷ *Yiwen leiju*, *juan* 74, p. 1909.

are common metaphors for army formations. Nevertheless, his writing is still influenced by Ban Gu, as we can see in the next section:

The player might pretend to withdraw and outflank the enemy, lining up white-fronted horses and carriages side by side. By exhausting the enemy's divisions and stretching them out, [players] can take advantage of the enemy's weakness, [making the enemy] unable to retrieve forces, [so] the two [isolated forces] can be captured and exterminated. This is the plan of Huaiyin³⁸ and the momentum of pulling out the enemy's banners.

或飾遁偽旋，卓轢駢列。羸師延敵，一乘虛絕，歸不得合，兩見擒滅。淮陰之謨，拔旗之勢也。

The player might deliberately design a capricious scenario in order to seek contingencies and react to the crisis. If the enemy attacks the northern front while one's preparation is arranged in the southern front, once the stones in the middle ground catch up [the enemy's stones], the forces on the four sides will collapse by themselves. This is the wisdom of Yafu (d. 143 BCE) and the surprise attack of Geng Yan (3–58 CE).

或匡設無常，尋變應危。寇動北壘，備在南麾，中棋既捷，四表自虧。亞夫之智，耿弇之奇也。

The player might take advantage of the paths to deploy [his stones] in the four directions [so he can] benefit from the surroundings and prosper further. The player can unify scattered stones and presses on the outskirts. [Since] the enemy's divisions are weakened, and his soldiers left alone, they will perish in isolation if there is a siege. [The player can] wipe out the enemy's territory and expand his own territory. This is the strength [exemplified in the Battle] of Kunyang (23 CE) and the tactics [drawn in the Battle of] Guandu (200 CE).

或假道四布，周爰繁昌。雲合星羅，侵逼郊場。師弱眾寡，臨據孤亡。披掃疆禦，廣略土疆。昆陽之威，官渡之方也。³⁹

All three paragraphs share a similar structure and analogical reasoning process with Ban Gu's *Yi zhi*. Ying Yang first describes the potential move taken by the player in a specific scenario and the result brought out by the player's tactic; he then concludes the paragraph by stating how the game situation resembles events of military engagements in history. However, Ban Gu and Yin Yang do have different focuses. The first difference is their choices of historical references. Unlike Ban Gu, who eulogises figures in the distant past, Yin Yang's exemplifications are situated in the Han dynasty. The two events mentioned in the third paragraph are particularly interesting. The Battle of Kunyang was fought in 23 CE between the forces of Wang Mang's 王莽 (r. 9–23) short-lived Xin 新 dynasty and the army led by Liu Xiu 劉秀 (r. 25–57), who eventually overthrew the Xin dynasty and became the founding emperor of the Eastern Han. The Battle of Guandu was fought in 200 CE

³⁸ This refers to Han Xin 韓信 (d. 196). See *Shiji*, *juan* 92, pp. 2609–2630.

³⁹ *Yiwen leiju*, *juan* 74, p. 1909.

between the forces of Cao Cao and the northern warlord Yuan Shao 袁紹. The outcome of the Battle of Guandu marked Cao Cao's dominance in the North. Both battles were famous examples in which the lesser powerful force prevailed against the outnumbered force. Both battles resulted in decisive victories that foreshadowed the fall of the old dynasty and the birth of the new. Although Cao Pi's usurpation took place in 220, which Yin Yang never lived to witness as he passed away in the pandemic in 217, based on his choice to place Cao Cao in parallel with Liu Xiu, we can say that Yin Yang clearly had the correct foresight.

Besides, while Ban Gu's *Yi zhi* alludes to ideas in the Confucian classics, Yin Yang's *Yi shi* exhibits a strong interest in principles in the *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法 ("Art of Warfare by Sunzi"). In the first paragraph, Yin Yang presents a player who draws on deceptive tactics to exhaust and stretch out the formation of his enemy. In doing so, the player breaks down the strong points (*shi* 實) and creates weak points (*xu* 虛) in the enemy's formation so he can launch some effective attacks. This reminds the reader of two famous quotes in the *Sunzi bingfa*. One is that "the art of military tactics is the art of deception" (兵者詭道也).⁴⁰ The other is the idea that a capable commander would proactively cause his opponent to move instead of passively being manipulated by the opponent.⁴¹

The second paragraph is an elucidation of the idea of tactical unpredictability (*qi* 奇), which again involves deceiving the enemy. The tactic of *qi* is particularly significant when a player faces a disadvantageous situation. Ying Yang stresses that the player should act according to the contingencies and conceal one's true intention while launching a surprise attack. In doing so, the player may resolve the crisis and prevail. This alludes to the fifth chapter of the *Sunzi bingfa*, which states: "As for the combatants, one engages in battle by confronting the enemy and gains victory by drawing on tactical unpredictability. For someone who is good at launching surprise attacks, he is limitless like heaven and earth and inexhaustible like rivers and streams" (凡戰者, 以正合, 以奇勝; 故善出奇者, 無窮如天地, 不竭如江河).⁴²

The third paragraph focuses on taking advantage of specific strategic locations on the game board to create a network of stones that can effectively siege the opponent's stones. The idea of

⁴⁰ *Sunzi bingfa*, juan 1. See *Sunzi shijia zhu* 孫子十家註, *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 Vol. 6, p. 13.

⁴¹ *Sunzi bingfa*, juan 6, in *Zhuzi jicheng* Vol. 6, p. 83.

⁴² *Sunzi bingfa*, juan 6, in *Zhuzi jicheng* Vol. 6, p. 69. Alternatively, Ames translates *qi* 奇 and *zheng* 正 as "surprise and straightforward operations," see Ames, *Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare*, pp. 118–119.

deploying one's men in accordance with the environment is also expounded in the *Sunzi bingfa*, particularly in the ninth chapter "Deploying the Army" (*xingjun* 行軍) and the tenth chapter "The Terrain" (*dixing* 地形). The ideal location to position one's army and assess the enemy in the *Sunzi bingfa* is the high ground that faces the sunny side. While the *Sunzi bingfa* gives advice on military operations in different kinds of terrains, such as mountains, marshes, and flatlands, the *weiqi* player can only deploy his stones on a two-dimensional board. The strategic spots on the game board are probably the areas between the corners and the fourth crossings (*sidao* 四道). Occupying this area allows the player to be effective in both defending oneself and assaulting the enemy. This exposition may be influenced by the "Rhapsody on Weiqi" by the earlier writer Ma Rong, who stresses "occupying the fourth crossings [from each direction] to secure the corners and take advantage of the sideways" (先據四道, 守角依傍).⁴³

The actions taken by the *weiqi* player in all three paragraphs resemble those of the exemplary commander in the *Sunzi bingfa*. According to Roger Ames, Sunzi's exemplary commander is defined by two features. The first is that he is a *junzi* of superior character. He carries the virtues of "wisdom, integrity, humanity, courage, and discipline," which are the results of his self-cultivation.⁴⁴ Besides, he must have sole control over his localised area and foreknowledge based on a full understanding and precise assessment of the various circumstances on the battlefield so he can make the most fitting decision that will lead to victory with minimum costs.⁴⁵ Yin Yang's *weiqi* player demonstrates similar traits, particularly in terms of the wisdom exemplified in his employment of deceptive tactics.

Yin Yang's positive attitude toward deception is noteworthy. As Meow Hui Goh points out, although the general moral paradigm viewed deception as a limited and, if not illegitimate, strategy in war, a fundamental shift took place under the sociopolitical reality of frequent civil wars and the promotion of the *Sunzi bingfa* by Cao Cao during the end of Han and the Three Kingdoms period.⁴⁶ As shown earlier, Ban Gu mentions in the *Yi zhi* that the *weiqi* player may imitate the surprise attack of Tian Dan, who pretended to surrender while conspiring against his enemy. This is precisely a deceptive tactic. Likewise, Yin Yang stresses that in order to win, the player is required to be able to

⁴³ *Yiwen leiju*, *juan* 74, p. 1905.

⁴⁴ Ames, *Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare*, pp. 87–88.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–96.

⁴⁶ Meow Hui Goh, "Genuine Words: Deception as a War Tactic and a Mode of Writing in Third-Century China," *Early Medieval China* 2022, no. 28 (2022), pp. 5–6.

use deception as well as to see through the enemy's deception. Most importantly, the player must actively take initiative to create conditions that lead to one's advantage and victory and never wait passively. If the player fails to take the initiative, he might be manipulated by the opponent, which leads to disasters as described in the next two cases:

[If a player] is provoked and lured into battle, [this means that he] has been deceived by the opponent. [The player will end up] fighting disorderly while [deploying his stones] to save each other and fail to assess [whether] to advance or retreat. When his clusters of stones are all dying, [the player] will endeavour to break through in an impetuous manner. He will stare with wide-open eyes and feel resentful, and the losing situation will ultimately result in ruin. This is the mistake of General Xiang and the error of King Huai of Chu.⁴⁷

挑誘既戰，見欺敵對。紛拏相救，不量進退。群聚俱隕，力行唐突。瞋目恚憤，覆局崩潰；項將之咎，楚懷之悖也。

.....

[A player] might press ahead to chase after [the enemy] once they see the advantage and forget about potential danger. [Because] he takes the enemy with little seriousness and leaves no precaution, his loss will be massive. He hesitates when facing uncertainties, leaving none of his calculations and predictions carefully examined. He is greedy for small gains and does not know what causes his defeat. When he is supposed to make a resolution, he does not do so but returns to discuss the plan. This is the failure of Xiang Yu and the mistake of the King of Wu (Fu Chai).

長驅馳逐，見利忘害。輕敵寡備，所喪彌大。臨疑猶豫，筭慮不詳。苟貪少獲，不知所亡。當斷不斷，還為所謀；項羽之失，吳王之尤也。⁴⁸

In both cases, the player's loss of initiative is caused by his failure to see through the enemy's deception and his inability to manage his emotions. Consequently, the player loses the capacity to assess the circumstances on the game board correctly and cannot act in his own favour. This reminds the audience of the statement about the dangerous traits of a commander in the *Sunzi bingfa*, including violent temper, greed, arrogance, and hesitation. A commander who has these traits will lead an operation to a certain defeat, and his army will be ruined. As Ames puts it, since one's capacity as a military commander is "a function of his cultivated humanity," greedy, arrogant and hesitant behaviour implies one's deficiency in self-cultivation.⁴⁹

Overall, it is clear that Yin Yang uses *weiqi* as the media to demonstrate his understanding of the art of military tactics. One can argue that his essay on *weiqi* is a commentary on the *Sunzi bingfa* as well as a commentary on contemporary politics for audiences who were military strategists like Cao Cao or gentlemen like himself who served in the army. Although Yin Yang came from a family

⁴⁷ This may refer to Xiongxin 熊心 (d. 206 BCE). See *Shiji*, *juan* 7, pp. 315–317.

⁴⁸ *Yiwen leiju*, *juan* 74, pp. 1909–1910.

⁴⁹ Ames, *Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare*, pp. 134–136, 148–149.

known for classical scholarship, like many of his peers who had to become dependent on regional warlords, Yin Yang served as an attendant/advisor to Cao Cao, Cao Pi, and Cao Zhi.⁵⁰ Cao Cao was a military strategist who promoted and commented on the *Sunzi bingfa*.⁵¹ He spent a significant part of his life in the military and established authority in the process of fighting against religious-inspired rebellions of the Way of Five Pecks of Rice and later against other regional warlords. Likewise, his son Cao Pi spent most of his childhood and adolescence following his father in the military, and his personal hobbies were largely shaped by his army experience.⁵² The military constituted a sociocultural sphere distinct from elsewhere, such as the court, imperial academy, or private salon. It was amidst such a context that playing and writing on *weiqi* became associated with the conferral of prestige for elite men.

IV. *A Test for Worth and Inner Character*

In the case of Yin Yang, it is possible to envision the occasion when Yin Yang plays *weiqi* with Cao Cao and Cao Pi. Since the game requires the players to share a rather intimate space, playing *weiqi* itself is a demonstration of trust and bond between the army commander and his subordinate. Moreover, considering the mention of Guandu, one can infer that the *Yi shi* was composed after the Battle of Guandu in 200. Yin Yang might have played the game with the Caos, during which they exchanged their understanding of the art of military tactics while reflecting on recent political events. Furthermore, since the *weiqi* board is a simulation of the battlefield, one's performance in a *weiqi* game can theoretically reflect one's character and capacity as the army commander. This section examines two anecdotal accounts preserved in the *Sanguo zhi* and explores how martial elites could prove their worth and whether they deserve the status of *mingshi* through playing *weiqi* in practice.

The first account concerns Lu Xun 陸遜 (183–245), the Chief Imperial General and one of the most talented military strategists in the Wu Kingdom:

⁵⁰ His uncle was Yin Shao 邵, who compiled the encyclopaedic work *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 (“Comprehensive Explanations on Customs”) and the *Han guanyì* 漢官儀 (“Records on Han Offices”). *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 21, p. 601.

⁵¹ Meow Hui Goh, “Genuine Words,” pp. 6–7.

⁵² *Dianlun* 典論, “Self Narrative” (*Zi xu* 自敘), in *Cao Pi ji* 曹丕集, *juan* 6.

In the 5th year of the Jiahe era (236), [Sun] Quan launched an expedition to the North and ordered [Lu] Xun and Zhuge Jin to attack Xiangyang. [Lu] Xun sent his close associate Han Bian to deliver the war reports. On the way back, [Han Bian] encountered the enemy in the Mian River. The enemy's patrol captured Han Bian. [Zhuge] Jin heard of this and was extremely frightened. He wrote a letter to [Lu] Xun, saying: "His Majesty (Sun Quan) has returned. The enemy has now captured Han Bian and could have known everything about our strengths and weaknesses. Besides, the river is drying. We should better retreat immediately."

嘉禾五年，權北征，使遜與諸葛瑾攻襄陽。遜遣親人韓扁齎表奉報，還，遇敵於沔中，鈔邏得扁。瑾聞之甚懼，書與遜云：“大駕已旋，賊得韓扁，具知吾闊狹。且水乾，宜當急去。”

[Lu] Xun did not reply. Just at that moment, he urged people to plant turnips and beans and continued playing *weiqi* and shooting games with his fellow soldiers as usual. [Zhuge] Jin said: "Boyan (Lu Xun) always has great wisdom and strategies. He surely has his ways [to deal with the situation]." [Zhuge Jin] came to see [Lu] Xun in person. [Lu] Xun said: "The enemy knows that His Majesty has returned. They no longer need to worry about him and can just concentrate on attacking me. Besides, although I have already sent forces to guard our weaknesses, the soldiers are still restless. We would better stay calm to set their mind at ease. [Meanwhile,] we can establish some surprising tactics and then begin the operation. If we retreat now, the enemy would think that we are afraid and would come to press on us. This would be a sign of certain defeat."

遜未答，方催人種菽豆，與諸將弈棋射戲如常。瑾曰：“伯言多智略，其當有以。”自來見遜，遜曰：「賊知大駕以旋，無所復慮，得專力於吾。又已守要害之處，兵將意動，且當自定以安之。施設變術，然後出耳。今便示退，賊當謂吾怖，仍來相蹙，必敗之勢也。」⁵³

This event took place in the early years after Sun Quan proclaimed his emperorship. All three kingdoms had the intention to re-unify the empire. In 234, Zhuge Liang launched his last northern expedition against the Wei Kingdom. In the summer of the same year, in correspondence with Zhuge Liang, Sun Quan led his principal forces to fight the Wei forces in Hefei 合肥 while sending Lu Xun and Zhuge Jin to station at Miankou 沔口 (an inlet of the Mian River) in Jiangxia 江夏 Commandery (present-day eastern Hubei). The situation did not turn out in favour of the Wu forces. Sun Quan eventually retreated, leaving Lu Xun's forces to continue fighting.

As shown in the text, Lu Xun's forces were indeed facing a disadvantageous situation. Not only was their intelligence captured by the enemy, but since the mobility of the Wu forces depended largely on waterways, the decrease in water level could cause the warships to strand. Facing such a situation, the other commander, Zhuge Jin, lost his composure and suggested an immediate retreat. Lu Xun's reaction is worth pondering: in contrast to his panicking colleague, he ordered plants to be planted and kept playing games as if there was no crisis. When Zhuge Jin came to visit Lu Xun in person, Lu Xun accurately assessed the psychological statements of his army and the enemy. He pointed out that to avoid fatal loss, maintaining the morale of his army was the key. If one

⁵³ *Sanguo zhi*, juan 58, p. 1351.

contemplates Lu Xun's initial reaction, the act of playing games with his men can be seen as a strategic move to set everybody's mind at ease. As for his order of planting turnips and beans, my speculation is that he did so to estimate the humidity of the soil so he could infer the latest time to retreat through waterways.

The *Sanguo zhi* records the subsequent development of this retreat. Lu Xun employed a deceptive tactic, leading a division and pretending to attack Xiangyang City. The enemy feared Lu Xun and was deceived, so they moved back to guard the city. Meanwhile, Lu Xun sent Zhuge Jin to prepare the warships for retreat. In the end, the Wu forces were able to retreat with minimal loss, as Lu Xun “slowly arranged his forces while showing off an aggressive posture. [Lu Xun's] forces marched to board the ships. The enemy did not dare interfere.”⁵⁴

The second account concerns Fei Yi 費禕 (d. 253), the Chief Imperial General from the Shu Kingdom in the Southern West:

When the army of Wei was stationed in Xingping, [the emperor] bestowed a proof of identity upon Fei Yi, [commissioning Fei Yi] to lead [the Shu forces] to confront [the Wei forces]. Lai Min, the Grand Master of Splendid Prosperity, went to [Fei] Yi to bid his farewell and asked [Fei] Yi to play *weiqi* with him. At the time, the military documents were passed around, and the preparation for carriage had been completed. [Fei] Yi reserved his attention to playing *weiqi* with [Lai] Min and showed no sign of exhaustion or irritation. [Lai] Min said: “I have just been testing you for a while. You are a trustworthy person who can certainly distinguish the traitors.” [Fei] Yi arrived [at the battlefield]. The enemy eventually withdrew.

