

Town and Country in China

Identity and Perception

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Marvelling at the Wonders of the Metropolis: Perceptions of Seventeenth-Century Chinese Cities in the novel *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* ...*

Daria Berg

The seventeenth-century novel, *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* (*The Tale of Marriage Destinies that will Bring Society to its Senses*), provides rare and fascinating insights into the rhythm of urban and rural life in late imperial China. Like many other writings of the time it depicts China on the verge of modernity, as a world torn between the traditional agricultural society and the new challenges of urban life, commerce and a money economy.¹ The shifts from conventional norms and values gave rise to concepts of utopia and anti-utopia; to nostalgia for a lost paradise of the past and to apocalyptic satire on present conditions. In the *Tale of Marriage Destinies*, the contrast between local society in both city and countryside is linked to the dream of an ideal, utopian world and its satirical inversion – the grotesque nightmare of anti-utopia.²

The author of the novel reveals only his penname – Xi Zhou sheng, scholar of the Western Zhou, which has been interpreted as an allusion to the Golden Age of the Western Zhou (Xi Zhou) dynasty (c. 1050–770 BC), a nostalgic reference to the Confucian utopia of the legendary past (YYZ, 26.378; Wu, 1986: 40). The *Tale of Marriage Destinies* vividly dramatizes the contrast between that lost utopia and the narrative present, depicting the late Ming era as a satirical anti-utopia with heavy use of irony as well as grotesque and comic imagery.

The true identity of the anonymous author has always been shrouded in mystery. As the novel mainly focuses on Shandong province and uses Shandong dialect, famous seventeenth-century writers from Shandong have been proposed and in turn rejected as candidates for the authorship. A fierce debate among scholars over the last decades has so far failed to

resolve the problem of authorship.³ Internal evidence suggests that the author was familiar with life in Shandong province and the capital Beijing in the 1630s and the early 1640s, the turbulent years of dynastic breakdown around the end of the Ming reign, even though the action is set in the fifteenth century. External evidence sets an early limit of 1628.⁴ By 1681 copies of the novel were circulating among Chinese literati (YSJCCD, 3.128–9). Modern scholars are not yet agreed whether the novel was written before or after the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644, but the text reflects voices and visions steeped in the late Ming world.

The *Tale of Marriage Destinies* is a chapter-linked novel (*zhanghui xiaoshuo*) written in an idiom approaching the vernacular. Containing about one million Chinese characters, it counts among the longest pieces of Chinese prose fiction ever written. Its one hundred chapters depict the lives of marital partners in two incarnations. The complex and episodic action of the novel roughly divides into two uneven parts which are structurally linked by the theme of reincarnation and karmic retribution. Two main plot strands can be identified: the 'Chao plot' dealing with the rise and fall of the Chao family, and the 'Di plot' concerned with the fate of the Di family, in particular the young hero Di Xichen who grows up in Mingshui Town (*zhen*) in Shandong province.

The first transition from the Chao plot to the Di plot is marked by two intersecting chapters (23 and 24) depicting the utopia of a golden age in the past of Mingshui Town. The protagonist You Xizuo, a scholar-commoner, appears as an inhabitant of this utopian paradise in the countryside. He remains in his rural retreat, never leaving the cottage in the countryside. His life illustrates an antithetical contrast to that of Di Xichen, the main protagonist and burlesque Confucian anti-hero of the Di plot. Di Xichen, an incompetent and mischievous student, climbs the social ladder by purchasing an academic degree and status but later gives up book learning and goes into business. Di Xichen frequently travels to the cities, first as a student to sit for the official examinations and later as a merchant to conduct business.

As its title suggests, the novel deals with marriages and their destinies, but it also shows much more. The novel provides access to the unofficial and informal side of traditional Chinese society, shedding light on the vernacular culture as opposed to the officially recognized and imperially ordained culture of China. History and fiction intersect in the voices and visions it records from the past. The seventeenth-century Chinese text and the contemporary context which we attempt to reconstruct from surviving sources take us on a journey back in time. By identifying voices and visions in textual analysis, we discover what they tell us about

perceptions of city and countryside in the world out of which the novel emerged. The identification of the narrative voice in its various guises as a satirist, caricaturist and Confucian conservative in particular plays a crucial role in the present analysis.