魏軍次于興平，假費禕節，率眾往御。光祿大夫來敏至禕許別，求圍棋。于時羽檄交馳，嚴駕已訖。禕與敏留意對戲，色無厭倦。敏曰：“聊觀試君耳，信可人，必能辨賊者。”禕至，敵遂退。⁵⁵

The offence from the Wei army in the current account refers to the campaign against the Shu Kingdom launched by Cao Shuang 爽, the General-in-Chief of the Wei Kingdom, in the winter of 243. In the story, the court minister, Lai Min, visited Fei Yi, and the two played *weiqi* before Fei Yi launched the counterattack against the Wei army in the Hanzhong 漢中 region. The episode of *weiqi* game serves as a testimony to two things. First, when Fei Yi was playing *weiqi* with Lai Min, he showed no sign of exhaustion or anxiety amidst the chaotic situation of pre-battle preparation. This demonstrates Fei Yi's capacity for mental concentration and emotional management. Second, although details of the game were not revealed, the reader can still infer that Lai Min probably used

⁵⁴ *Sanguo zhi*, juan 58, p. 1351.

⁵⁵ *Sanguo zhi*, juan 44, p. 1061.

deceptive tactics in the game, and his tactics were seen through by Fei Yi according to Lai Min's conclusion that Fei Yi was indeed a trustworthy commander with the intelligence to distinguish *zei* 賊, which likely includes both potential traitors and the enemy's spies. As highlighted in the *Sunzi bingfa*, warfare is the art of deceit, and so a good commander is required to not only have the capacity to discern the enemy's situation and fully conceal one's own situation but also use spies to collect intelligence and spread misinformation. The *Sunzi bingfa* also stresses that in order to employ spies effectively, one needs to possess sagaciousness (*sheng* 聖), humanness (*ren* 仁), and good insight (*wei miao* 微妙) to get the true information out of spies.⁵⁶ Unlike real battlefields, there are no spies in a *weiqi* game. However, as Yin Yang notes in the *Yi Shi*, one can demonstrate the wisdom to employ deceptive tactics and discern the conditions on the battlefield by playing *weiqi*. Returning to Fei Yi's case, the process and result of the *weiqi* game foreshadow the outcome of the battle in reality, as Fei Yi indeed defeated the Wei forces. He was eventually granted the rank of an earl.

Undoubtedly, in both accounts, *weiqi* exceeds the function of mere entertainment. In Lu Xun's case, playing *weiqi* itself was a part of the strategic decision to comfort the army's anxiety in a disadvantageous situation. An alternative reading is also impossible that Lu Xun was actually simulating the situation, making calculations, and formulating a counter-plan by playing *weiqi*. In the case of Fei Yi, he was a man who possessed both power and prestige.⁵⁷ In order to prove that one indeed deserves such a position and reputation, one has to be challenged. The text makes it explicit that playing *weiqi* is a test through which a peer verifies Fei Yi's inner character. The two episodes of *weiqi* game thus function as testimonies to the inner character and capacity of the two distinctive gentlemen.

V. Mediating Emotions

⁵⁶ Ames, *Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare*, p. 170. Ames translates the term *wei miao* as "sensitivity and alertness."

⁵⁷ According to the *Sanguo zhi*, Fei Yi likely came from a humble background. He lost his parents at a young age and had to rely on his uncle. Due to his outstanding character, he was highly praised and trusted by Zhuge Liang, and he gained a remarkable reputation along with Zhuge Liang and two other gentlemen in the Shu Kingdom. He once served as the close attendant of Crown Prince Liu Chan 劉禪 as well as an official envoy to the Wu Kingdom and was later promoted to the highest-ranking office in the Shu State. *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 44, pp. 1060–1062.

So far, I have explored how *weiqi* became a popular game in the military field during the Three Kingdoms period. The popularity of the game also extended to the literary field. This section aims to further unravel the significance of playing *weiqi* in conferring prestige to elite gentlemen by examining two stories.

The first story preserved in the *Jinshu* centres on Ruan Ji and was probably adapted from *Shishuo xinyu* 23.9 and the annotated commentary with reference to the official history *Jinji* 晉記 by Deng Can 鄧粲 (ca. 4th century).⁵⁸

Although Ji did not conform to the teaching of rites, his speech was profound and abstruse, and [when speaking,] he did not evaluate the qualities of others. He was extremely filial in nature. When his mother passed away, he was playing *weiqi* with someone. The opponent asked Ji to stop, but Ji stayed with him and brought the game to a conclusion. Once the game ended, Ji drank two *dou* (“peck”) of liquor.⁵⁹ He raised his voice and wailed, then vomited several *sheng* (“pint”) of blood. By the time his mother was about to be buried, he ate one portion of the sacrificial meat and drank two *dou* of liquor. When he then saw his mother’s corpse to bid the last farewell, he spoke out: “It is over!” And he raised his voice and wailed. Upon this, he vomited several *sheng* of blood again. His physique was severely damaged so that his bones stood out, which almost caused him to lose his life.

籍雖不拘禮教，然發言玄遠，口不臧否人物。性至孝，母終，正與人圍碁，對者求止，籍留與決賭。既而飲酒二斗，舉聲一號，吐血數升。及將葬，食一蒸肫，飲二斗酒，然後臨訣，直言：“窮矣！”舉聲一號，因又吐血數升。毀瘠骨立，殆致滅性。⁶⁰

This story can be divided into two layers. First, Ruan Ji appears “unmoved” when facing the immediate external event, which signifies his possession of the character of *yaliang* 雅量 (cultivated tolerance), one of the most highly praised models of emotional expression in the *Shishuo xinyu*, as pointed out by David Felt. *Yaliang*, according to Felt, is a lack of attachment instead of a lack of emotions; It is manifested in terms of a state of “unchanged” and “not moving” by external stimuli, behaving in a “self-possessed” (*ziruo* 自若) manner with an unashamed natural honesty and little desire to impress others in a contrived manner.⁶¹ In Ruan Ji’s case, since playing *weiqi* requires

⁵⁸ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 806.

⁵⁹ *Dou* 斗 (“peck”) is a traditional Chinese unit of volume. 1 *dou* is equal to 10 *sheng* 升 (“pint”). Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual*, p. 553.

⁶⁰ *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, p. 1361.

⁶¹ In his study on the emotional regime of the *Shishuo xinyu*, Felt argues that emotional expressions were ranked within an evaluative hierarchy. The highest ideal and most praised model is emotional detachment, referred to as *yaliang* (cultivated tolerance or imperturbability). The second ideal is naturalness, defined as “a natural expression of emotions in accord with one’s nature (*xing*).” David Jonathan Felt, “Emotional Regime of the Shishuo Xinyu,” in *Early Medieval China* (2014:20), pp. 66–68.

mental concentration, the game facilitates Ruan Ji's composure in front of the audience by allowing him to temporarily suppress the potential immediate emotional breakdown upon losing his beloved mother. The story also focuses on the theme of "naturalness" (*ziran* 自然), which, as Felt defines it, is "the natural expression of emotions in accord with one's nature (*xing* 性)."⁶² The text underlines Ruan Ji's exceptional innate filial piety (*xing zhi xiao* 性至孝) toward his mother. But this inner character cannot be verified without any revelation. The story then demonstrates Ruan Ji's inner character of naturalness by showing that he eventually vomits a large amount of blood after finishing up the game and drinking liquor. Arguably, the act of playing *weiqi* functions as a mediation between Ruan Ji's display of *yaliang* and *ziran*.

Moreover, we may recall that according to the *mingshi* paradigm in Chapter 2, a consummate gentleman is supposed to be a Zhuangzian type of spiritual ideal who lives in accordance with the flow of the Way without being confined to conventionality and openly expresses his emotion without fixation on the phenomenal world. The current account may be an allusion to the story in the *Zhuangzi*, where Huizi pays a visit to Zhuangzi after the passing of Zhuangzi's wife and sees Zhuangzi sitting on the ground, hitting a pot and singing with his two legs open.⁶³ Although Ruan Ji does not "celebrate" his mother's passing with music, the unconventional way of mourning (playing *weiqi*, spitting blood, drinking, and eating sacrificial food) surely indicates his embodiment of the *mingshi* paradigm.

The second story centres on Pei Xia 裴遐, the nephew of Pei Kai 裴楷 (237–291). The story is preserved both in the *Shishuo xinyu* and the *Jinshu*. Below is the version from *Shishuo xinyu* 6.9.

Pei Xia was at Zhou Fu's place. Fu appointed a host (probably the commander mentioned later) for their gathering. While Xia was playing *weiqi* with someone else, Fu's commander (*sima*) poured liquor for everyone. Since Xia was in the middle of his game, he only drank occasionally. The commander was upset and thus dragged Xia, who then fell to the ground. Xia returned to his seat and behaved as normal. With his complexion unchanged, he resumed playing *weiqi* as if nothing had happened.

Wang Yifu (Wang Yan 衍) asked Xia: "Why was it that your complexion remained unchanged at that time?" [Xia] answered: "I was simply holding up inwardly."

裴遐在周馥所，馥設主人。遐與人圍碁，馥司馬行酒。遐正戲，不時為飲。司馬恚，因曳遐墜地。遐還坐，舉止如常，顏色不變，復戲如故。

⁶² Ibid., pp. 61, 71–73.

⁶³ *Zhuangzi*, pian 18, "Zhi le 至樂." In *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, pp. 616–617.

王夷甫問遐：當時何得顏色不異？荅曰：”直是闇當故耳。”⁶⁴

At first glance, the story appears straightforward. Pei Xia goes to a party and is offended by the appointed host, the anonymous commander of Zhou Fu. Pei Xia responds in a calm and detached way and carries on playing *weiqi*. Like Ruan Ji's story, this anecdote is conventionally read as Pei Xia's display of *yaliang* as a distinctive gentleman. However, one can read the story differently after retrieving some contextual information.

The key figure in the story is Zhou Fu (d. 311), a powerful figure in the Western Jin. Zhou Fu held the first-rank official position of *da jiangjun* 大將軍 (General-in-Chief) and was given the noble rank of *bo* 伯 (Earl). He was commissioned by Emperor Hui 惠 (r. 290–307) to command the army in Yangzhou 揚州. The *Jinshu* describes him as a loyal minister at court who openly denounced the royal prince Sima Yue 司馬越 for his lack of “subject integrity” (*chenjie* 臣節).⁶⁵ Sima Yue, titled the Prince of Donghai 東海王, is the next key figure in this story, even though without being present. He was known as one of the prominent figures in the War of the Eight Princes (八王之亂). Rumour has it that he poisoned Emperor Hui and later became regent during the reign of the new Emperor Huai 懷 (r. 307–311).⁶⁶ The power struggle between Zhou Fu and Sima Yue further escalated, as Sima Yue became frightened by Zhou Fu and eventually schemed to assassinate Zhou Fu but failed. Pei Xia's personal interest was entangled with Sima Yue. Not only was Pei Xia selected by Sima Yue to be his record keeper (*zhubu* 主簿), meaning that the two were connected through their ruler-subject relation, but there was also a connection through kinship since Pei Xia was the nephew of the prominent statesman Pei Kai, and Sima Yue married Pei Kai's niece as his principal wife.⁶⁷

Like all other anecdotes in the *Shishuo xinyu*, Pei Xia's story is presented to the reader without any explanation of the historical context. Although it remains impossible to know when and how the event came to be, one can, with the fragmented clues in the *Jinshu*, re-interpret the story of a minor social conflict between a drunken scoundrel and a sober gentleman as a scene of political struggle. The commander's impetuous act against Pei Xia no longer appears unintentional. Instead,

⁶⁴ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 388–389.

⁶⁵ *Jinshu*, *juan* 61, p. 1663.

⁶⁶ *Jinshu*, *juan* 4, p. 108; *Jinshu*, *juan* 59, p. 1632.

⁶⁷ *Jinshu*, *juan* 35, p. 1052.

it can be read as an act of deliberate, playful violence mediated by alcohol and motivated by the intention to provoke and humiliate one's political enemy. In the story, Pei Xia is indeed facing a disadvantageous situation. However, he is not completely passive. His agency is indicated through the verb *xi* 戲, which was usually translated as "to play." Yet, since the graph contains radical *ge* 戈 "halberd," it also connotes the meaning of "engaging in battle." Pei Xia's act of resuming playing *weiqi* in a *yaliang* manner can be read as an act of resistance against the playful violence enacted by his counterpart. The importance of the display of *yaliang*, hence, is not merely a spontaneous manifestation of inner character and spirit but a survival technique resulting from a conscious endeavour of emotional control in a stressful and dangerous situation.⁶⁸ The same re-interpretation can be applied to other anecdotes in the *yaliang* category of the *Shishuo xinyu*, such as the story of Ji Kang on the eve of his execution or that of Xie An 謝安. During the two military campaigns in Feishui 淝水, the latter was so concentrated on playing *weiqi* that he was not only unaware of the fracture in the teeth of his clogs but also undistracted by the news of victory on the battlefield.⁶⁹

The re-interpretation above leads me to two points. The first point is a re-realisation that all these stories reflect what could have happened to ordinary people in a dangerous world. Some individuals were respected as distinguished gentlemen because they could react to external stimuli in an ideal manner. My second point concerns the significance of the presence of objects such as the zither for Ji Kang and *weiqi* for Ruan Ji, Pei Xia, and Xie An in the context of social tension. The significance of objects like the *weiqi* board can be understood from two perspectives. The first is from the subjective perspective of the player in the moment of playing the game in the story. Here, I propose the idea of *jiquing* 寄情, which I define as the process of emotional mediation through play—the player can temporarily entrust one's emotion to external objects to produce the desirable outcome of spiritual freedom.⁷⁰ When the player is observed from the outside, his behaviour manifests itself as a display of *yaliang* or *ziran*. This process occurs in a transcendent space constituted by the player through actively engaging with the media. The second perspective is an objective one beheld by

⁶⁸ This also implies that the semantically abstruse word *andang* 闔當 in the punchline by Pei Xia at the end of the text should be translated as "holding up inwardly" instead of what Mather and many others suggest that *andang* is an "obviously garbled text" or "scribal error" for *doubian* 鬪變 (a private quarrel). Richard Mather trans., *Shih-shuo hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002), pp. 193, 642.

⁶⁹ *Jinshu*, *juan* 79, p. 2075; *Shishuo xinyu* 6.35 in *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 412.

⁷⁰ Here, temporality is important. As Felt pointed out, *yaliang* is not a permanent emotional state. Figures like Xie An, who behaved in a *yaliang* way, might still be moved on other occasions. Thus, it is fair to say that *yaliang*, at least on some occasions, was achieved as a result of conscious effort and emotional mediation. Felt, "Emotional Regime," p. 70.

outsiders, that is, the immediate audience present at the event and the reader of these anecdotes. Depending on whether an outsider possesses knowledge about the inferred historical context, the significance of *weiqi* can be viewed in two completely different ways: 1) as a symbol of leisure and transcendence or 2) as a symbol of challenge (whether of intellectual or emotional), political struggle, or even life-threatening danger.⁷¹

VI. Rhetorics of Play as Frivolity

So far, both prescriptive and descriptive sources suggest that *weiqi* was considered more than a past-time, and there was a growing acceptance of playing *weiqi* as a means to generate one's social capital. Despite the acknowledgement that playing *weiqi* could be used as a means to prove a gentleman's distinction, the oppositional voice still existed. Before ending this chapter, I would like to discuss an example of what Sutton-Smith calls "rhetorics of play as frivolity"⁷² and explore the ambivalence of board games by revisiting some extracts of the *Boyi lun* written by Wei Yao from the Wu Kingdom. I aim to clarify his moralistic argument against board games while seeking to unravel the deeper anxiety embedded in his polemic discourse on board games.

Wei Yao's writing begins as follows:

I have heard that a gentleman feels ashamed if he does not achieve any merit during his peak age; he is afraid of dying without having his name established. For this reason, [the *Lunyu*] says: "To study is like [chasing after something] but not being able to reach it; [once I reach it/the knowledge is acquired], I am still afraid of losing it (what I have learned)."

蓋聞君子恥當年而功不立，疾沒世而名不稱。故曰：“學如不及，猶恐失之。”⁷³

The objective of the text is obviously exhortative. The text begins with a statement addressed to the potential audience who desires social recognition and fame. The statement is a paraphrase of *Lunyu*

⁷¹ For intellectual challenge, see *Shishuo xinyu* 5.42, as well as the case of Yin Zhongkan 殷仲堪 (d. 399) and Yuan Qiang 袁羌 in the *Yiwen leiju* in which Yin consulted Yuan about the Book of Change while Yuan was playing *weiqi*; for political struggle, see the case of Kong Rong's 孔融 children in the *Hou Hanshu* and the annotated commentaries to *Shishuo xinyu* 2.5. Another example of political struggle is the anecdote about Cao Pi 曹丕, who poisoned his brother while playing *weiqi* with the empress dowager in *Shishuo xinyu* 21.1. *Yiwen leiju*, juan 74, p. 1270; *Hou Hanshu*, juan 70, p. 2279; *Shishuo jianshu*, pp. 63, 354, 785.

⁷² Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 200–213.

⁷³ *Sanguo zhi*, juan 65, p. 1460.

15.20 that “A *junzi* was afraid of dying without having his name propagated”(君子疾沒世而名不稱焉).⁷⁴ Such anxiety over one’s status is presented as something universal among the educated elites. Next, Wei Yao quotes another statement from the *Lunyu* that is conventionally taken as a phrase of Confucius expressing a pressing and earnest attitude regarding studying and self-cultivation within one’s limited time and capacity.⁷⁵ Here, Wei Yao uses the phrase to induce status anxiety in the audience further. In the succeeding passage, Wei Yao draws on examples of outstanding figures in the past and the present to support his argument. The examples range from King Wen of Zhou to Bu Shi 卜式 and Huang Ba 黃霸, the two exemplary officials in the Western Han.⁷⁶ Wei Yao made it explicit that the ultimate aspiration of an individual and the purpose of learning, self-cultivation, and public service is to achieve an immortal reputation (不朽之名).

Like other moralist discourses, after presenting the positive exemplars in the past, Wei Yao then contrasts the image of the ideal past with that of the degenerating present:

Most in the present do not make studying the *Classics* their priority. [Instead,] they are so fond of playing board games that they forsake their daily affairs and duties while forgetting to sleep and eat. Once they exhaust the daylight, they would light up candles at night to continue... Eventually, some bet their clothes and properties while others cheat their opponents by switching their stones and moves. Their sense of shame is slackened while the complexion of rage and ferocity breaks forth.

今世之人多不務經術。好翫博奕，廢事棄業，忘寢與食；窮日盡明，繼以脂燭...至或賭及衣物，徙棋易行。廉恥之意弛，而忿戾之色發。⁷⁷

Here, Wei Yao portrays a vivid scene of what modern audiences may call “game addiction.” Although we have seen that board games (at least *weiqi*) can be used to discipline one’s mind and emotion and cultivate one’s character, Wei Yao views the fully self-absorbed player in a highly negative. Not only does playing board games cause impairment to the state, but game addiction also boosts the risks of moral derogation and emotional outbursts, as some players choose to employ

⁷⁴ *Lunyu* 15.20. In *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義, *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 Vol. 1, p. 342.

⁷⁵ *Lunyu* 8.17. *Zhuzi jicheng* Vol. 1, p. 165.

⁷⁶ Bu Shi was an official during the reign of Han Wudi. Initially, he made a living through herding sheep and was later recommended into office because of his insightful speech about the art of benevolent governance. See *Hanshu*, *juan* 58, pp. 2625–2626. Huang Ba was a legal specialist known for his capability and integrity. See *Hanshu* *juan* 89, pp. 3627–3635.

⁷⁷ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 65, p. 1460.

cunning means in order to win while others lose their temper, which could cause resentment and dispute among the players.

Wei Yao's criticism further proceeds:

However, whatever the players ever wish for does not exceed beyond the game board, and all of their actions are confined to the space between the grid. When they win, there is no reward of aristocratic rank. When they gain the territory [on the game-board], there is no actual annexation of land. The player's skill is not among any of the six arts. The application [of the game] has nothing to do with governing the state. Those who intend to preserve their life do not rely on the skill [of playing board games]. Those who select [official candidates] do not draw on the method [of playing board games]. Verifying it (what one has learned in playing board games) in battle formations does not accord with the principles of Sunzi and Wu Qi.⁷⁸ Examining it from the perspective of philosophy and art, it does not fit the teachings of the Confucian tradition. By taking deception as the prior tactic, it opposes the commitment of loyalty and honesty. By naming [the moves] as "raiding" and "killing," it opposes the mentality of humaneness.

然其所志不出一枰之上，所務不過方罫之間。勝敵，無封爵之賞。獲地，無兼土之實。技非六藝，用非經國。立身者不階其術，徵選者不由其道。求之於戰陣，則非孫、吳之倫也。考之於道藝，則非孔氏之門也。以變詐為務，則非忠信之事也。以劫殺為名，則非仁者之意也。⁷⁹

In addition to the risks mentioned earlier, the passage appears to be a criticism of *weiqi* in particular, as we can see from the mention of the game's association with military tactics, deception, and the terminologies of violence. Besides, Wei Yao points out the biggest issue of *weiqi*: playing *weiqi* is an activity of non-productivity and, therefore, of utter futility and meaninglessness.

This rhetoric of play as frivolity is worth further discussion. We have seen that for some in early medieval China, *weiqi* was considered useful and meaningful, for it was not an activity to its own end but a means to achieve something else, whether it was fostering close relationships with one's peers and superiors, demonstrating character, mediating emotion, or experiencing the what-if reality and crisis in the battlefield without any real consequences. Meanwhile, *weiqi*, as a form of play, is also what Miguel Sicart calls an autotelic activity "with its own goals and purposes, with its own marked duration and spaces and its own conditions for ending."⁸⁰ In other words, *weiqi* is an activity confined within itself, and it only represents an abstraction of reality. Any action and result on the game board is only meaningful within the abstract reality of the game. Although the boundary between the world of the game and the world at large is not rigid, Wei Yao perceived this boundary as something essential and untranspassable. Paradoxically, on the one hand, Wei Yao's

⁷⁸ For Sunzi and Wu Qi, see *Shiji*, *juan* 65.

⁷⁹ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 65, p. 1461.

⁸⁰ Sicart, *Play Matters*, p. 16.

rhetoric stresses the incompatibility between the comprehensive skill or knowledge acquired through playing *weiqi* and real-life situations. On the other hand, the text also accuses how immersing into the game reality exerts various influences, particularly negative influences, on reality, which implies that Wei Yao nevertheless admitted that the game world and the real world were, in fact, closely relevant to each other.

The *Boyi lun* was composed in a context where the popularity of *weiqi* became so prominent in the Wu palace that it became perceived as a matter of concern by the state. The founder of the Wu Kingdom, Sun Quan, once endeavoured to cease the trend with his court officials.⁸¹ The popularity of *weiqi* was also linked to the vogue of travelling for the purpose of fostering personal connections (*jiaoyou*). Such idle ethos became a particular concern of Sun He, the third son of Sun Quan, who was briefly made the Crown Prince from 242 to 250. It was said that the addiction to playing board games was particularly severe among some of Sun He's close attendants in the Eastern Palace (the residence of the Heir-Apparent), so Sun He ordered his other palace attendant, Wei Yao, to write the polemic essay. The cohort of palace attendants was headed by a gentleman named Cai Ying 蔡穎.⁸² Although there is no further information about Cai Ying, I suspect that he might be related to Cai Hong 蔡洪, who wrote one of the five extant "Rhapsody on Weiqi," for Cai Hong was an official who served first in the Wu Kingdom and then the Jin dynasty in the 3rd century. Regarding Wei Yao, we know that his personal name was changed from Zhao 昭 to avoid the tabooed character of the personal name of Sima Zhao; he was a gentleman renowned for literary composition in the Wu Commandery 吳郡. He was appointed to be the official historian of the Wu Kingdom in about 252 as the successor of the previous historian to compile the *Wushu* 吳書, the official "History of the State of Wu." His reputation and accomplishments were said to be comparable to those of the Han historian Liu Xiang.⁸³

Regarding the game addiction, the *Sanguo zhi* records Sun He's viewpoint as follows:

[The Crown Prince often spoke:] "In general, [to consider] the basic human condition, entertainment is certainly needed. [However, regarding the choice of] entertainment and hobby, one should choose

⁸¹ This is recorded in a report on incised brick wall murals in a large tomb of the Southern Dynasties discovered in Jiangsu. See Dien, *Six Dynasties Civilizations*, pp. 383, 503, 553.

⁸² *Sanguo zhi*, juan 65, p. 1420

⁸³ *Sanguo zhi*, juan 65, pp. 1460–1464. For more details about the life and career of Wei Yao, see Rafe De Crespigny, *Generals of the South: The Foundation and Early History of the Three Kingdoms State of Wu* (Canberra: Australian National University, Faculty of Asian Studies, 1990), pp. 550–554.

from communal drinking, music, calligraphy, archery, and horse riding. Why does it have to be playing board games and then feeling delighted?”

夫人情，固不能無嬉娛。嬉娛之好，亦在於飲宴琴書射御之間。何必博弈，然後為歡。⁸⁴

In spite of his complaint, it appears that Sun He was not against the idea of entertainment and idle activities. Instead, the problem lay in the perceived excessiveness and indulgence of his immediate subjects, who failed to fulfil their official duties in the context of national insecurity as the Wu Kingdom still faced external threats from the two rival states. As the virtuous Heir-Apparent, it was timely for Sun He to make the exhortation to stop the trend and call for solidarity.

The power struggle over imperial succession within the Wu court may be another reason, perhaps the genuine reason, behind Sun He's exhortation. In the mid-third century, Sun Quan was the sole living founder of the Three Kingdoms. As De Crespigny observes, on the one hand, Sun Quan's longevity brought stability to the Wu Kingdom, but on the other hand, it also caused difficulties for his successors.⁸⁵ Although Sun Quan declared himself emperor in the 220s, the Wu regime was still very much defined by the structure and characteristics of a warlord state. Its government and army were dominated by commanders and ministers who held authority through their individualism and competency in fighting. The stability and solidarity of the regime largely relied on the loyalty of the military elites and their personal bonds with Sun Quan. This posed challenges for Sun Quan's successors, for commanders and ministers would usually act in their own interest and support different candidates to the throne. The death of Sun Quan would eventually lead to confusion and disintegration in the power centre.⁸⁶ De Crespigny notes that few successors were able to maintain real authority after the death of three founders: Cao Cao, Sun Quan, and Liu Bei. This is a shared pattern in the political organisations throughout the Three Kingdoms, or perhaps the early medieval period at large.

Sun He was made the Crown Prince to replace Sun Quan's eldest son, Sun Deng 登, who died in 241. As a young man with a good reputation among the literati and scholars, Sun He nevertheless found himself caught in the contest of factions between his own supporters and those of his younger brother, Sun Ba 霸. Neither faction was able to gain what they wanted, with Sun He dismissed in 250 and his brother driven to commit suicide. The details of this succession struggle are not

⁸⁴ *Sanguo zhi, juan* 59, p. 1369.

⁸⁵ De Crespigny, *Generals of the South*, p. 438.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 485.

recorded, but one can still imagine the anxiety Sun He felt over time. Returning to Wei Yao's writing and Sun He's effort to restrict board games, one can argue that the polemic discourse against board games is not only an expression of moralistic concern by the self-righteous official historian but also a reflection of paternalistic power anxiety by an imperial heir who failed to exert control over his immediate subjects amidst the torrent of political uncertainty. The crown prince and his righteous official were unable to rectify the seemingly degenerating value orientation in their state, and neither were they able to control their own destinies at the oncoming dusk of their kingdom.

This chapter has demonstrated how individuals could claim prestige by playing the board game of *weiqi*. This chapter has elucidated the significance of *weiqi* in the making of Wei-Jin *mingshi* by analysing philosophical treatises and historical anecdotes. For Ban Gu and Yin Yang, *weiqi* was valued because of the game's inherent nature of immersion and simulation. As is noted by game studies scholars Andrew Elliott and Matthew Kapell, historical simulation games offer a channel for the player to immerse and participate in the past, thus enabling "an in-depth understanding not just of facts, dates, people, or events, but also of the complex discourse of contingency, conditions, and circumstances, which underpins a genuine understanding of history."⁸⁷ Although traditional *weiqi* differs from 21st-century computer games, early medieval writers also recognised that *weiqi* could be used as a means to cultivate one's wisdom and understand changes in the cosmos and the battlefield, for *weiqi* configured a transcendent what-if space in which the player could temporarily enter a what-if reality and experience past events. In the process of playing, the player could re-live the experiences of exemplary figures in the past and develop one's own philosophical reflection, military theory, and political commentary for the present. The *weiqi* board also functioned as a platform on which the player's capacity, wisdom, and internal disposition could be manifested and verified by peers.

Besides, anecdotal accounts show that for others, *weiqi* represented an understated challenge for the player's self. As we have seen, leisure interactions with peers and the superior in the non-institutional public space became essential in generating social capital. Nevertheless, the context for leisure was not always carefree, for tension and power struggles could still be embedded in and played out in such space. Hence, emotional management became essential for both personal and group survival, as well as the preservation of personal dignity. Occasionally, an individual might be

⁸⁷ Andrew B.R. Elliott and Matthew Wilhelm Kapell eds., *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 13.

trapped and muted under social pressure or political oppression, even though a distinctive gentleman was expected to preserve one's agency and openly express oneself according to the *mingshi* paradigm. Under such a circumstance, *weiqi* could also be used as a crucial device in fostering mental concentration and emotional management and as a non-verbal expression. This explains why a form of play (*xi*) like *weiqi* became the ideal game for self-conscious gentlemen whose social image and reputation primarily depended on idle activities conducted in a non-institutional public space.

Chapter 5 Drunkards at Play

Alcohol consumption plays an indispensable role in Chinese sociocultural life. Although there has been some literature on alcohol consumption, primarily in social and ritual contexts, the significance of drunkenness has not received enough attention. This chapter examines the significance of drunkenness as a form of carnivalesque play and non-verbal expression and explains why the drunkard became an object of admiration within the literati circle during the Wei-Jin period. This chapter consists of five sections. The first two sections introduce the overall cultural background pertaining to alcohol consumption. The next two sections explore the new meanings and aesthetic values (referring to as *tong* 通/*da* 達) vested in alcohol assumption and drunkenness through a close reading of several anecdotes and a verse titled “Jiu de song 酒德頌” (“Hymn for the Virtue of Liquor”) composed by one of the most typical drunkards, Liu Ling 劉伶/靈. The last section zooms in on the life of Ruan Ji 阮籍, the most celebrated drunkard in early medieval China. Through the ambiguity of Ruan Ji’s drunkenness, I reflect on the function and limitation of drunkenness as a carnivalesque play in Wei-Jin sociopolitical life.

I. Alcohol Consumption in Early China

Prescriptive texts in early China seek to restrain alcohol consumption to two contexts: 1) religious sacrifice and ritual performance and 2) communal drinking. Regarding the first context, Roel Sterckx points out two occasions where alcohol plays a key role by studying a text named “Jiu gao 酒誥” (“Pronouncement on Alcohol”) preserved in the *Shangshu* 尚書 (*Book of Documents*). One is at important offerings such as the *yuan si* 元祀; the other occasion is when presenting a sacrifice.¹ Since grains were the most important staple and were probably perceived as a cosmic and divine bestowal in early China,² it is reasonable that humans could temporarily obtain the channel to communicate with and penetrate the divine world by ingesting *jiu* 酒, an alcoholic beverage made from grains. In other words, alcohol functions as a medium between humans and the divine world.

¹ Roel Sterckx, *Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 96–97.

² We know that the Zhou performed sacrifice to the spirits of soil and grain, referred to as *sheji* 社稷. See *Ibid.*, p.116.

Besides offering the means to bond with the spirits, canonical texts such as the *Liji* 禮記 (*Records of Rites*) underlie the significance of drinking in fostering friendship and sociopolitical harmonies among humans. As Michael Nylan notes, it is not formal occasions and ancestral sacrifice that facilitate the formation of genuine bonds between men. Instead, it is social events such as local community banquets and drinking sessions (*xiang yan* 饗宴 / *xiang yinjiu* 饗飲酒) that provide the ideal soil for the sprouting of friendship, particularly male friendship.³ Although social hierarchy and ritual courtesies should still be prudently observed,⁴ an ideal banquet should be one that blurs the boundaries between kin and non-kin by offering some degree of comfort that resembles home. Such comfort catalyses convivial exchanges and even the consolidation of political alliances; as tongues are loosened by ale and playful conversations spark up, the true colours of men are revealed. The sense of closeness between the participants is further nourished by performing bonding rituals, such as the circulation of wine cups, reciprocating toasting, mutual bowing, and sharing the same sensual experience from watching and listening to musical and dancing performances. In short, regarding male drinking bouts in early Chinese texts, Nylan observes: “Wine, music, and friendship infuse a set of cultural exchanges that were deemed simultaneously witty, provocative, and highly ‘educational,’ for it was no mean feat to maintain the proprieties while drinking.”⁵

Participation in communal drinking is especially important to elite, educated men, for participation in such events signifies one’s sociability and virtues of humility. Moreover, communal drinking provides a platform for distinguished men to display their moral character and temperance and be seen and evaluated by their peers. While virtue can be discerned and nourished through drinking, so is moral degradation. Such moral ambiguity is embedded in alcohol from the beginning of its invention. For this reason, alcohol consumption was frequently employed in early Chinese historiography as a powerful rhetorical tool in judging the moral character and achievements of those in power while prohibiting alcohol became a way for the state to promulgate its legitimacy. Both the Qin and the Han placed periodic restrictions on the production and consumption of alcohol. According to Han legal statutes, gathering three or more people to drink without a

³ Michael Nylan, *The Chinese Pleasure Book* (New York: Zone Books, 2018), p. 99.

⁴ Observing social hierarchy and avoiding disorderly conduct are among the major principles of communal drinking. Depending on social status and seniority, seated or standing, the location of the seat, spatial relation to the host, and the order of serving and eating, the portions of food and drink served to each guest, all aspects of the banquet were elaborately stipulated by ritual prescriptions such as the *Liji* to ensure the observance of ritual courtesies. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

particular reason was subject to a fine.⁶ This moral discourse on liquor persisted into the following period after the collapse of the Han dynasty.

In 207, Cao Cao 曹操 imposed his famous “Prohibition on Alcohol” despite the wide unpopularity among the *shi* communities.⁷ One of the major objectors was the prominent scholar-official Kong Rong 孔融, who was a descendant of Confucius and was well-connected within the literary circle. The *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 describes that Kong Rong’s residence was never short of visitors even after he was demoted to a minor and marginalised official position. He was tolerant and amicable to other gentlemen and was extremely fond of drinking. He once expressed a lament: “With seats always filled up with guests and my cup never empty of wine, I have nothing to worry about.”⁸ In response to the ban on alcohol, Kong Rong was frustrated and wrote several letters to argue with Cao Cao. Two letters collected in the personal anthology of Kong Rong survived as annotations in the *Hou Hanshu*.⁹

In the first letter, Kong Rong argues for the potency 德 of alcohol. He states that liquor is a cosmic gift and is the sole means through which the sage-kings in the past made sacrifices to the Supreme Deity and the Six Ancestors; alcohol also harmonises spirits and pacifies people; with such potency of alcohol, countless lands are saved. Kong Rong then draws on several historical references to justify his claim. For example, he writes that if King Yao could not drink thousands of goblets of alcohol, he would not have built the Age of Great Peace; if Confucius could not drink hundreds of *hu* of alcohol, he would not have been capable of being the Supreme Sage. Kong Rong also gives three examples from the near past. There is Fan Kuai 樊噲 at the famous “Feast of the Swan Gate,” who boosted his courage after drinking and eating the boar shoulder. The other two examples are Liu Bang 劉邦, who chopped off a white serpent after being intoxicated, and Liu Bang’s chief advisor Li Shiqi 酈食其, the self-claimed “Drunkard of Gaoyang.” If the past exemplars were able to make their achievements without quitting alcohol, then Kong Rong asks, “How can one blame liquor for the failure of governance?”¹⁰

⁶ Roel Sterckx, “Alcohol and Historiography in Early China,” *Global Food History* 1, no. 1 (2015), pp. 20, 24.

⁷ David R. Knechtges, “Gradually Entering the Realm of Delight: Food and Drink in Early Medieval China,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 2 (1997), p. 237.

⁸ *Hou Hanshu*, juan 70, p. 2273.

⁹ *Hou Hanshu*, juan 70, p. 2273.

¹⁰ *Hou Hanshu*, juan 70, p. 2273.

Although Kong Rong's argument is in part sophistic, he nevertheless makes the point that liquor itself and one's hobby of drinking have nothing to do with one's character and capacity, as well as the performance of the government.