Di Xichen's adventures in the city

The story of Di Xichen on his way up the social ladder occupies most of the Di plot from chapters 25 to 100. His parents were originally farmers. Having become an inn-keeper and ranking now among the richest men in town, the father tries his best to educate his only son according to the literati standards in order to pave his way into the scholarly elite. Di Xichen, however, appears to be an incapable student with an inclination for mischief and all attempts at making him acquire a standard Confucian education fail. Di Xichen exemplifies the deterioration of the present as the narrative voice perceives it: expanding market-places, new cities and newly acquired wealth in the long run entail degeneration and pollute the pure spirit of Confucian education (YYZ, 37.539). *Money corrupts* – this is the message that Di Xichen epitomises.

Despite his lack of literary accomplishment Di Xichen starts climbing the ladder of success via the regular route, that is the examination system. Di Xichen manages to pass the preliminary examinations by cheating with the help of his friends and classmates. Di Xichen and his friends thus qualify to take the first public examination in the provincial capital Jinan. Di's father sponsors the pupils' trip to Jinan (YYZ, 37.544). When Di Xichen and his friends arrive in Jinan city after a one-day journey of around 100 *li* (50 km), they feel as if they have ascended into Heaven (YYZ, 37.545).

When they heard that it was still some time before the date of the examination Teacher Cheng wanted to make them stay in their lodgings to study. But these young boys were country people from the remote parts of the region and born in a village. Now that they had suddenly arrived in the provincial capital, it was just like having ascended into Heaven, so how could anyone restrain them? The teacher said: 'I can only restrain your bodies, but your minds are already running wild outside, so it is useless to do that. You may roam about as you please and enjoy yourselves but you must be careful not to make trouble, and go to other places at random.'

The four boys, having received this absolution, were like 'fish frolicking in the vast sea, birds flying about in the sky'. They set out

from Quehua Bridge, and went past the Black Tiger Shrine into the compound of the examination hall where Bi Jin [their servant] showed them around. Then they went into the Prefectural School from where they saw Mt Iron Ox. From the Fourth Memorial Archway in front of the Gate of Morality they went to the Provincial Governor's place. They browsed in each and every bookshop along the Boulevard of the Provincial Governor, then went out through the Western Gate and amused themselves at the Leaping Fountain Spring before they returned.

(YYZ, 37.545)

They find the streets full of bookshops, food stores and shops selling various goods. The narrative voice shows how the delicacies on offer in the city, such as bean jelly and sesame seed cakes, make the pupils' and teacher's mouths water while the urban sights make them giddy with excitement (YYZ, 37.546).

The next day they again asked the teacher for permission to let them go to the Temple of the Thousand Buddhas. They went out through the Southern Gate, taking with them the sesame seed cakes they had bought, pork from their lodgings, and garlic braids, and first headed for the inner courtyard, where they rested for a while before they started to climb the mountain. As soon as they had reached the top they ate the cakes and the meat which they had brought along. After lunch they descended and again spent a long time playing at the martial arts training ground and then they returned from the entrance of the Prince's Palace to their lodgings. By the time they had something to eat it was already evening.

(YYZ, 37.547)

They enjoy the tourist attractions of the city which include restaurants, famous sites on hills, temples, boat trips on the lake and picnics (YYZ, 37.545-8).

Early the following day they asked the teacher to give them a day off as they wanted to go to the lake. They told the servant Di Zhou to go to a restaurant and buy a fifteen-dish lunchbox, and they packed their own wine. They asked Bi Jin to go ahead and hire a boat. In front of the entrance to the Provincial Education Commissioner's office they got on the boat and enjoyed a pleasure ride on the lake. They got off at the

steps of the North Pole Shrine and played there for a while, before getting onto the boat again.

Having eaten more than their fill of the sesame seed cakes they had bought in the restaurant in front of the Provincial Education Commissioner's office, husked rice congee, a mixed dish of bean jelly noodles, and mixed cucumber and gluten, they wanted to punt across to the West Lake.

(YYZ, 37.547)

Di Xichen moreover meets Sun Lanji, a singing girl from the pleasure quarters. He first sees the pretty girl in beautiful attire in a pavilion in the garden near the Leaping Fountain Spring (YYZ, 37.545). He later sees her again on the lake as she has joined another party of examination candidates for a boat cruise (YYZ, 37.547). Di Xichen sends his servant to discover her identity. The servant reports that she and her companion are prostitutes but Di Xichen refuses to believe it:

'You liar! How come they are prostitutes, they have their hair nicely put up and netted, and wear pendant eardrops. They are ladies from a good family!' Bi Jin replied: 'Brother Di, was the one you saw the girl who wore apricot-coloured silk gauze?' Di Xichen said: 'Precisely.' Bi Jin answered: 'That is the one who is a prostitute.' Di Xichen countered: 'Let's all go back together to find out whether she is a prostitute or not.'

(YYZ, 37.546)

For Di Xichen, the boy from a small country town, the attractions of the provincial capital include hitherto undreamt-of temptations. He also proves gullible and unable to judge the urban dwellers' lifestyle and status. He soon succumbs to the charms of Sun Lanji, the singing girl. He visits her several times while pretending to his teacher that he goes to the bookshops (YYZ, 37.549). But it is not only the boy who enjoys the company of the singing girl. Teacher Cheng and his mates also turn out to be among Sun Lanji's visitors (YYZ, 38.561-2). The narrative voice here pokes fun at the teacher and scholar reacting to the temptations of the city in the same way as the inexperienced country boys. In the perception of all the protagonists in this scene, life in the provincial capital obviously differs from the world of Mingshui Town, which has only just ceased to be a farming village. Nevertheless, as Di Xichen grows up, Mingshui too gradually turns into a market town and begins to expand its business.

Like Di Xichen and his friends, many people in the late Ming would marvel at the wonders of the city; as market towns developed into

commercial and cultural centres, those who were more used to the village environment would marvel too at the glamour acquired by the towns. The material culture and prosperity of Chinese cities would stun all those – Chinese as well as foreigners – who saw them for the first time and they would find urban glamour not only in the metropolis but also in the towns. On his way home after being stranded on the shores of China in 1488, the Korean official Ch'oe Pu (1454–1504) noted of the market town of Linqing on the Grand Canal running north to south through Shandong.⁵

It is an important junction between the two capitals [Nanjing and Beijing] and a place where travelling merchants congregate. Areas densely covered with towers and pavilions, an abundance of markets, a wealth of possessions and a vast assembly of boats at anchor [stretch across] dozens of miles (*li*) inside and outside the city. Although the place is inferior to Suzhou and Hangzhou, it is still the grandest in Shandong and famous throughout the empire

(KPHR, 2.50ab).

Cities in the lower Yangtze delta appeared even more prosperous, but they did not remain exclusive. Urban splendour characterized many cities throughout China. When the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) visited Nanjing during the last years of the sixteenth century, he praised it as surpassing the cities of Europe in some respects (Gallagher, 1953: 268–9).

Like the protagonists of the *Tale of Marriage Destinies*, the visitors of seventeenth-century Chinese cities would seek distractions. Travelling and tourism became a distinctive feature of late Ming life.⁶ Scenic places throughout the central provinces developed into tourist spots. Guidebooks for travellers emerged as a new genre of writing (Brook, 1981: 32–76). In the *Tale of Marriage Destinies* the pilgrimage to Mount Tai (Taishan) appears as an enterprise in the tourist industry (Dudbridge, 1991: 226–52). Taian, a town at the foot of Mount Tai, grew into a centre for entertainment in the seventeenth century. The place boasted over twenty playhouses, innumerable quarters for storytellers and singers, more than twenty restaurants with one to two hundred employees and inns with courtesans. There were five or six more such centres in the vicinity. They were so popular that customers had to put their names on waiting lists (TAMY, 54).⁷