His argument continues into the second letter:

Yesterday, I received [your] instruction. [You] stated the calamities of the two [Han] dynasties and the moral degradation of people. As for those who perished because of liquor, it is all true, as you suggested. However, King Yan of Xu practiced humaneness and righteousness and perished, but nowadays, the ordinance does not terminate humaneness and righteousness. King Kuai of Yan lost the order of his state because of practicing abdication, but nowadays, the ordinance does not forbid the practice of abdication. The State of Lu was impaired because of classical scholars, but nowadays, the ordinance does not [make people] abandon the study of classics. Moreover, the Xia and the Shang lost control over the realm under heaven because of women, but nowadays, the ordinance does not [make people] abstain from getting married. As for someone who is solely anxious about liquor, it is doubtful if he is simply stinting on grains instead of taking the past kings as admonitions.

昨承訓荅，陳二代之禍及眾人之敗，以酒亡者，實如來誨。雖然，徐偃王行仁義而亡，今令不絕仁義；燕噲以讓失社稷，今令不禁謙退；魯因儒而損，今令不棄文學；夏、商亦以婦人失天下，今令不斷婚姻。而將酒獨急者，疑但惜穀耳，非以亡王為戒也。¹¹

This letter reveals the contention between Kong Rong and Cao Cao over alcohol prohibition. As the text suggests, Cao Cao was the one who sought to moralise the danger of alcohol. Interestingly, in spite of being known as an upright, conservative Ruist, Kong Rong took a rather pragmatic approach and used his eloquent argumentation to undermine the moral authority embedded in Cao Cao's policy. The text points out that Cao Cao's real concern was not the moral ambiguity of alcohol but the shortage of grains. The same contention is also mentioned in an alternative source. The commentary under *Shishuo xinyu* 2.5 quotes a collection of anecdotes and gossip titled *Shiyu* 世語 (*Worldly Stories*) and states the respective reasons of Cao Cao and Kong Rong. Cao Cao banned alcohol due to the deficiency in grain production that year (*sui jian* 歲儉), while Kong Rong argued that alcohol should not be banned because "one drinks in order to complete the *li*" (*jiu yi cheng li* 酒以成禮)¹² This is probably a paraphrase of the earlier idea of "gatherings for the hundred rites would not take place without wine" (*fei jiu bu xing* 非酒不行) in Lu Kuang's 魯匡 memorial to the throne.¹³ *Li* here probably signifies ritual sacrifices, social hierarchy, and societal order since

¹¹ *Hou Hanshu*, juan 70, p. 2273.

¹² *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏, p. 63.

¹³ Sterckx, "Alcohol and Historiography in Early China," p. 15.

banquets and communal drinking are among the occasions where social hierarchy is visually manifested. Although canonical texts seek to regulate every single aspect of a man's social life, it is likely that in practice, most semi-formal and private banquets and parties in the Eastern Han and Wei-Jin periods were held according to the preference of individual hosts and the dynamic of the particular group.

Based on his own words, Kong Rong seemed unconcerned about observing ritual protocols in communal drinking. Alternatively, perhaps he was simply defending his own hobby while expressing his political antagonism against Cao Cao. As noted by previous scholarship, Kong Rong's political standpoint was rather conservative. Considering the socio-political reality of his time that the realm was divided by local warlords and the end of the Han dynasty could be foreseen, Kong Rong still advocated the building of local academies, selecting moral exemplars as state officials, and promoting classical scholars, as the solutions to current crises. Because his aspiration lay firmly in restoring the Han state, Kong Rong and Cao Cao eventually drifted apart. He thereupon composed multiple polemic essays to attack the policies and social practices of Cao Cao. Cao Cao found him disrespectful and offensive and eventually put Kong Rong and his whole family to death by accusing him of suspicion for treason.¹⁴

It is clear that while the proposition of "drinking in order to complete the *li*" was present in the common discourse, new attitudes on drinking started to emerge at the end of the Han dynasty. Kong Rong was not the last one to argue for the virtuous potency of alcohol, as we will eventually see in the following sections.

II. Alcohol Consumption and Three Kingdoms Historiography

This section explores the moral discourse on alcohol in Three Kingdoms historiography and how such a discourse was employed as a rhetorical weapon to undermine a person's reputation in power politics.

Cao Cao received the noble title of King of Wei 魏王 in 216 and passed away in 220. In the same year, his heir, Cao Pi 丕, forced the last Han emperor to abdicate and proclaimed himself emperor of the new Wei dynasty. As the new emperor, Cao Pi employed various means to legitimise his

¹⁴ Li Baojun 李寶均, *Cao shi fuzi he Jian'an wenxue* 曹氏父子和建安文學 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), pp. 68–70.

usurpation of the throne. Among the means of legitimisation, there was the moral discourse on alcohol consumption and management, as we can see from Cao Pi's own literary criticism *Dianlun* 典論 ("Essays on the Standards [for Literature]") preserved in fragments in later encyclopaedic works.

The following two quotes from the *Dianlun* describe the phenomenon of alcoholic abuse at the end of the Han dynasty:

1. At the end of the reign of Emperor Ling, the hundreds of offices abandoned themselves to drinking. It cost one thousand cash to buy one *dou* ("peck") of alcoholic beverage. The eunuch Zhang Rangzi was made the *taiyi ling* ('Principal Medical Attendant'). Once he drank with others, he would take off his clothes and expose his body to entertain the audience.

孝靈末，百司湎酒，酒千文一斗。常侍張讓子奉為太醫令，與人飲，輒去衣露形，為戲樂也。

2. Guo Zhen, the Magistrate of Luoyang, had millions of cash at home. Each summer, he would invite many guests. [He had] tens of servant girls who dressed up with luxurious ornaments and gauzes while being naked inside. He ordered them to toast.

洛陽令郭珍，家有巨億，每暑召客，侍婢數十，盛裝飾，羅縠披之，袒裸其中，使進酒。¹⁵

Cao Pi's account repeats the narrative trope in dynastic histories that the end of a dynasty is always marked by corruption. In his depiction of the reign of Emperor Ling 靈 (r. 168–189 CE), court officials accumulated unmeasurable wealth at home and abandoned themselves to drinking while the empire suffered from natural disasters and social turmoils. Cao Pi's writing particularly targets those who gained power and prestige because of their personal relationships with the Han emperor, namely the eunuchs and imperial affines. For example, there was the eunuch Zhang Rangzi, one of the most prominent eunuchs in the court of Emperor Ling, known as the *shi changshi* 十常侍 ("Ten Permanent Attendants").¹⁶ By writing against eunuchs and imperial affines who were deemed decadent and morally corrupted (*zhuo* 濁), Cao Pi implicitly identified himself with the morally pure stream (*qingliu* 清流), namely, the scholar-officials and local gentries who experienced alienation in court politics.¹⁷ Although there is no direct attack on the Han emperor himself, Cao

¹⁵ *Cao Pi ji jiaozhu* 曹丕集校注, p. 262.

¹⁶ Also see *Hou Hanshu*, *juan* 78, p. 2534.

¹⁷ For discussion on the "pure stream" and the formation of new elites in the Cao-Wei regime, see Kawakatsu Yoshio 川勝義雄, *Liu-Chao guizu zhidu yanjiu* 六朝貴族制社會研究, trans. Xu Gupeng 徐谷芄 and Li Jicang 李濟滄 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), pp. 3–102.

Pi's writing still implies a sharp criticism of the ruler who failed to tackle moral decadence and encouraged corruption to prevail within his immediate surroundings and the central government. Besides, the imagery of extravagance and debauchery easily evokes the reader to associate Emperor Ling with archetypes of bad rulers who caused the downfall of their dynasties, such as the last rulers of Xia and Shang.¹⁸

Clearly, Cao Pi intended to establish himself as the opposite of the incompetent, morally decadent ruler by actively tackling the issue of alcoholic abuse. Cao Pi also composed a work titled “Jiu hui 酒誨” (“Instruction on Drinking”), which stresses, “One drinks in order to complete the *li* (rites). However, excessive drinking causes moral decadence as well as personal indulgence.”¹⁹ Regarding the “Jiu hui,” it is an essay in the *Dianlun*, but the full text did not survive.²⁰ Nevertheless, it is arguable that the title “Jiu hui” is a deliberate allusion to the “Jiu gao” preserved in the *Shangshu*. The “Jiu gao” is a speech attributed to a Sage King in the Western Zhou period. By making this allusion to the “Jiu gao,” Cao Pi elevated himself to the equal ground of the virtuous Sage King in the past.

Cao Pi's employment of the moral discourse on alcohol did not end there. He not only used the moral discourse on alcohol to establish himself as a legitimate, virtuous ruler, but he might have also used it as a weapon to undermine the reputation of his younger brother Cao Zhi 植 (192–232) in the power struggle over succession.

Among Cao Cao's twenty-five sons by two principal wives and thirteen concubines, Cao Pi was not the most favoured despite being the eldest surviving son. Cao Cao's favourite son was Cao Chong 沖, born in 196. Cao Chong was said to be remarkably intelligent and kind-hearted, and he frequently persuaded Cao Cao to be lenient. Cao Chong died in 208 due to illness, and Cao Cao was grief-stricken. He even told Cao Pi that he planned to make Cao Chong his heir.²¹ After Cao Chong passed away, Cao Zhi received the most attention and favour from Cao Cao. Not only well-read in Confucian classics and poetry from a young age, but Cao Zhi also demonstrated an outstanding talent for literary composition and was well-connected to the literati community in the capital, which, in addition to his father's affection, made Cao Zhi a strong candidate for heir. The contention

¹⁸ Sterckx, *Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China*, p. 99.

¹⁹ *Cao Pi ji jiaozhu*, p. 262.

²⁰ *Beitang shuchao* 北堂書鈔, juan 148.

²¹ Rafe De Crespigny, *Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155-220 AD* (Brill, 2010), pp. 400–407.

between Cao Pi and Cao Zhi over succession became apparent in 215. In the end, it was Cao Pi who was made the heir in 217. Cao Zhi's biography in the *Sanguo zhi* gives the following remark:

[Cao] Zhi was considered extraordinary because of his talent. Scholar-officials, such as Ding Yi, Ding I, and Yang Xiu, were among his supporters. The Grand Ancestor (Cao Cao) remained undetermined and sceptical. There had been many times that [Cao Cao] almost made Cao Zhi the Crown Prince. However, Cao Zhi gave free rein to his disposition instead of making an effort in self-cultivation. He drank without moderation. [In contrast,] Emperor Wen (Cao Pi) governed himself with arts and techniques while rectifying his disposition and polishing himself. The courtiers and attendants were all on his side and made their suggestion [to Cao Cao]. Eventually, [Cao Cao] appointed [Cao Pi] to be his heir.

植既以才見異，而丁儀、丁廙、楊修等為之羽翼。太祖狐疑，幾為太子者數矣。而植任性而行，不自彫勵，飲酒不節。文帝御之以術，矯情自飾。宮人左右，並為之說，故遂定為嗣。²²

The contrast between Cao Zhi and Cao Pi is straightforward. Cao Pi showed prudence and propriety, so he won the support of the courtiers, whereas Cao Zhi was self-indulgent and drank excessively, which could be taken as an indicator of moral corruption and incompetence. De Crespigny suggests that although Cao Cao's decision might have been influenced by his senior advisers who favoured the elder Cao Pi, still Cao Zhi's questionable reputation might have caused him to lose favour with his father.²³

Cao Zhi further disappointed his father in 219 because of drinking. At the time, the Shu Kingdom launched a northern expedition against the Wei Kingdom. Forces of the two kingdoms fought in Jingzhou 荊州, where Cao Ren 仁 was trapped in a siege by Liu Bei's 劉備 general Guan Yu 關羽. Cao Cao appointed Cao Zhi to be the chief general and intended to send him to save Cao Ren. However, Cao Zhi was too drunk at the time to take the appointment, so Cao Cao had to dismiss him.²⁴ According to the *Weishi chunqiu* 魏氏春秋 quoted by Pei Songzhi in the commentary section of the *Sanguo zhi*, Cao Zhi was framed by Cao Pi.²⁵ De Crespigny suggests that this is probably no more than a slander since Cao Zhi was in Luoyang while Cao Pi was busy

²² *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 19, p. 557.

²³ De Crespigny, *Imperial Warlord*, pp. 414, 416.

²⁴ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 19, p. 558.

²⁵ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 19, p. 561.

putting down a potential rebellion in Yecheng 鄴城 (present-day southern Hebei) at the time.²⁶ The endgame for Cao Zhi came down in 221, the second year after Cao Pi proclaimed himself emperor of the newly founded Wei dynasty. Cao Zhi's old supporters in court were purged. What made it worse was a memorial submitted to the throne that accused Cao Zhi of intimidating a foreign envoy while intoxicated. Some officials asked Cao Pi to punish Cao Zhi for a crime. The empress dowager pleaded with Cao Pi to spare his brother. Cao Pi showed his brother mercy by degrading Cao Zhi's rank from the noble King of Pingyuan 平原王 to that of a *hou* 侯 (Earl).

The rivalry between Cao Pi and Cao Zhi evokes endless speculations in later times. De Crespigny lists two theories. The first is that Cao Zhi might have gained the succession but was discredited because of his conduct. The other speculation suggests that Cao Zhi's self-indulgence was intentional, as he deliberately chose intemperance in order to avoid contending with Cao Pi. De Crespigny rejects both theories and argues that Cao Zhi was a brilliant literatus but was also unconventional and irresponsible, which disqualified him from succeeding Cao Cao as the ruler of Wei.²⁷ We do not know to what extent Cao Zhi's biography provides a faithful description of reality or simply stereotypical representation concerning the narrative of dynastic cycle. Nevertheless, it is certain that alcohol management and consumption were used as crucial criteria in judging a ruler or heir-apparent and as rhetorics in providing rationales for political events in Three Kingdoms historiography.

The same description can be seen in the case of the Sun 孫 family in the Wu Kingdom. Regarding the handling of drinking, one finds a clear contrast between Sun Quan 權, who appears as the virtuous founding emperor of a dynasty, and his grandson Sun Hao 皓, the wicked last ruler. Sun Quan was certainly fond of drinking and feasting. The *Sanguo zhi* records multiple cases of Sun Quan drinking with his officers and ministers without observing ritual courtesies. On one occasion, he was drunk and sent servants to spray water on his ministers. He said: "Today, we will drink to our hearts' content. We shall only stop once we are drunk and tumble down from the platform." His minister found it inappropriate and admonished him: "In the past, King Zhou of Shang built a dregs hill and a liquor pond and indulged in drinking for endless nights. At that time, he also thought it was pleasurable instead of evil." After hearing this, Sun Quan fell into silence and

²⁶ De Crespigny, *Imperial Warlord*, p. 419.

²⁷ Ibid.

looked ashamed. He eventually quit drinking.²⁸ On another occasion, Sun Quan was offended by an official who did not accept the goblet when Sun Quan poured wine to everyone in a banquet. Sun Quan was furious and pulled out a sword, intending to strike the official. Sun Quan's Grand Minister of Agriculture stopped him by raising the example of Cao Cao, who killed Kong Rong without consideration and attracted criticism from the realm. In the end, the official was exempted from punishment. Sun Quan later issued a decree to those around him, stating that nobody should be killed if he himself spoke of killing after drinking.²⁹

As a ruler, getting drunk was certainly not desirable. However, as seen in Sun Quan's case, drunkenness itself did not necessarily cause a ruler to lose his legitimacy as long as the ruler could demonstrate some degree of self-control and let in the advice of his ministers. In contrast, Sun Quan's grandson, Sun Hao, appears to be a ruler who not only abandoned himself to intoxication but also turned the banquet into a site of oppression and horror. The *Sanguo zhi* records that Sun Hao would force everybody to drink themselves into oblivion when holding banquets for his ministers; meanwhile, ten sober *huangmen lang* 黃門郎 ("gentleman attendants at the palace gate") were placed on the side to surveil the guests. Once the feast was finished, these gentleman attendants would report on the "mistakes" of the guests in terms of "offensive staring" (*wu shi* 覘視) and "preposterous speech" (*miu yan* 謬言). Everything could be reported. Those who committed bigger mistakes would be punished with mutilation, and those who committed smaller mistakes would be convicted of a crime. The moralist official Wei Yao 韋曜, who wrote the "Discourse on Board Games" examined in the last chapter, was a victim of such banquets. It is said that Sun Hao would force his ministers to drink at least seven litres of alcohol. After drinking, Sun Hao would order his attendants to mock and humiliate the ministers, as he took joy in exposing the ministers' private defects.³⁰ Although Sun Hao was not the only one who intimidated others to

²⁸ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 52, p. 1221.

²⁹ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 57, p. 1321.

³⁰ *Sanguozhi*, *juan* 65, p. 1462.

drink, he might have been the one who caused the worst outcome.³¹ The *Sanguo zhi* states that Sun Hao eventually lost legitimacy and support from his surroundings and brought the Wu Kingdom into ruin. His tyranny made him the prototype of a wicked ruler in early medieval historiography.

Considering the standpoint of the historian Chen Shou 陳壽, it is difficult to judge whether these representations in the *Sanguo zhi* are free from exaggeration. After the Shu Kingdom was conquered by the Wei forces in 263 and the usurpation of the Wei by Sima Yan 司馬炎 in 265, Chen Shou was recommended by Zhang Hua 張華 and eventually served as the official historian in the Western Jin.³² Sun Hao reigned in the Wu Kingdom from 264 to 280. During his reign, the Wu Kingdom launched several military campaigns against the Jin dynasty. After surrendering to the Jin in 280, Sun Hao was given the title of the Earl of Submitting Mandate 歸命侯 by Sima Yan. Chen Shou's historiography might have been influenced by the rivalry between the Jin and the Wu, for the *Sanguo zhi* does show a contrastive representation of the worthy founding emperors and their wicked political rivals.³³

Thus far, regarding alcohol consumption and management in Three Kingdoms historiography, one can draw a brief conclusion that frequent intoxication could cause damage to a ruling figure's lifetime and posthumous reputation, which agrees with Sterckx's observation that alcohol consumption was often employed in Chinese historiography as a rhetorical tool in judging the moral character and achievements of those in power. On the other hand, it is worth noting that despite moralistic concerns, later Han and Three Kingdoms historiography also contains a pragmatic

³¹ Regarding other cases of forced drinking, there was the account about Cao Cao and his general Dian Wei 典韋 after the conquest of Jingzhou in 197. Cao Cao's force fought another warlord named Zhang Xiu 張繡, who eventually surrendered. Cao Cao was extremely delighted and invited Zhang Xiu and Zhang Xiu's fellow commanders to a banquet. When Cao Cao poured liquor for everyone, Dian Wei followed Cao Cao closely from behind, holding his massive axe while staring at everyone. By the end of toasting, nobody dared raise their heads to look at Cao Cao. Another account of exercising one's power in a drinking session is *Shishuo xinyu* 30.1. The extravagant official Shi Chong 石崇 (249–300) enjoyed holding banquets for important guests. He would have some beautiful maidens to pour wine for everybody. If there was any guest who failed to finish his drink, Shi Chong would order the palace gatekeepers to crosscut the beautiful maiden. *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 18, p. 544; *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 966.