Tourism and fun had to be paid for, however. When Di Xichen receives four taels from his mother for his trip to Jinan he complains that it is not

enough. His father gives him another six taels for books, paper, brushes and ink, warning him not to waste the money (YYZ, 37.544). Di Xichen, however, spends it on his adventures with the courtesan Sun Lanji while his classmates prepare for the examinations. The protagonists of the *Tale of Marriage Destinies* join in the lavish lifestyle and conspicuous consumption that so many late Ming writers observed in Chinese cities north and south. At the end of the sixteenth century the scholar-official and artist Zhang Han (1511–93) reflected on contemporary conditions: 'With the passing of generations customs have changed. Everybody has their minds set on worshipping mammon and luxury.' (SCMY, 7.123) Another late Ming scholar fretted over the amounts of money spent on gambling and erotic pleasures in Hangzhou, Suzhou, Changzhou and Beijing (LQRZ, 3.60–3).

The late Ming appears as an era characterized by the 'commoditization' of culture: consumption appeared on an unprecedented scale. Entertainment, pleasure, women and even knowledge counted among the commodities (Clunas, 1991: 118, 167). This environment created a craving for possessions. As not everyone had enough cash available, pawnbroking and money-lending became the business of the day. According to one estimate, around 20 000 pawnshops existed in late Ming China (Peng, 1958 [1988]: 741–6).⁸ Through the eyes of another visitor from Korea, Hong Taeyong (1731–83), who recorded his impressions of a diplomatic mission to Beijing in 1765/66 in his travel diary *Beijing Memoir* (*Tamhŏn yŏn'gi*), we can see what a pawnshop would have looked like:⁹

Pawnshops are stores where you can mortgage things for money on interest. The monthly interest rate is two percent. If you exceed the deadline for redeeming your things, then the mortgaged things are sold to make up for the loss. When you enter these stores, you will see that they have absolutely everything, from clothing and jewellery to all kinds of utensils for daily life. All items are labelled and neatly arranged on shelves. . . . Every little village inside and outside the frontier passes that has a street with shops will also have a pawnshop. Its ornamented walls and lofty buildings will moreover mark [the pawnshop] as distinctly different from all other shops. The profit will certainly be sufficient to pay for all its items. The poor depend on [pawnshops] to relieve their misery and lack of money. The wealthy do not dare to sell things for large profits. [A pawnshop] is a must in every market town.

(THYG, 4.337ab–ba)

Later in life the protagonist Di Xichen also opens a pawnshop (YYZ, 75.1072; 77.1092). For a Confucian scholar giving up book learning and going into business would traditionally indicate social decline. As in the late Ming, attitudes towards money and wealth began to change, however, many members of the scholar elite sought profit in business, turning conventional ideas about social hierarchies topsy-turvy (Yu, 1987). The narrative voice does not deride Di Xichen for his change of career as he gives up book learning and goes into business; on the contrary, the adult Di Xichen as a merchant is on his way to good morality, happiness and salvation and he eventually succeeds in educating his sons to become Confucian scholars.

Although Di Xichen has never counted as a real scholar, having succeeded only by virtue of his father's wealth and corruption in the system, other examples in the novel show how successful scholars too become merchants while rising in social status, and how successful merchants patronise scholarship while displaying perfect morality in Confucian terms. While remaining ambiguous about the status of scholars-cum-merchants and portraying both negative and positive examples, the narrative voice reveals the influence of the Wang Yangming (1472–1529) school of thought in conceding that the honest and morally upright merchant too has the potential to become a sage or worthy (CXLSY, 14.398).¹⁰ The narrative voice here abandons traditional prejudices against the new elite of scholar-cum-merchants, revealing the tensions between Confucian convention and the spirit of the age in seventeenth-century China.

The late Ming era, the so-called 'Silver Age' (Atwell, 1982: 83, n.54), also witnessed a rapid growth in the number of periodic markets in rural areas – such as Mingshui Town in the *Tale of Marriage Destinies* – alongside the expansion in traditional industries, the development of new industries and the introduction of new food and cash crops (Atwell, 1977: 7). The modern historian F.W. Mote notes how urban society changed in consequence throughout the empire:

Late Ming writers in Nanking and other cities were quite aware of changes in urban life-styles and social attitudes. ... Urban commoners who had money were no longer under great pressure to conceal that fact; they could display their wealth in elegantly enlarged houses, gardens now free of restrictions of size, gaudier entertainment. A pleasure-loving elite came to be identified with the city by late Ming time.