³² *Jinshu*, *juan* 82, pp. 2137–2138.

³³ In general, the last ruler was, by large, an object to be defined retrospectively by historians. It is rather rare for the last ruler to retain his agency of self-expression. *Shishuo xinyu* 25.5 provides a rare account of the interaction between the founding emperor, Sima Yan, and the last ruler, Sun Hao, after the conquest of the Wu Kingdom. Sima Yan intended to insult Sun Hao by asking Sun Hao to sing a “you-your” song (爾汝歌 *er ru ge*) in the midst of drinking, for *er* and *ru* were abasing pronouns used by the honourable and superior to address the inferior. Sun Hao reacted in a playful way by addressing Sima Yan with *ru* in his singing. In the end, Sima Yan regretted his request. See Richard B. Mather, *A New Account of Tales of the World* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002). p. 434.

attitude toward alcohol. Alcohol consumption, and even excessive consumption, was not always deemed unacceptable per se. Instead, writers appear more concerned about the abuse of power and its political consequences.

III. Drunkenness and the Aesthetics of Tong 通/Da 達

Although a drunken ruling figure could become the target of moral criticism, drunkenness in the case of a *shi* 士 (elite gentleman, literatus or official) was perceived with greater ambivalence. Drunkenness itself was not necessarily embarrassing and did not always cause a gentleman the loss of reputation. For example, the *Sanguo zhi* contains an anecdote about an official named Xu Miao 徐邈, who secretly drank himself into oblivion when Cao Cao issued the alcohol prohibition. When an inspector went to examine Xu Miao's office work, Xu Miao was wasted and replied with the famous line: "[I am] hit by the sage" (*zhong shengren* 中聖人). When this was reported back to Cao Cao, Cao Cao was furious. At the time, Cao Cao's general pleaded for Xu Miao and explained: "Drunken men usually call pure liquor 'sage' and turbid liquor 'worthy.' Miao is a man of a prudent nature. He just said this by accident after getting drunk." Eventually, Xu Miao was exempted from punishment. Later, when Cao Pi ascended to the throne and visited Xuchang 許昌. He met Xu Miao and teased him, asking whether he was still "hit by the sage." Xu Miao replied:

In the past, Zifan died at the hand of Guyang. Yu Shu was punished because of drinking. Your minister's hobby is the same as these two men's. I am unable to restrain myself, so very often, I am still hit by it. However, the Neck Lump Lady's reputation was passed down because of her ugly look. I, your humble minister, am distinguished because of my drunkenness."

昔子反斃於穀陽，御叔罰於飲酒，臣嗜同二子，不能自懲，時復中之。然宿瘤以醜見傳，而臣以醉見識。³⁴

Xu Miao draws on three historical references here. The first two references come from the *Zuozhuan* 左傳. Zifan (d. 575 BCE) was a noble in the State of Chu 楚, and Guyang was Zifan's servant. When the Chu and Jin forces engaged in a battle at Yanling, Zifan was the chief commander. Guyang got Zifan drunk, and Zifan failed to fulfil his duty of providing advice on military affairs to King Gong of Chu 楚共王. Zifan felt deeply ashamed and eventually committed

³⁴ *Sanguo zhi*, juan 27, p. 379.

suicide.³⁵ The second reference concerns Yu Shu (ca. 6th century BCE), a high official in the State of Lu 魯. When his colleague was sent as an envoy to the State of Jin 晉, he stopped by Yu Shu's place on a rainy day. Yu Shu was about to drink his liquor and mocked his colleague, saying: "Why bother to employ a sage? I am about to drink, and that is it! What is so sagacious about travelling on a rainy day?" This was reported to the ruler, and Yu Shu was punished to pay double tax.³⁶ The last reference is about the worthy woman with a neck lump who became the queen of King Min of Qi.³⁷ By analogising himself to Zifan and Yu Shu, Xu Miao was open and honest about his hobby of drinking and admitted that drunkenness could lead to disastrous outcomes. Xu Miao then analogises his questionable hobby to the ugliness of the neck-lump lady. In doing so, Xu Miao juxtaposes himself with those who, in spite of having displeasing defects in popular opinions, still earned an immortal reputation because of their inner virtue and outstanding capacity. After hearing Xu Miao's words, Cao Pi was amused and said to everyone around: "His reputation was not erected based on nothing!"³⁸

Even though intoxication is meant to be condemned in conventional terms, the overall tone of the anecdote appears hardly negative. The representation of Xu Miao implies a separation between the man's questionable hobby of drinking and his virtue as a man of integrity and as a prudent and competent official, which correlates to the practice of official selection under the Cao-Wei regime that talent and capability were prioritised over proprieties.³⁹ Xu Miao was a humble-born man whose hobbies and behaviours hardly fit the Confucian ideal of carefully observing ritual courtesies. Nevertheless, he was still well respected by his contemporaries. The historian Chen Shou held Xu Miao in high regard, praising him for being "a good minister of the country and an outstanding gentleman of the time" (國之良臣, 時之彥士) along with three other prominent officials at the end of *juan* 27 in the *Sanguo zhi*.⁴⁰

³⁵ *Zuozhuan*, Duke Cheng 成公, year 16.

³⁶ *Zuozhuan*, Duke Xiang 襄公, year 22.

³⁷ *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳, "Bian tong 辯通."

³⁸ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 27, p. 739.

³⁹ Mark Edward Lewis, *China between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 38–41. Miyazaki Ichisada 宮崎市定, *Jiuping guanren fa yanjiu: keju qian shi* 九品官人法研究: 科舉前史, trans. Wang Dan 王丹 (Zhenzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2020), pp. 73–146.

⁴⁰ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 27, p. 765.

During his lifetime, Xu Miao was known for the quality of *tong* 通 and *jie* 介. Regarding the meaning of the two terms, the scholar-official Lu Xin 盧欽 (d. 278) gave the following explanation:

In the past, when Mao Xiaoxian (Jie 玠; d. 216) and Cui Jigui (Yan 琰; d. 216) were in charge [of official selection], they valued gentlemen of purity and simplicity. People at the time hence changed their carriages and clothes in order to elevate their reputation. However, Master Xu did not change his usual [carriage and clothes]. Therefore, people regarded him as *tong*. In recent days, [people] in the realm are extravagant, and they imitate each other. However, Master Xu remains elegantly honest and self-possessed and does not conform to social conventions. Therefore, his *tong* in the past is his *jie* at the present.

往者毛孝先、崔季珪等用事，貴清素之士。于時皆變易車服以求名高，而徐公不改其常，故人以為通。比來天下奢靡，轉相倣效，而徐公雅尚自若，不與俗同。故前日之通，乃今日之介也。⁴¹

As the text shows, *tong* and *jie* are the defining features of Xu Miao's character. *Tong*, in Later Han and early medieval times, was a word vested with multilayered meanings. In a simple sense, *tong* means "passing through" when functioning as a verb or "the state of being able to pass through something without obstacle" when functioning as an adjective. Regarding *Jie*, there are *three* denotations: 1) the gap between two boundaries, 2) the state of being isolated and intact, and 3) to intermediate. Based on Lu Xin's remark, *jie* is very much a synonym for *tong*. We have seen in earlier chapters that the intellectual ideal since the later Han is referred to as the universalist (*tongren* 通人). The *tongren* is a person who possesses a comprehensive understanding of knowledge in various traditions. However, *tong*, in the current context, clearly does not concern universalistic scholarship. Instead, both *tong* and *jie* are figurative signifiers of a specific behavioural pattern and attitude that were considered socially distinctive and aesthetically pleasing in the third century.

Lu Xin's remark indicates that Xu Miao was unmoved by external factors such as peer pressure and social expectations. The man's conduct remained consistent while others changed their behaviours because of external incentives. Such consistency invokes the impression of being lofty, isolated, unpretentious, and straightforward. Xu Miao's *tong* was also testified in the aforementioned anecdote when Xu Miao was teased by Cao Pi about his episode of being caught drunk on his post. Even though he was facing the emperor, the man answered honestly that he was

⁴¹ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 27, pp. 740–741.

still drinking frequently. Considering his openness and self-possession, Xu Miao can be said to exemplify the *mingshi* paradigm.

Xu Miao's drunkenness and his attribute of *tong/jie* were perceived positively not only because they entertained the audience but also because of a certain embedded morality. At the end of *juan* 27, Chen Shou used the phrase *qingshang hongtong* 清尚弘通 to characterise Xu Miao, which can be translated as "that of transparent sincerity and extensive thoroughfare." Notably, *tong* is very often associated with *qing* 清 in Wei-Jin discourses. This is reasonable since both terms signify the state of being able to go/see through. When a man is characterised by *qing*, it means that he is distinguished by moral purity and integrity. When combining *qing* with *tong*, the phrase implies that a man possesses not only the inner qualities of moral purity and integrity but also a demeanour that allows the audience to see through him. In other words, the visibility of one's true character is considered as significant as the good or bad of the person's character. This may explain why *qing* and *tong* became associated with the drunkard. When a certain amount of alcohol is consumed, one's inhibition will be lifted. When one's guard is down, and teeth loosen, the person will reveal his/her true character.⁴²

The same presumption was also shared by third-century writers. For example, in his essay on distinguishing human character in the *Xinshu* 心書 (*Book of Heart*), Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 listed getting a person drunk as one of the seven methods to discern people's true nature or intrinsic disposition (*xing* 性):

In general, there is nothing more difficult than knowing the true nature of people. People differ in terms of beautiful (good) and ugly (evil), [and] their inner dispositions and outer manifestations are not coherent. There are those who are gentle and kind but take part in deception. There are those who are obedient outwardly but treacherous inside. There are those who are bold outwardly but cowardly inside. There are those who appear devotional but are, in fact, disloyal. This being the case, there are seven ways of knowing people. One, provoke him through a dispute and observe his resolution. Two, exhaust him through argumentation and observe how he changes. Three, consult him about tactics and observe his knowledge. Four, tell him accounts of disasters and observe his courage. Five, get him drunk with liquor and observe his intrinsic disposition. Six, lure him with profits and observe his integrity. Seven, set up plans with him and observe his credibility.

夫知人之性，莫難察焉。美惡既殊，情貌不一。有溫良而為詐者，有外恭而內欺者，有外勇而內怯者，有盡力而不忠者。然知人之道有七焉：一曰，問之以是非，而觀其志。二曰，窮之

⁴² Such a presumption is captured by the modern Chinese idiom "a person's drunken manner reveals the person's true character" (酒品見人品).

以辭辯,而觀其變。三曰,咨之以計謀,而觀其識。四曰,告之以禍難,而觀其勇。五曰,醉之以酒,而觀其性。六曰,臨之以利,而觀其廉。七曰,期之以事,而觀其信。⁴³

Zhuge Liang argues that the primary challenge in discerning a person's true nature lies in the discrepancy between one's inner character and outer conduct. He seems particularly concerned with issues of hypocrisy and pretentious posturing that individuals may use kindness, obedience, bravery, and dedication as performances to disguise their malevolent characters and intentions. In response to the challenge posed by hypocrisy, Zhuge Liang proposes his seven methods of discerning the true nature of man. These methods mostly involve using baits of various kinds to tear apart one's disguise. After the bait is placed, the evaluator is supposed to observe (*guan* 觀) the object's reaction cautiously. Like the primary verb for character appraisal *mu* 目 in the *Shishuo xinyu*,⁴⁴ *guan* entails immediacy and a mode of social interaction between the evaluator and the evaluated with as little delay and mediation as possible. The ideal individual is expected to demonstrate coherence between the inner and the outer and preserve behavioural consistency across different circumstances. Zhuge Liang clearly considers the empirical knowledge about a person acquired through social engagements such as conversing and drinking more authentic and reliable.

Knowing the man (*zhiren* 知人) or discerning one's true nature has been a recurrent theme in Chinese political thoughts since the times of the sage kings.⁴⁵ Considering the sociopolitical context of the later Han and Three Kingdoms periods, where warfare became frequent and social mobility increased, treachery became a significant concern for those in power.⁴⁶ Power-holders were not only eager to rank and evaluate characters of educated and competent men in order to create new orders within their circle of influence, but they were also anxious to find out whether their subordinates were trustworthy. A drunkard could be considered offensive by some due to his breach of ritual protocols and social conventions. However, others might consider the drunkard pleasing for the exact same reason. By disrupting the observation of ritual protocols, drunkenness causes the person to be transparent. Such transparency evokes a sense of sincerity.

⁴³ *Zhuge Liang ji* 諸葛亮集, p. 80.

⁴⁴ For example, see *Shishuo xinyu* 8.2, 8.14, and 8.37.

⁴⁵ Jack W. Chen, "Knowing Men and Being Known: Gossip and Social Networks in the *Shishuo Xinyu*," in *Idle Talk: Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China*, ed. Jack Wei Chen and David Schaberg (Berkeley: Global, Area, and International Archive, University of California Press, 2014), pp. 55–59.

⁴⁶ Kawakatsu, *Liu-Chao guizu zhidu yanjiu*, pp. 90–102.

Xu Miao was not the only one who gained a repute for intoxication and exemplifying *tong*. The playful drunkard, in fact, became a social icon in the literati community during the Wei-Jin period.⁴⁷ For example, *Shishuo xinyu* 23.53 provides a remark by Wang Gong 王恭 (350–398) about the criteria of being a *mingshi*, which states, “Being a *mingshi* does not entail extraordinary talent. Just let a man be idle, drink heavily, and be familiarised in reading the *Li sao* 離騷, then he can be called a *mingshi*.”⁴⁸ The famous Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves and their associates were also known for drunkenness and exemplifying the aesthetic of *tong/da*, which can be attested in the following account by Wang Yin 王隱 (280–350) quoted as the commentary of *Shishuo xinyu* 1.23:

At the end of the Wei dynasty, there was Ruan Ji, who indulged himself in drinking and idleness. He left his hair untied and sat with his legs splayed while being naked. Later, idle aristocrats such as Ruan Zhan, Wang Cheng, Xie Kun, and Huwu Fuzhi all traced their “ancestry” back to Ruan Ji. They claimed to have attained the essence of the Great Path. Therefore, they took off their headwear and clothes and exposed their ugly [bodies] like birds and beasts. The worst ones were called *tong*. The lesser ones were called *da*.

魏末阮籍，嗜酒荒放，露頭散髮，裸袒箕踞。其後貴游子弟阮瞻、王澄、謝鯤、胡毋輔之之徒，皆祖述於籍，謂得大道之本。故去巾幘，脫衣服，露醜惡，同禽獸。甚者名之為通，次者名之為達也。⁴⁹

Wang Yin served as the official historian during the reign of Sima Rui 睿 (r. 317–323), the first emperor of Eastern Jin. Unlike Chen Shou’s neutral appraisal of habitual drinkers like Xu Miao a few decades ago, Wang Yin harshly denounced drunken figures such as Ruan Ji and other idlers. Nevertheless, three things can be inferred from this account. First, the drunken literatus Ruan Ji was perceived as a spiritual and intellectual inspiration by his contemporaries. I will turn to Ruan Ji at the end of this chapter. Second, there was an association between drunkenness and wisdom or spiritual enlightenment, as stated in the line that the drunkards claimed to have attained the essence or root of the Great Path. Third, while some found fascination with drunkenness and the aesthetics of *tong/da* within elite society, others considered such a trend utterly repulsive. Regarding the meanings of *tong* and *da*, Wang Yin did not give further explanation. So how did drunkenness become associated with wisdom and enlightenment, or, more specifically, the attainment of insight into the Way? In the following section, I will further explore the connection between drunkenness

⁴⁷ See *Shishuo xinyu* 23.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 28, 29, 30, 33, 35, 48, 51, 52, 53.

⁴⁸ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 842.

⁴⁹ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 27.

and spiritual enlightenment by examining a piece of writing by Liu Ling 劉伶/靈 (a. 221–300) and some anecdotes about him. Liu Ling was among the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves. He was renowned as a typical, eccentric drunkard in the third century.

IV. Drinking to be Enlightened

Liu Ling was likely a man of humble background. There is no mention of Liu Ling's pedigree except that he was from the Pei 沛 Principality in official history. The *Jinshu* describes him as someone quiet and introverted. He was selective when making friends. He was a countryman of Ji Kang and Ruan Ji. A certain spiritual correspondence occurred between these men, and they delightfully befriended each other. While many of his contemporaries gained power and promotion because of their family pedigree, Liu Ling chose to give up his post and advocated the virtue of being useless (*wu yong* 無用) and the idea of transformation by non-action (*wuwei zhi hua* 無為之化). He spent most of his time drinking and being drunk. By distancing himself from the political centre, he was able to die of natural causes, while most gentlemen at the time perished in power struggles.⁵⁰

Unlike his close friends Ji Kang and Ruan Ji, Liu Ling was known solely for his frequent intoxication instead of literary composition. The *Zhulin Qixian lun* 竹林七賢論 (*Discourse on the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves*) quoted as the commentary of *Shishuo xinyu* 4.69 claims that Liu Ling only composed one work titled “Jiu de song 酒德頌” (“Hymn for the Virtue of Liquor”) onto which he entrusted his will and spirit.⁵¹ The late Qing textual scholar Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫 pointed out that Liu Ling might have composed other verses.⁵² Nevertheless, the *Jiu de song* was his only work widely circulated in early medieval times.

The “Jiu de song” is a short but intriguing text that links drunkenness with the type of spirituality advocated in the *Zhuangzi*. The text can be divided into three parts. The first part goes:

There was someone called Master Great Man. He considered [the time of] heaven and earth as that of the morning, ten thousand years as one moment, [the size of] the sun and the moon as door and

⁵⁰ *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, pp. 1375–1376.

⁵¹ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 275–276; also *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, p. 1376

⁵² *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 278.

window, and [the space of] the Eight Expanses as an intersection in a courtyard. He travelled without leaving any wheel track behind. He resided without having a chamber or hut. By taking heaven as his bed curtain and earth as his sleeping mat, he gave free rein to the sound of his heart as he wished. When he was walking, he would carry a liquor cup and a gourd bottle. When he moved around, he would carry a wine jar and a jug. He took liquor as his sole priority. How could he know the rest of things?

有大人先生者，以天地為一朝，萬朞為須臾，日月為扃牖，八荒為庭衢。行無轍迹，居無室廬，幕天席地，縱意所如。行，則操卮執瓢，動，則挈榼提壺。唯酒是務，焉知其餘？⁵³

The beginning of the text introduces the reader to the figure of Master Great Man, who is arguably the exemplification of the *mingshi* paradigm and also of spiritual ideal referred to as the Perfect Man (*zhiren* 至人), the True Man (*zhenren* 真人), or the Spirited Man (*shenren* 神人) in the *Zhuangzi*. According to Michael Puett, such a spiritual ideal is someone who possesses a higher perspective and can act like a free-wandering spirit while nourishing one's essence (*jing* 精) and Heavenly-given lifespan (*tiannian* 天年); he is not attached to worldly things (*wu* 物) such as his own life or possessions hence will not be affected by natural phenomena nor contained by any boundaries.⁵⁴

Liu Ling's Master Great Man certainly resembles a Zhuangzian sage in multiple ways. First, he perceives worldly things in a non-dualistic way without making value judgments according to evaluative categories.⁵⁵ He sees no difference between the "big" (the time and spatial magnitudes of the cosmos) and the "small" (the duration of a transient morning and the size of mundane objects such as doors and windows). Second, he shows no attachment to material possessions nor has the intention to be transcendent and overcome his own disposition. He lives an unadorned yet abundant life, for he literally dwells in the world, taking elements of nature as constituents of his residence. By doing so, he unifies himself with the greater transformation of the cosmos.⁵⁶ It is by virtue of

⁵³ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 276.

⁵⁴ Michael Puett, "'Nothing Can Overcome Heaven': The Notion of Spirit in the *Zhuangzi*," in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*, ed. Scott Bradley Cook (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 249–251.

⁵⁵ This is analogous to what Dan Lusthaus calls the "perspectival model" of perception that evaluative standards such as big and small, good and bad, are not absolute and invariant once taking issues of temporality and perspective into consideration. Dan Lusthaus, "Aporetic Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*," in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*, ed. Scott Bradley Cook (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 186.

⁵⁶ There may be certain intertextuality between this part of the *Jiu de song* and some anecdotes about Liu Ling. For example, *Shishuo xinyu* 23.6 describes an occasion where Liu Ling was accused by a visitor of being naked at home after drinking. The visitor felt offended but Liu Ling replied: "I take heaven and earth as ridgepole and roof and regard house and chamber as underwear. Why would you fellows come into my underwear?" See *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 805.

non-dualistic perception that the Master can “give free rein to the sound of his heart as he wishes” (*zong yi suo ru* 縱意所如). The word *yi* 意 is usually translated as “thought,” “intention,” or “awareness.” But here, I choose to give a poetic interpretation to the phrase by translating *yi* based on the composition of the graph as “sound of the heart” in order to highlight the explicitness of Master’s *yi*. As seen in the following lines, the liberation of the Master’s *yi* does not simply take place on a mental level but is manifested in a “loud” manner through his hobby of drinking.

The “loudness” of the Master’s liberated spirit is not appreciated by some of his contemporaries, as one can see in the next part:

There were noble aristocrats and begirded scholar-officials who heard of my (his) reputation and came to assess the source of my (his) reputation.⁵⁷ They shook their sleeves and tore off the flaps of their robes while staring out their eyes and rubbing their teeth with anger. They made statements about the rites and conventions. [At the time], affirmation and negation rose sharply like knives. Seeing this, Master Great Man held an ewer to contain the dregs from his liquor. He held a cup [to his mouth] and sucked up the unstrained liquor. He shook his whiskers while sitting with his legs stretched out. [Then] he leaned down and slept on the lees.

有貴介公子，縉紳處士，聞吾風聲，議其所以。乃奮袂攘襟，怒目切齒，陳說禮法，是非鋒起。先生於是方捧罌承槽，銜杯漱醪，奮髯箕踞，枕麴藉糟。⁵⁸

In this passage, Liu Ling first portrays a vivid scene of “public discussion” initiated by discussants who were gentlemen of high institutional positions (*wei* 位) such as noble rank and bureaucratic positions. The Master’s drinking hobby was inappropriate and subject to conventional criticism, but the drunkard himself was certainly not inflicting any harm to the world. By contrast, the self-righteous discussants drew on language and knowledge as weapons to attack the drunkard. Considering their conduct, these discussants appear highly contentious and vulgar. Facing such hostility, the Master does not lose his agency. Instead of defending himself through words, the Master reacts in a playful way. He continues drinking as if not being affected by social pressure. Moreover, the Master arguably expresses a satire by sitting with his legs stretched out (*jiju* 箕踞),

⁵⁷ Instead of using the third person possessive pronoun *qi* 其, Liu Ling uses the first person possessive pronoun *wu* 吾 in this passage. There can be a double meaning that it was the Master speaking or the Master was, in fact, a literary persona of the author himself.

⁵⁸ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 276.

which is a highly impolite, insulting gesture in standard terms.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Whether the Master intends to insult his opponents is highly ambiguous when taking his drunkenness into account.

The last part of the “Jiu de song” further celebrates the Master’s drunkenness as such:

Without having any thoughts or worries, his joy was endless. In a daze, he was drunken. In a muddle, he was awake. Listening carefully, he did not hear the sound of thunder strikes. Looking cautiously, he did not see the contour of Mount Tai. He was unaware of the cutting sensation of extreme coldness and heat or the emotion stimulated by the desire for private interest. He looked down on the turmoil of ten thousand things as if they were duckweeds floating on the Yangtze and Hanshui. Having the two marvellous [rivers] as companions on the side, it was like the digger wasp’s company to bollworm.

無思無慮，其樂陶陶。兀然而醉，慌爾而醒。靜聽不聞雷霆之聲，熟視不見太山之形，不覺寒暑之切肌，利欲之感情。俯觀萬物之擾擾，如江、漢之載浮萍。二豪侍側焉，如蜾蠃之與螟蛉。⁶⁰

This passage is probably inspired by two sections in the “Zai you 在宥” chapter in the *Zhuangzi*.

The first section is a dialogue that took place between the reigning Son of Heaven Huangdi 黃帝 and the hermit Guang Chengzi 廣成子, where Huangdi consulted Guang Chengzi about the essence of the utmost Way (至道之精). One can find an apparent correspondence between the *Zhuangzi* and the “Jiu de song” regarding language and ideas. For example, Guang Chengzi describes the essence of the utmost Way as “hazy and dark” (窈窈冥冥) and the extreme of the utmost Way as “abstruse and silent” (昏昏默默).⁶¹ These phrases can also be used to describe one’s cloudy perception when intoxicated. Accordingly, in the “Jiu de song,” the drunken Master enters a surreal realm of consciousness where all boundaries in the phenomenal world seem to dissolve.

In order to nourish oneself and become one with the Way, Guang Chengzi highlights:

Do not look! Do not listen! Embrace the spirit and be still, and the form will correct itself. You must stay still and pure; do not labour your form (body) nor disturb your essence; then, you will be able to

⁵⁹ The sitting position of *jiju* appears in the anecdote in the *Zhuangzi* when Zhuangzi’s wife passed away and Huizi 惠子 came to express his condolence. At the time, Zhuangzi was singing while hitting a basin and sat with his legs stretched out. Huizi found Zhuangzi’s reaction inappropriate and voiced his complaints. See *Zhuangzi, pian* 18, “Zhi le 至樂.” In *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, p. 616.

⁶⁰ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 276.

⁶¹ *Zhuangzi, pian* 11, “Zai you 在宥,” in *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 393.

extend your life. Your eye will have nothing that it sees, your ear nothing that it hears, and the heart nothing that it knows. Your spirit will hold fast to your form, and your form will then live long.⁶²

無視無聽，抱神以靜，形將自正。必靜必清，無勞女形，無搖女精，乃可以長生。目無所見，耳無所聞，心無所知。女神將守形，形乃長生。

Just like what Guang Chengzi said to Huangdi, the “Jiu de song” also elaborates on not-seeing, not-listening, and not-feeling. Unaffected by visual, auditory, tactile, and psychological stimulations, Liu Ling’s Master is an exemplification of the enlightened Sage who becomes selfless and acts like a spirit. Furthermore, the Master demonstrates an attitude of non-attachment. He regards the countless mundane events in the world as insignificant as duckweeds on the rivers; he remains static, clinging to none but simply watching everything be carried away by the natural flow. He appears alone but not lonely, for he has Nature as his companion. This is suggested in the ending line, which draws an analogy between the relationship of the digger wasp and bollworm and that of the Master and the two rivers.

The pair of digger wasp and bollworm is usually used as a metaphor to signify the relationship between the adopted son (digger wasp) and foster parents (bollworm). It is also a metaphor for a model of Confucian education that the teacher (digger wasp) transforms an uncultivated pupil (bollworm) into someone like himself.⁶³ A two-fold interpretation can be made regarding the phrase “digger wasp’s company to bollworm” in the *Jiu de song*. First, the Master took Nature, or the ultimate Way, as his parent and teacher. Like the bollworm who eventually gets turned into the digger wasp, the Master ultimately becomes one with the Way. Second, the phrase signifies a more generic type of companionship, or in other words, friendship, alluding to the phrase “he who observes the formless is the friend of heaven and earth” (觀无者，天地之友) in “the teaching of the Great Man” (大人之教) in the “Zai you” chapter.⁶⁴ For an audience who is familiar with the Ruist

⁶² *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 393. This translation is based on Micheal Puett’s translation with slight modifications. See Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 215.

⁶³ See *Maoshi* 毛詩 46.196.3: The bollworms have children, but the digger wasps carry them. “I will instruct your sons, and will model virtue like them [the wasps]” 螟蛉有子蜾蠃負之，教誨爾子式穀似之； and also *Yangzi fayan* 揚子法言: The dying moth larva encountered the wasp. The wasp snatched it away saying, “Be like me, be like me.” After a while, they were alike. How quickly the seventy disciples became like Confucius! 螟蛉之子，殖而逢，蜾蠃祝之曰：“類我，類我！”久則肖之矣！速哉，七十子之肖仲尼也。 Jeffrey S. Bullock trans., *Philosophy of the Fa Yan: A Confucian Hermit in the Han Imperial Court* (Highlands, N.C.: Mountain Mind Press, 2011), pp. 34-35. This reference is kindly pointed out by my classmate John Donegan-Cross on May 5, 2023.

⁶⁴ *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 406.

literary tradition and the *Zhuangzi*, Liu Ling's drunken Master is undoubtedly a physically drunk but spiritually awakened being. Drunkenness, for the Master, is the means to experience the essence of the utmost Way.

Thus far, it is evident that the fascination with the drunkard correlates with the popularity of the *Zhuangzi* in the Wei-Jin elite circle. Besides his sole extant piece of writing, other anecdotes about Liu Ling also show that he modelled himself after the Zhuangzian spiritual ideal. For example, Yuan Hong's *Mingshi zhuan* 名士傳 (*Biographies of Distinctive Gentlemen*) tells that Liu Ling gave free rein to his will and acted as he wished.⁶⁵ He used to ride in a cart pulled by deer while drinking a bottle of liquor. He asked people to carry a shovel and follow him around, saying: "If I die, just dig the earth and bury me there." Treating his body and bone no difference from earth and trees (*tu mu xing hai* 土木形骸), he roamed freely for his entire life.⁶⁶ This anecdote possibly alludes to the famous section in the *Zhuangzi* where the apprentice Liezi 列子 asks Guan Yin 關尹 why the Perfect Man (*zhiren*) is able to stay immune to fear and negative emotions while interacting with myriad things. Guan Yin explains that this is because the Perfect Man is able to preserve the integrity of his spirit:

In general, when a drunken man falls down from the cart, he will feel unwell but not die. The joints of his bones are identical to those of other people. Nevertheless, [the way he reacts] when encountering harm is different from other people. [This is because] his spirit is whole. He is unaware when riding in the cart, and neither is he aware when he falls down. The startling fear of death and life cannot enter his chest. Therefore, he is not frightened when encountering things. [If a drunken man can] attain his wholeness from drinking liquor and acts like this, then how about [the Sage who] attains his wholeness from Heaven? The Sage hides in Heaven; therefore, nothing can harm him.

夫醉者之墜車，雖疾不死。骨節與人同，而犯害與人異，其神全也。乘亦不知也，墜亦不知也。死生驚懼不入乎其胸中，是故還物而不懼。彼得全於酒而猶若是，而況得全於天乎？聖人藏於天，故莫之能傷也。⁶⁷

Notably, the *Zhuangzi* only presents the drunken man as a secondary exemplar of the spiritual ideal who overcomes things and becomes unaffected by injuries. The drunken man is not equivalent to a Sage since his spiritual enlightenment is conditional—he can only preserve the integrity of his spirit

⁶⁵ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 275.

⁶⁶ The phrase 土木形骸 probably means one either treats one's body like dirt and wood or leaves one's body without adornments. The same description also appears in the biography of Ji Kang. See *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, p. 1369.

⁶⁷ *Zhuangzi*, *pian* 19, "Da sheng 達生," in *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 638.

and enter the state of transcendence through drinking. From the perspective of a modern audience, if an achievement is made on the basis of substance intake, this arguably brings doubts to the authenticity of that achievement. Nevertheless, this problem of authenticity is not a concern for Wei-Jin audiences.

Besides, we notice that Liu Ling also draws on the discourse of social distinction in his contrastive representation of the Master and the conventional, mundane mass who fixate themselves on the observance of ritual courtesy. This contrastive representation may allude to the section in the “Fisherman” chapter in the *Zhuangzi* where the fisherman states that genuine enjoyment (*le* 樂) is principal when it comes to drinking instead of the choice of vessels in accordance with social hierarchy. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the fisherman is concerned with the hypocrisy and suppression of one’s true feelings for the sake of following social conventions and ritual protocols (*li* 禮). The fisherman advocates authenticity (*zhen* 真) and defines authenticity as the ultimate form of the purest sincerity (精誠之至也).⁶⁸ Authenticity emphasises the coherence between one’s inner emotions and outer actions. It is by such coherence that the True Man (*zhen ren*) has the power to execute the intended effects of his actions on the world. The opposite of the True Man is the advocator of rites who simply observes *li* without sincerity. Such a person’s actions cannot move others, and he fails to gain insight into the Great Way. In short, authenticity can be understood as an anti-ritualistic mode of being; it advocates a type of naturalism that one should follow and nurture one’s *ziran* (intrinsic dispositions given by Heaven) and allow others to follow and nurture their *ziran*.⁶⁹

As we have seen in Chapter 2, the juxtaposition of a playful and spiritually realised being and the confined, unenlightened, mundane person is a recurrent motif in the *Zhuangzi* and in writings inspired by the *Zhuangzi* in the Wei-Jin period. Such juxtaposition is entailed in the characterisation of a distinctive gentleman (*mingshi*). In the case of Liu Ling, he is also said to have confronted figures of vulgar gentlemen (*sushi* 俗士) many times in his life. For example, according to the fragment of the *Zhulin Qixian lun* preserved as the commentary of *Shishuo xinyu* 4.69, Liu Ling was once involved in a quarrel with a vulgar gentleman. The vulgar gentleman tucked up his

⁶⁸ *Zhuangzi*, *pian* 31, “Yu fu 漁父,” in *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 1036.

⁶⁹ See Adam B. Seligman et al., “Ritual and Sincerity,” in *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, ed. Adam B. Seligman et al. (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 103–130. Seligman and others discuss the tension between ritual and the antiritualistic mode of thought that they call “sincerity.” The latter often draws on tropes of “authenticity” to question the acceptance of social convention as mere action without intent and as performance without belief. With his strong interest in the *Zhuangzi*, Liu Ling’s thought clearly belongs to the mode of sincerity.

sleeves and intended to punch Liu Ling. Liu Ling conciliated the gentleman's anger in a playful manner, saying: "How could some chicken ribs bear your honourable punch?" The gentleman did not realise Liu Ling's satire and withdrew dispiritedly.⁷⁰

Shishuo xinyu 23.3 shows another characterisation of Liu Ling in the same formula:

Liu Ling was sick from drinking liquor. He was extremely thirsty and asked his wife for liquor. His wife dumped the liquor and smashed the vessel. She cried and admonished him, saying: "You drink too much. This is not the way to nourish life. You'd better cut it off."

Liu Ling said: "Very well. I was unable to stop myself. I can only make prayer to ghosts and spirits and pledge that I will cut it off. Now you can prepare the liquor and meat."

The wife said: "I prudently heard your command." The wife put the liquor and meat in front of the sacrificial altar and asked Ling to make his prayer and pledge.

Liu Ling kneeled down and prayed, saying: "Born as Liu Ling, I take liquor as my name (a part of my identity). Once I drink, I drink [at least] one *hu*; [and drinking up to] five *dou* resolves my hangover. A woman's words do not deserve to be heeded." Then he started drinking the liquor and eating meat. Looking unsteadily, he was already drunk.

劉伶病酒，渴甚，從婦求酒。婦捐酒毀器，涕泣諫曰：“君飲太過，非攝生之道，必宜斷之！”
伶曰：“甚善。我不能自禁，唯當祝鬼神，自誓斷之耳！便可具酒肉。”
婦曰：“敬聞命。”供酒肉於神前，請伶祝誓。
伶跪而祝曰：“天生劉伶，以酒為名。一飲一斛，五斗解醒。婦人之言，慎不可聽。”便引酒
進肉，隗然已醉矣。⁷¹

Twenty-first-century readers may interpret the story as a testimony of alcoholism, domestic gender conflict, and even emotional abuse from a feminist perspective. However, viewing from the cultural lens of the Wei-Jin period, this story should be understood as a confrontation between the moralist and anti-conventional paradigms. The wife here is, in fact, fulfilling the role of the mundane gentleman (*sushi*) who is unable to allow others to follow and nurture their *ziran*. Although Liu Ling's behaviour of tricking his wife into believing that he would conform to conventional expectations and withdraw from drinking is questionable, he nevertheless feels no shame and explicitly asserts that drinking is part of his name or identity (*ming*). Furthermore, his wife admonishes him to quit drinking because she sees drinking as the cause of her husband's sickness. Liu Ling holds the opposite view and claims that drinking is essential for his well-being and the solution to his sickness, which can be sophistry. But if one takes the *Jiu de song* into consideration,

⁷⁰ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 275–276.