(Mote, 1977b: 151)

Life in the city became more luxurious and extravagant (Mote, 1977a: 244). The late Ming writer Xie Zhaozhe (1567–1624) observed this trend in northern China too:

When I was a young man I would go to Beijing and not find much in its markets. Getting one fish apart from chicken, goose, mutton and pork would count as a rare delicacy. After twenty years however fish and crabs are cheaper there than in the Jiangnan area and piles of clams, whitebait, razor clams, blood clams, and crabs fill the markets. This also shows how such fashions have spread from the South to the North.

(WZZ, 9.39B)

In the *Tale of Marriage Destinies* we watch this very kind of conspicuous consumption in northern China when Sun Lanji, now married to a pawnbroker in Jinan city, prepares a feast for Di Xichen. With satirical hyperbole the narrative voice enumerates the abundance of exotic delicacies she has at hand in the provincial capital of Shandong:

She took duck eggs from Gaoyou, ham from Jinhua, pickled fish from Huguang, mussels from Ningbo, crabs from Tianjin, diving beetles from Fujian, marinated shrimps from Hangzhou, grapes from Shanxi, candied crab apple balls from Qingzhou, fish in bamboo sprouts from Tianmushan, dried small shrimps from Dengzhou, crisp pancakes from Datong, salted fragrant olives from Hangzhou, carambola from Yunnan, and amber-coloured candies from Beijing and arranged these foods in an exquisite box for fifteen dishes. She moreover prepared four dishes of peeled fruits: one plate of litchis, one plate of air-dry chestnuts, one plate of stir-fried ginkgo, one plate of walnut meat in mutton fat bamboo shoots. She furthermore prepared four dishes of savouries: one plate of ginger sprouts steeped in vinegar, one plate of savoury soya beans, one plate of asparagus lettuce, and one plate of sprouts from the tree of heaven.

(YYZ, 50.731)

Here we can see how conspicuous consumption in a northern metropolis had begun to compete with the affluence of cities further south in the lower Yangtze delta. The new abundance of silver in China and the ensuing extravagance make such scenes typical of the late Ming cities. This state of affairs was not to last, however. Di Xichen's adventures in the city take place at the peak of late Ming prosperity just before the decline, when a world-wide economic depression made bullion imports drop

sharply in the 1630s (Adshead, 1973: 276). The last years of Ming rule represented, in the words of the historian William Atwell, an 'economic nightmare' (Atwell, 1986, 229). Silver disappeared from circulation, counterfeit copper coins flooded the market and the silver-copper ratio widened sharply, plunging the Ming dynasty into financial ruin. Di Xichen's adventures in the city dramatize one facet of the turbulent years of extravagance, corruption and bankruptcy in government that heralded the end of the last native Chinese dynasty.

You Xizuo's cottage in the countryside

Chapters 23 and 24 in the *Tale of Marriage Destinies* depict a utopian landscape with Mingshui in fictional Xiujiang county in its midst. The historical town of Mingshui near Xiujiang river in Zhangqiu county lies in hilly terrain north-east of Mount Tai in Shandong. In the seventeenth century Mingshui counted among the many rapidly developing market towns in Shandong not far from the bustling commercial centres of Linqing and Jining on the Grand Canal. Seventeenth-century visitors perceived the place as an idyll. Travelling through Mingshui in 1650 the scholar-official, poet and novelist Ding Yaokang (c. 1599–1670) from Zhucheng in eastern Shandong appreciated its scenery in a poem:

A hundred springs converge here coiling around the mountain village.
Weeping willows droop and bamboo throws its shadow on the gates.
In this place the paddy fields cannot be ploughed by horses.
But wheels for husking grain revolve like whirlpools to the humming
sound of water.