⁷¹ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 803–804.

then Liu Ling's words here are logically self-consistent with the argument that drinking is a way to nourish the drunkard's nature and liberate his spirit.

Liu Ling was not the only one who wrote about the figure of Master Great Man during the Wei-Jin time. As seen in Chapter 2, his friend Ruan Ji also composed a text titled *Daren xiangsheng zhuan* 大人先生傳 ("Biography of Master Great Man"). Interestingly, although Ruan Ji was renowned for being an excessive drinker, there is no mention of his Master Great Man's involvement in drinking. The different representations of Master Great Man demonstrate that each author adopted the prototype of the Zhuangzian spiritual ideal and created their own renditions. Besides, Liu Ling and many of his contemporaries were not only readers of the *Zhuangzi*, but they also put ideas in the *Zhuangzi* into practice. One of the ways to actualise the Zhuangzian spiritual ideal and the *mingshi* paradigm is through drinking. By virtue of drunkenness, the drunkards attain their enlightenment and social distinction.

V. The Drunkard at Play

The last section of this chapter focuses on the drunkenness of Ruan Ji, the most admired drinker in early medieval China. Through the ambiguity of Ruan Ji's drunkenness, I reflect on the significance of drunkenness as a form of play and its limitation in Wei-Jin sociopolitical life.

There are several accounts regarding Ruan Ji's drunkenness in the *Shishuo xinyu*.⁷² Like the case of Liu Ling, the ambiguity of these accounts sparks endless speculations in later times. For example, Lu Xun 魯迅 gave an interpretation from a medical perspective, linking Wei-Jin cultural practices, such as drinking, wearing loose garments, and exposing one's body to drug intake.⁷³ While the conduct of Ruan Ji can be perceived as an expression of individualism or a proof of the ethos of hedonism, a contextual interpretation of historical sources can shed more light on the complex human conditions and meanings embedded in the drunkard's actions. In order to understand the significance of Ruan Ji's drunkenness, we should briefly look into the political

⁷² For example, see *Shishuo xinyu* 23.1, 23.2, 23.5, 23.8, 23.11, 23.12 and the annotated commentaries.

⁷³ Lu Xun 魯迅, "Wei-Jin fengdu ji wenzhang yu yao ji jiu zhi guanxi 魏晉風度及文章與藥及酒之關係," *Wei-Jin fengdu ji qita* 魏晉風度及其他, ed. Wu Zhongjie 吳中杰 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2019), pp. 225–241.

context, in particular, Ruan Ji's relationship with Sima Zhao 昭 during the Wei-Jin transition (249–265).

In 249, the last year of the Zhengshi 正始 era, Sima Yi 懿 launched a coup and eliminated the rival faction headed by Cao Shuang 曹爽, Xiahou Xuan 夏侯玄, and He Yan 何晏.⁷⁴ After Sima Yi passed away in 251, his two sons, Sima Shi 師 and Sima Zhao, continued to dominate court politics. In 260, Sima Zhao began to fully purge the Cao influence from the Wei court, which paved the way for his heir, Sima Yan 炎, to usurp the throne. Other than those who were directly involved in faction politics,⁷⁵ many scholar-officials and literati also became indirectly victimised under the law of shared responsibility (*lianzuo* 連坐) or suspicion of treason, among which there was Ruan Ji's best friend Ji Kang, who was executed in public.⁷⁶ The political atmosphere during the Wei-Jin transition was marked with a sort of “white terror.”⁷⁷ Under such circumstances, Ruan Ji's response was not participating in factional politics nor commenting on contemporary affairs but speaking of metaphysical subjects and drinking. His ambiguous attitude and behaviour might have partially helped spare him from political persecution. He nevertheless passed away in 263.

As a prominent gentleman at the time, Ruan Ji was favoured by the Sima family. Sima Yi once appointed (probably coerced) Ruan Ji to serve as his personal attendant/secretary (*cong shizhong lang* 從事中郎).⁷⁸ He was in a position to share his superior's secrets and to draft the various documents and letters in his superior's name. When Sima Yi passed away, Ruan Ji then held the same position under both Sima Shi and Sima Zhao, who acted as regent.

Sima Zhao's favour of Ruan Ji is repetitively mentioned in various sources. For example, *Shishuo xinyu* 23.2 says that Ruan Ji once went to a banquet hosted by Sima Zhao after his mother passed away. Ruan Ji drank and ate without observing the ritual protocols for double bereavement. He Zeng 何曾, the Metropolitan Commandant, was deeply displeased by Ruan Ji's conduct, and he

⁷⁴ For a detailed study of the two factions and the coup, see Chou Luming 仇鹿鳴, *Wei-Jin zhi ji de zhengzhi quanli yu jiazuo wangluo* 魏晉之際的政治權力與家族網絡 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2020).

⁷⁵ *Sanguo zhi*, *juan* 9, p. 288.

⁷⁶ *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, p. 1373.

⁷⁷ Xin Qi 辛旗, *Ruan Ji ping zhuan* 阮籍評傳 (Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 2012), p. 14.

⁷⁸ The *cong shizhong lang* is a low-ranking position but always of relatively high prestige and influence; it is a concurrent duty assignment for men appointed to other offices. The *cong shizhong lang* served as the intimate gentleman attendant of the first-ranking General-in-Chief (*da jiangjun* 大將軍). See Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2008), p. 133.

proposed to Sima Zhao that Ruan Ji should be banished to foreign lands in order to rectify customs and regulations. Sima Zhao excused Ruan Ji, saying: “Sizong was devastated like this. [Yet] you cannot empathise with him. Why is it? Besides, [if someone] feels envy/angry (*ji* 疾) while drinking and eating, this is certainly a profanation of rites.”⁷⁹ Liu Jun 劉峻 supplemented two contemporary references as commentaries to this anecdote. One is the *Jinji* 晉紀 by Gan Bao 幹寶 (286–336), which states that Ruan Ji won the reputation for not conforming to social conventions and ritual protocols during the Wei-Jin transition and was frequently complained about by He Zeng.⁸⁰ The other is the *Weishi chunqiu* 魏氏春秋 by Sun Sheng 孫盛 (302–373), which states that although Ruan Ji did not follow the conventional ways of mourning when his mother passed away, he was extremely filial in nature so that the grief of losing his mother almost caused him to die; regardless of the wider criticism from hidebound literati (*wen su zhi shi* 文俗之士) like He Zeng, General-in-Chief Sima Zhao was fond of Ruan Ji’s honesty and extraordinary character (*tong wei* 通偉), so he did not harm him.⁸¹

Three things can be inferred from *Shishuo xinyu* 23.2 and the two additional references. The first is the recurring confrontation between a gentleman of distinction (*mingshi*) and a mediocre person (*sushi*). Second, there is the acknowledgement of the *tong/da* aesthetic regarding drunkenness. Since drunkenness is the medium through which the inner character of a gentleman can be revealed and testified, Ruan Ji proved that he was indeed genuinely an honest, moral being and was not harmful to his surroundings by consistently reacting in a self-possessed manner after drinking in a social context.⁸² The third theme is rather implicit and worth pondering.

Notably, Ruan Ji was always the object of *mu* 目 (character appraisal), and his reputation and destiny largely depended on the results of external evaluations. Moreover, the man was constantly

⁷⁹ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 802.

⁸⁰ About He Zeng, the commentary of *Shishuo xinyu* 23.2 refers to the *Jin zhugong zan* 晉諸公贊 (‘Praise to Honourable Sirs of the Jin’) and states that He Zeng was known for being lofty and elegant in addition to having a benevolent and filial character; he was eventually promoted to the position of Metropolitan Commandant under the Wei regime. He deployed his mind extremely uprightly and the court revered him as mentor. He then served under the Jin and eventually rose up to the position of Grand Steward. He advised Sima Zhao to kill Ruan Ji several times for he saw Ruan Ji as someone who had an undeserved reputation and spoiled social customs. *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 801.

⁸¹ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 802.

⁸² *Shishuo xinyu* 23.8 provides a further attestation. It is said that Ruan Ji frequently visited a beautiful woman who vented alcohol in the neighbourhood. When Ruan Ji was drunk, he would just sleep next to the woman. The husband was very suspicious of this at the beginning. He watched over Ruan Ji and later found out that there was no other intention, so he no longer suspected Ruan Ji. See *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 805–806.

the object of power gaze. In the relationship between Sima Zhao and Ruan Ji, one can argue that there was a certain oppressive imperial gaze embedded in Sima Zhao's favouritism. Such oppressive gaze is also suggested in the following two accounts about Ruan Ji's drinking hobby in the *Jinshu*:

1. Many times, Zhong Hui asked Ruan Ji about contemporary affairs, intending to accuse Ruan Ji based on his affirmation and negation. Ruan Ji was always exempted because of intoxication. 鐘會數以時事問之，欲因其可否而致之罪，皆以酣醉獲免。

2. At the time Emperor Wen (Sima Zhao) acted as regent, Ruan Ji once calmly spoke to the emperor, saying: "I once visited Dongping Commandery and enjoyed its customs and land." The emperor was delighted and made [Ruan Ji] the magistrate of Dongping. [Later], Ruan Ji rode a donkey to the commandery. He smashed the walls of his official residence, making the outside and inside mutually visible to each other. [His] governance and administration were transparent and simple. Ten days later, Ruan Ji returned [to the capital].

及文帝輔政，籍嘗從容言於帝曰：“籍平生曾游東平，樂其風土。”帝大悅，即拜東平相。籍乘驢到郡，壞府舍屏鄣，使內外相望。法令清簡，旬日而還。⁸³

Regarding the first account, Zhong Hui's motivation behind asking Ruan Ji's opinion about contemporary affairs might have been personal since Zhong Hui was known for being a competitive person, so he might have been jealous of Ruan Ji. However, considering that Zhong Hui once served as the personal advisor of Sima Zhao, it is possible that he was sent by Sima Zhao to spy on Ruan Ji.⁸⁴ Even though Ruan Ji might have some slips of the tongue, the drunkard could still be exempted from responsibility since drunkenness entailed ambiguity.

The second account is likely based on a work titled *Wenshi zhuan* 文士傳 ("Biographies of Literati"), quoted as the commentary of *Shishuo xinyu* 23.5, which states that Ruan Ji had no political ambition and only asked for certain posts because he either enjoyed the social environment away from the political centre or the supply of alcohol at the workplace; since Sima Zhao favoured Ruan Ji, he always invited Ruan Ji for idle conversation and accommodated most of Ruan Ji's requests.⁸⁵ Ruan Ji's request to be posted to Dongping likely took place after Sima Zhao's regicide of Cao Mao 髦 (r. 254–260) and the enthronement of the last child emperor Cao Huan 奂 (r. 260–265). As for Ruan Ji's motivation to go to Dongping, previous scholarship suggests that Ruan Ji

⁸³ *Jinshu*, juan 49, p. 1360.

⁸⁴ *Sanguo zhi*, juan 28, p. 785.

⁸⁵ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 804–805.

could have gone there to seek asylum since Dongping was the fief of a Cao royal Prince.⁸⁶ It is also possible that Ruan Ji attempted to avoid the request to draft a document in support of Sima Zhao's usurpation of the throne.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, Dongping could not shield Ruan Ji from the vortex of politics. The description of "smashing the walls of his official residence, making the outside and inside mutually visible to each other" is noteworthy, for this is also a manifestation of *tong/da*. My interpretation is that even though Ruan Ji distanced himself from the political centre, he did not receive much freedom, for he was still under the surveillance of Sima Zhao and had to "voluntarily" make himself visible under the ubiquitous imperial gaze.

As underlined by scholars in modern sociology, psychoanalysis, film and feminist studies, looking is always a relational activity. The more powerful is the subject to look while the less powerful or powerless is the object to be looked at. The direction of gaze hence signifies the relationship of power.⁸⁸ In the case of Sima Zhao's favouritism toward Ruan Ji, the relation between the subject and the object of the gaze is that of the dominant and the dominated. The effect of Sima Zhao's power gaze on Ruan Ji is "repression," which, as Michel Foucault explains, "operated as a sentence to disappear, but also an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, nothing to know."⁸⁹ This is not to say that Ruan Ji was entirely deprived of agency. Based on the aforementioned sources, one can infer that Ruan Ji was fully aware of Sima Zhao's coercion, and his passivity can be perceived as a form of resistance. Moreover, although Ruan Ji might have been verbally muted and could not explicitly rebel against his oppressor, he did not give up on expressing himself through non-verbal means such as drinking and satirical insinuations. Let us examine two more accounts that testify to Ruan Ji's agency:

⁸⁶ Xin Qi, *Ruan Ji pingzhuan*, pp. 8–10.

⁸⁷ The *Jinshu* states that a group of ministers demanded Ruan Ji to persuade Sima Zhao to accept the Nine Bestowments (*jiu xi* 九錫) in 263, which is usually the prelude to a former emperor's abdication and the accession of a new dynasty. Although Ruan Ji did end up drafting the document, his attitude was certainly highly passive. It is said that when the envoy visited Ruan Ji to obtain the draft, Ruan Ji was drunk and passed out on the desk; the envoy spoke of his request, Ruan Ji then wrote on the desk and asked the envoy to copy his writing. *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, pp. 1360–1361. Also see Holzman, *Poetry and Politics*, pp. 51–55.

⁸⁸ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 14–15, 21–25; Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 103–108.

⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 6.

1. Initially, Emperor Wen (Sima Zhao) intended to have Emperor Wu (Sima Yan) marry Ruan Ji's daughter. Ruan Ji was drunk for sixty days. [Because it was] unable to talk [to him], [the affair was] called off.

文帝初欲為武帝求婚於籍，籍醉六十日，不得言而止。

2. Ruan Ji once climbed up to Mount Guangwu and observed the place of the Chu-Han Battle. He lamented and said: "At that time, there was no hero, so the brat could establish his name!" Then he climbed Mount Wulao, looking afar to the capital and sighed. Thereupon, he composed the *Haojie shi* (Poem for Outstanding Heroes).

嘗登廣武，觀楚、漢戰處，歎曰：“時無英雄，使豎子成名！”登武牢山，望京邑而歎，於是賦《豪傑詩》。⁹⁰

The first account can be interpreted as an implication of Ruan Ji's contempt for Sima Zhao. With Sima Zhao's unchallengeable dominance during the Wei-Jin transition, it could be anticipated that his heir, Sima Yan, would be the founding emperor of the new dynasty. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the decisive power in the Eastern Han was reserved for a small number of the emperor's close associates, such as eunuchs and imperial affines. Although the influence of these groups, especially that of eunuchs, was relatively restrained during the Three Kingdoms period, imperial affines could still exercise significant power. For example, Jia Chong 賈充 (217–282) became the top prominent minister at the Western Jin court because his two daughters were married into the Sima family.⁹¹ In Ruan Ji's case, considering that Sima Zhao's marriage offer meant a promise of power, prestige, elevation of rank, proximity to the throne, and probably prosperity for one's family's future generations, Ruan Ji's refusal was indeed an honourable gesture and a demonstration of the man's pride and integrity. Even though the text states that the affair was called off because Ruan Ji was too drunk to talk, the man's rebellious determination was nevertheless made clear through the active choice of drinking excessively for sixty days. The message in the second account is relatively more explicit. Drawing on the past to comment on the present is a common rhetorical device in literary composition. The Battle between the Chu and the Han concluded with Liu Bang's 劉邦 victory over Xiang Yu 項羽. The victor was called by the derogatory name of "brat", and the defeated was named "hero." By commenting on figures in the past while looking at the direction of the capital, Ruan Ji was arguably hinting at winners and losers in recent political events, namely, the Sima's elimination of the Cao forces.

⁹⁰ *Jinshu*, *juan* 49, pp. 1360–1361.

⁹¹ For research on the influence of imperial affines during the Wei-Jin period, see Xu Chong 徐冲, *Zhonggu shidai de lishi shuxie yu huangdi quanli qiyuan* 中古時代的歷史書寫與皇帝權力起源 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2017), pp. 123–153.

Thus far, I have tried to infer Ruan Ji's attitude and feelings and the significance of his drunkenness in dynastic histories, which only provide indirect evidence. In the final part of this section, I would like to pay close attention to the "genuine voice" of Ruan Ji manifested in one of his famous "Yonghuai shi 詠懷詩" ("Poems that Sings My Cares"):⁹²

1 A day starts over with a morning.	一日復一朝，
A dusk starts over with a dawn.	一昏復一晨。
My complexion changes from what it was,	容色改平常，
4 My essence and spirit drift apart and disappear.	精神自飄淪。
Holding the goblet close, I feel plenty of sorrow,	臨觴多哀楚，
As I miss my former friends.	思我故時人。
7 Facing [the reflection on] the wine, I cannot speak.	對酒不能言，
Miserable [am I] to keep the desolation and suffering in my heart.	悽愴懷酸辛。
I wish to plough the fields on the highland to the East,	願耕東皋陽，
10 [But] who would preserve his authenticity with me?	誰與守其真？
Sorrow and bitterness only last for a moment,	愁苦在一時，
[But] lofty conduct impairs my humble body.	高行傷微身。
13 What causes me to bend or straighten?	曲直何所為？
Next to me are the dragons and snakes.	龍蛇為我鄰。

This poem begins with a description of the repetitive cycle of time (lines 1-2) and the poet's gradual deteriorating mental state (lines 3-4). The spiritually weary self is reflected in his complexion, which certainly contrasts with Ruan Ji's social persona, which always remained lofty and self-possessed in public. The next four lines express the poet's sentiments when drinking at the moment of solitude. The famous drunkard feels no joy. Perhaps he misses the former times when he used to drink with his true friends like Ji Kang and Liu Ling in the bamboo groves (lines 5-6). Besides his solitude, it is possible that the man's misery is a result of repression, as he is still muted and has to suppress all his emotions even in such a private context (lines 7-8). As Ruan Ji endures his silent suffering, he aspires to retreat into an idyllic life and cultivate his authenticity with a companion (lines 9-10). Unfortunately, his wishes cannot come true. He clings to his integrity, but such insistence comes with the cost of depleting his vitality (lines 11-12).

⁹² Pentasyllabic *Yonghuai*, no. 34. In *Ruan Ji ji jiaozhu* 阮籍集校注, pp. 313–314. For alternative translation, see Stephen Owen and Wendy Swartz, trans., *The Poetry of Ruan Ji and Xi Kang*, ed. Ding Xiang Warner and Xiaofei Tian (Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), p. 110–113.

In the final two lines, Ruan Ji puts forward the ultimate reason for his affliction: the “dragons” and “snakes” that are nearby. Previous scholarship gives different interpretations for the last two lines and suggests that “dragons” and “snakes” are metaphors for hermits. For example, Holzman reads Ruan Ji’s question as “How can one be alternatively straight and crooked, alternatively hide and appear, as the dragons and snakes do when they hibernate in winter [and then appear again in spring].”⁹³ Owen and Swartz offer a similar interpretation and translate the last two lines as: “What does it matter whether coiled up or extending?—dragons and serpent will be my neighbors?”⁹⁴ Notably, the current poem and pentasyllabic “Yonghuai No. 33” appear to be “a pair of twins” that mirror each other in theme and share a strikingly similar beginning.⁹⁵ The ending of Poem 33 states: “For my whole life, I’ve been stepping on the thin ice. Who could know the anxiety in my heart” (終身履薄冰，誰知我心焦), which is an explicit expression of anxiety. If there is an intertextuality between Poem 33 and Poem 34, then the last two lines should also share some correspondence. Therefore, it is possible that “dragons” and “snakes” here are malicious animals that evoke the image of ropes and nets that wind around the prey. Since “dragons” often symbolise the ruler and “snakes” are regarded as small dragons, “dragons” here could refer to Sima Zhao and “snakes” could refer to his ministers and officials. If “dragons” and “snakes” are metaphors for Ruan Ji’s victimisers and their supporters, then Ruan Ji himself is the prey trapped by the predators, and his action of bending or straightening depends on the degree of external oppression.

Among Ruan Ji’s extant works, there are eighty-two “Yonghuai shi” written in pentasyllabic form and three “Yonghuai shi” written in quatrisyllabic form. Most of the “Yonghuai shi” were likely composed in the later years of Ruan Ji’s life (249–263), as they involve not only the poet’s daily sentiments and the aspiration for seclusion and spiritual liberation but also his ambiguous comments and humourless satire on the men in power and the political struggle between the Cao forces and the Sima usurpers. Unlike earlier literature that was composed for didactic purposes and political propaganda, Ruan Ji’s verses are highly individualistic and personal. These poems that crystallise the poet’s innermost thoughts and genuine feelings distinguish Ruan Ji from any earlier author who attempted to express oneself through poetry.⁹⁶ As Ruan Ji’s most circulated and influential works, the “Yonghuai shi” became a model to be emulated by many outstanding poets

⁹³ Holzman, *Poetry and Politics*, p. 132.

⁹⁴ Owen and Swartz trans., *The Poetry of Ruan Ji and Xi Kang*, p. 113.

⁹⁵ *Ruan Ji ji jiaozhu*, pp. 312–313.

⁹⁶ Holzman, *Poetry and Politics*, p. 1.

throughout the medieval period, such as Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324), Tao Qian 陶潛 (365–427), Bao Zhao 鮑照 (a. 414–466), Jiang Yan 江淹 (444–505), Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581), Cheng Ziang 陳子昂 (661–702), as well as Li Bai 李白 (701–762).⁹⁷

In contrast to Ruan Ji's reputation as a drunkard, there is only one mention of drinking among the eighty-two pentasyllabic "Yonghuai shi,"⁹⁸ and there is not a single mention of drunkenness in his entire works.⁹⁹ Based on Ruan Ji's own writings and the descriptive anecdotes about the drunkard, a twofold conclusion regarding the significance of Ruan Ji's drunkenness can be made. First, getting drunk was a strategic move for Ruan Ji. Ruan Ji was probably aware of the *tong/da* aesthetic and the assumption that drunkenness exposes a person's true character. Hence, he put on the social persona of an honest drunkard to disguise his true self. Second, drunkenness was a means through which Ruan Ji could still partially preserve and express his agency in an oppressive environment, for getting drunk was a playful resistance against the power gaze of the Sima clique. This renders the drunkard a symbol of rebellion. However, like what is connoted by the terms *tong* (going through) and *jie* (in-betweenness), the drunkard's rebellion was limited to "dancing inside the cell" instead of "breaking away from the prison." In other words, the drunkard was anti-conventional but certainly not revolutionary. Drunkenness allowed the man to adapt but did little to challenge the very social and political structures that facilitated the source of the drunkard's suffering. Drinking was a temporary relief. The drunkard could only temporarily transgress the prescribed boundaries and entered an as-if reality of freedom. Once the cloudy sensation began to wane, the man's anxiety and affliction would return; he would only realise that he was still "stepping on the thin ice."

Several hundred years later, the Song-dynasty literatus Zhu Gong 朱肱 describes the drinking ethos of the Wei-Jin period as follows:

If Wang Chen did not drink for three days, he would feel his body and spirit no longer matched each other. As for those like Liu [Ling], Yin [Hao 浩?], Ji [Kang] and Ruan [Ji], they could not live a day without drinking. In short, these men drank to their hearts' content to let go of their self-discipline. They relied on malts to escape from the net of the world. They did not necessarily get the joy in liquor.

⁹⁷ Xin Qi, *Ruan Ji pingzhuan*, pp. 149–153.

⁹⁸ Other than the aforementioned Poem 34, there is another mention of drinking in quatrisyllabic *Yonghuai* Poem 3. See *Ruan Ji ji jiaozhu*, p. 203.

⁹⁹ Holzman, *Poetry and Politics*, p. 64.

王忱三日不飲酒，覺形神不復相親。至於劉、殷、嵇、阮之徒，尤不可一日無此。要之，酣放自律，托於麴蘖，以逃世網，未必真得酒中趣爾。¹⁰⁰

Among the distinguished gentlemen, some, like Liu Ling, truly enjoyed drinking. However, as Zhu Gong remarks, the *mingshi* remembered for his habitual intoxication perhaps did not drink out of joy and spontaneity. He who modelled himself after the untrammelled Master Great Man perhaps died in bitterness and recession. Perhaps this is the irony of Ruan Ji's life.

This chapter has analysed the significance of drunkenness as a form of carnivalesque play and non-verbal expression and demonstrated why the drunkard became a sociocultural icon in elite society throughout the Wei-Jin period. As an exemplar of the *tong-da* aesthetic, the drunkard was perceived as a moral being who openly revealed his true character to be evaluated by the audience. The drunkard was also portrayed as a spiritually enlightened being who embodied Zhuangzian spirituality and anti-conventionalism. Besides the moral and spiritual significance, drunkenness, like playing *weiqi* in the previous chapter, was also a strategic move through which a gentleman's agency could be preserved and expressed in an oppressive situation. Because of the ambiguity and ambivalence of drunkenness, the drunkard became a subject that could not be fully defined or subjugated. By being a drunkard, an individual could temporarily assume the personality of a playful sage to openly express oneself and wander freely. This explains why the drunkard became recognised as an exemplification of the *mingshi* paradigm.

The old drunkards lived a life of mortals, but their reputation and legacies are surely immortal. One of the most noteworthy influences is that drunkenness has become a popular motif in the Chinese literary world ever since. The most famous admirer of Wei-Jin ethos is the great Tang poet Li Bai. According to the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, the young Li Bai used to enjoy an idyllic life and dedicated himself to drinking and poetry with a group of friends. The group received the title of "Six Idlers of the Bamboo and Stream" (*zhuxi liuyi* 竹溪六逸),¹⁰¹ which is likely an allusion to the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves. In his famous rhapsody, "Jiang jing jiu 將進酒" ("Bring in the Wine"), Li Bai invites his friends to drink "three hundred cups" and sings: "I only wish to stay

¹⁰⁰ *Beishan jiujiing* 北山酒經 (The Classic of Liquor of Beishan). *Chinese Text Project*, last accessed at <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=210230>. 20, July, 2024.

¹⁰¹ *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, *juan* 200.

drunk forever and never wake up. The sages and worthies in the past all lay in silence. And only the greatest drinkers left a lasting fame.”¹⁰² Stephen Owen suggests that this poem is simply saying: “Don’t be stingy with material wealth and just drink with me to forget the troubles of this world and mortality.”¹⁰³ If “Bring in the Wine” was composed in Li Bai’s later life after he was banished from the court, then besides expressing a *carpe diem* mentality and his love for drinking, it is also possible that Li Bai experienced a deep emotional and spiritual resonance with the drunkards in the past like Ruan Ji who were silenced and could only drink to leave a legacy.

¹⁰² *Li Taibai quanji* 李太白全集, *juan* 3, p. 216

¹⁰³ Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T’ang* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1981), p. 126.

Conclusion

The present dissertation has presented a cultural history of early medieval China, focusing on exploring the socio-cultural model of distinguished gentlemen called *mingshi* 名士.

Drawing on the analytical framework of play and prestige proposed in the introduction chapter, I come to the conclusion that *mingshi* was a status of prestige achieved by engaging in playful activities. It was also a social construction that came to be through the circulation of media of reputation. We began with discussing the gradual intellectual shift in the Eastern Han and the rise of social eremitism in the latter half of the second century, where decentralisation, social turmoil, and political struggles damaged the sanctity of imperial sovereignty, driving educated elites to seek prestige (*ming* 名) outside the normative political order. Henceforth, the non-institutional public space, such as idle gatherings and quasi-literary salons, became the primary loci where elites fostered personal connections with peers and claimed prestige. There, elite members accumulated symbolic capital by engaging in playful activities (*xi* 戲), such as speech play, playing board games, and drinking. While playing in the social arena, individuals could strive to embody the defining character traits and the spirit of playfulness of the ideal sociocultural model. Upon distinguishing themselves according to the *mingshi* paradigm, individuals could receive prestige conferred by the audience at the scene. As the event of prestige transaction became the object of gossip, the social capital of those in the story increased, materialising in the lifetime reputation of distinguished elites. When the gossip was recorded as anecdotes and preserved in dynastic histories and anthologies like the *Shishuo xinyu*, the private knowledge of enclosed elite communities became public knowledge. Distinguished elites in the Wei-Jin time eventually gained immortal posthumous fame as long as their stories continued to be read and propagated in the social network of the living.

Overall, the celebration of *mingshi* in Wei-Jin elite society went hand in hand with the prevalence of playful activities in the social space. As we have seen in chapter 3, play also became a common theme in literary composition throughout the early medieval period. Considering the significance of play and playfulness, one can even make a bold statement that there was a ludification and carnivalisation of elite culture in the early medieval period. Regarding “ludification,” it is a recent concept mostly debated in contemporary media and cultural studies. This concept is first used to highlight the popularity of computer games in the 21st century and is later expanded to refer to the ubiquity of playful activities in modern and postmodern eras, where

play has become a crucial part of everyday life and the cultural economy of postmodern society.¹ By “ludification” here, I mean that playful activities gradually became the indispensable infrastructure in the economy of symbolic capital, and playfulness became a definitive characteristic of early medieval elite culture.

The concept of “carnivalisation” derives from the notion of “carnival” coined by Mikhail Bakhtin. In his study, Bakhtin conceives the carnival as a category of popular culture in opposition to the official and institutionalised culture. The carnival rejects formalism, centralism, and monopoly of truth while promoting ambivalence and a more genuine type of communication, allowing people to temporarily enter “the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.”² As Renate Lachmann and others observe, Bakhtin’s carnival represents the centrifugal force of a cultural mechanism that counters the centripetal force, which inclines towards unification, monopolisation and standardisation of norms, values and truth.³ Although Bakhtin’s carnival seems to mainly signify cultures of the lower strata of society (as in folk culture and subculture),⁴ one also finds the presence of the carnivalesque in elite culture. For example, in the world of high literature, writers can incorporate heterogeneous forms and functions of the carnival into literary composition and make their literature take up the original functions of the carnival. This is what Bakhtin calls “the carnivalisation of literature.”⁵ By “carnivalisation” in the case of my research, I mean that social practices and literary production in the Wei-Jin time exhibit a carnivalesque and centrifugal tendency to oppose the authority of institutionalised culture and the symbolic order of the authoritarian world. This observation, again, is based on my study of the conception of the distinguished figures, *mingshi*. We have seen that a *mingshi* in Wei-Jin elite society was not marked by one’s belonging to a social class, the holding of rank and office, erudition in classical studies, merits in fulfilling civil and military duties, observance of the teaching of Confucian moral propriety and ritual protocols, religious affiliation, and even gender. On the contrary, a *mingshi*

¹ Joost Raessens, “The Ludification of Culture,” in *Rethinking Gamification*, ed. Mathias Fuchs, Sonia Fizek, and Paolo Ruffino (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2014), pp. 91–114. Valerie Frissen, Jos de Mul, and Joost Raessens, “1. Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity,” in *Chapter Five. Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), p. 84; Anne Dippel and Sonia Fizek, “Ludification of Culture. The Significance of Play and Games in Everyday Practices of the Digital Era,” in *Digitisation Theories and Concepts for Empirical Cultural Research*, ed. Gertraud Koch (Routledge, 2017), pp. 276–292.

² Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 5–9.

³ Renate Lachmann, Raoul Eshelman, and Marc Davis, “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 11 (1988), p. 116.

⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 4.

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 122.

distinguished oneself by preserving one's agency and challenging conventionality through the intellectual and political act of playfulness.

My concluding statements regarding the construction of *mingshi* and the characteristics of early medieval culture are by no means free from controversy. I want to reflect on this controversy from two levels. First, there is the question as to what extent *mingshi* was a sociohistorical or literary construction. The answer to this question largely depends on the evidential value of my primary sources, especially the anecdotes in the *Shishuo xinyu*. Although some may still regard these anecdotes as “literature” or “nostalgic constructions of the past,”⁶ I consider anecdotes as the materialisation of gossip and rumours that converge objectivity and subjectivity and are simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive. I take anecdotes as mediations of factual representations of events and people and the cultural mentality and social imagination of early medieval elite communities. This handling of anecdotes problematises the boundaries between fact and belief, as well as historical and literary constructions. As Watanabe stresses, the collection of anecdotes like the *Shishuo xinyu* was considered realistic and served as a manual for elite education at the time.⁷ Hence, even if some stories were exaggerated and imbued with tropes, one cannot deny the probability that individuals and communities who shared a general belief in these stories might emulate the words and behaviours of distinguished figures in real life, hence turning “opinions” and “literary constructions” into “facts” and “history.”⁸ At times, I did try to distinguish what may be factually based and what may be imaginary in a given anecdote by practising source criticism. Still, my judgment is influenced by my cultural and personal frame of reference. Readers with different cultural and individual frames of reference may perceive the same account differently. Such a disagreement is somewhat inevitable because, as Stephen Owen remarks, anecdotes in the Chinese case represent a regime of knowledge concerning “probability” instead of “truth” versus “falsity”

⁶ Jack Chen, *Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance*, p. 220.

⁷ Watanabe Yoshihiro 渡邊義浩, “Sesetsu Shingo no hensen ito 『世説新語』の編纂意図,” *Tōyō Bunka Kenkyusho Kiyō*, no. 170 (2016), pp. 2–6, 26–27.

⁸ Indeed, the stories of *mingshi* in the Wei-Jin period actually had a long-term impact on the conception of *shi* 士 in the later periods. For example, Zachary Berge-Becker explores how modes of engagements, such as playing *weiqi*, ink painting, music making, farming and gardening etc., became significant ways to signal one's “gentlemanly” identities in the middle period. See Zachary Berge-Becker, “Art, Leisure, and the Construction of “Gentlemanly” (*Shi* 士) Identities in 7th-14th Century China” (PhD Thesis: Columbia University, 2023).

and compel readers to “play on the margins of belief.”⁹ The debate over whether something really happened is rather a matter of belief and relative credibility than historical knowledge.¹⁰

Regarding the generalising claim of ludification and carnivalisation of early medieval culture, one may wonder whether such a claim is ontological or epistemological. Indeed, as the pioneer of the concept of “ludification,” Joost Raessens is compelled to address this question. As Raessens notes, the former refers to making claims of a new phase in history that people play more than before or of “a ludic turn” in a specific field, whereas the latter refers to making re-interpretation of existing phenomena and identification of certain aspects of culture through the lens of the heuristic tool of play.¹¹ In my case of Wei-Jin elite culture, I think that the claim is both ontological and epistemological. To clarify, I do not mean that Wei-Jin elites played much more than their predecessors in the Han and before, for playful activities such as speech play, board games, and drinking had long existed in the earlier periods. Nevertheless, I do consider that there was a relatively higher interest in participating in playful activities in the elite leisure sphere and a proliferation of literary compositions that engage with playful themes and/or take on carnivalesque functions. This “ludic turn” in elite culture correlated with the broader historical context of political decentralisation, greater social mobility, and the rise of a new aristocracy that was autonomous and self-interested instead of fully committed to and depended on the imperial state.¹² As for the epistemological side, it is undoubted that the heuristic framework of play and prestige has evoked my observations and arguments. This heuristic framework has guided me to stay close to the ground, paying attention to concrete practices and traces of individual experiences and emotions. It has served as a lamp illuminating an overlooked, shadowy landscape of early medieval culture and history. Regarding the prospect of future studies, perhaps taking a “ludic turn” can further enable us to open up new horizons and discover new repositories of meanings in early medieval Chinese history.

Considering the thematic focus of this dissertation, it is certainly appropriate to end on a playful reflection. All heuristic tools, whether concepts or categories, serve simultaneously as a lamp and a screen. Conventional categories such as the state, class, ethnicity, and the manifold “-isms” had led to new understandings of the past, but over time, they had also become conventions facilitating the

⁹ Stephen Owen, “Postface: ‘Believe It or Not,’” in *Idle Talk: Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China*, ed. Jack Wei Chen and David Schaberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 218, 222.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹¹ Raessens, “The Ludification of Culture,” pp. 95–96.

¹² According to Watanabe, this autonomy is among the five characteristics of early medieval aristocracy. Watanabe, “Sesetsu Shingo no henshen ito,” p. 10.

production of particular kinds of narratives and even institutionalised discourses.¹³ In my understanding, to practice New Cultural History means to draw on creative perspectives and conceptual tools to challenge previous narratives and discourses and foster new understandings of the past. Considering its relation to other “conventional” types of historical research, New Cultural History itself is a carnivalesque play. However, as low and subcultures can eventually become mainstream and institutionalised, perhaps practising New Cultural History will also eventually become a sort of convention and be challenged by new scholarship. After all, if one acknowledges the indeterminacy of the past and history’s reliance on different interpretative patterns, then historical research is an everlasting engagement with the ambiguity of the past.

¹³ Lionel Gossman, “Anecdote And History,” *History and Theory* 42, no. 2 (2003), p. 165.

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