(Zhang Qingji, 1991, 87)

Modern scholarship has noted that the *Tale of Marriage Destinies* confuses the topographical description of the mountains and rivers around Mingshui and Zhangqiu. This has led scholars to conclude that the author was not familiar with the area and hence cannot have been a local (Sun Kaidi, 1931 [1985]: 1501; Xu Beiwen, 1980: 1–12; Zhang Qingji, 1991: 86–7). But such conjectures fail to take into account that the *Tale of Marriage Destinies* does not even pretend to get it right, giving Zhangqiu the fictional name Xiujiang county. Poetic licence allows the passage through the spring of Mount Huixian (Huixianshan) into Mingshui on the model of the fisherman's entry into the peach blossom utopia as depicted in the much cited poem 'A Record of the Peach Blossom Spring' (*Taohuayuan ji*)

by Tao Qian (365–427) (*TYMJ*, 165–8).¹¹ The narrative voice here introduces the reader to a spot on the *moral map*. Mingshui combines the beauty of nature and balance of climate with harmony in human society. Microcosm and macrocosm strike the balance by their mutual influence: beautiful nature produces good people while good morality causes cosmic harmony – a concept deriving from ancient Chinese cosmology (Needham, 1956: 378–82). The inhabitants of Mingshui have never heard of rebellion. As loyal subjects they willingly submit to the authority of their sovereign. In daily life they follow the Confucian code of human relationships. Mingshui knows no illiteracy, no lack of education, no idleness, no theft, no murder, no inversion of social or sexual hierarchies, no breach of social decorum. No vices such as extravagance, excess, or covetousness exist (YYZ, 23.340–1). In sum Mingshui lacks the sins and sicknesses that plague society in the Chao and Di plots. The name of Mingshui village can be read as a pun on the name of the reigning Ming dynasty. It suggests the vision of an ideally functioning Ming world.

In the foreground of the landscape of utopia we find a list of ideal citizens, climaxing in the brief story of the scholar-commoner You Xizuo (YYZ, 24.358–9). You Xizuo holds the status of licentiate (*xiucai*, 'fine talent'). A government student who has passed the first public examination, he counts as a Confucian scholar but has to pass further examinations before qualifying for civil service. The narrative voice records the diurnal rhythm of Licentiate You and his family's life. We see them only in one moment in time: Licentiate You, around forty years of age, is married with two teenage sons and one daughter. He lives in a cottage in the countryside, farming and studying. He pursues his studies according to a daily curriculum, in summer sitting at a table in the garden under weeping willows. His wife manages the household affairs. His sons go to school while his daughter receives instruction in needle work at home. Every evening in summer the family dines in the garden, chatting and laughing. Licentiate You discusses literature and philosophy with his sons and the classic examples of female virtue with his daughter, or he plays chess with his wife. On winter nights they sit by the stove, reading, studying and weaving by candlelight.

The story of Licentiate You presents a pastoral vision of life. He lives in a self-sufficient utopia modelled on the ancient concepts of the utopia of the Great Sharing (*datong*) (YYZ, 24.357; *LJ*, 21.3A–3B) and the era of Supreme Harmony (*taiping*) in which nothing threatens the social and cosmic order (YYZ, 24.358–9; *LSCQJS*, 1.44–5; *ZZJS*, 13.471). The Confucian concept of a world in harmony here blends with Daoist ideals

of self-emancipation, return to simplicity and integration with nature. We see no change, no movement in time. As in freeze-frame, the picture remains static. But it is not timeless. Licentiate You's acts and ambitions tie him into a specific historical background.

In his forties Licentiate You is still a 'government student', an eternal licentiate, remaining but a would-be member of the literati elite – like many of his historical counterparts in seventeenth-century China. Though living in the countryside Licentiate You has not renounced the world, as some seventeenth-century literati did. Frustrated social ambitions or disappointment with the political situation drove some late Ming and early Qing scholars and officials to become hermits.¹² Licentiate You has not abandoned his ambitions in public life for the sake of artistic pursuits or pleasure. Licentiate You continues his Confucian studies and educates his children in preparation for the civil service examinations. A career in the imperial bureaucracy still matters to him and to his sons. Different from the Ming loyalists, remnants of a lost empire, who after the fall of their dynasty retreated to the mountains refusing to serve the Manchu government, Licentiate You strives for the qualification to serve his sovereign – a Ming monarch. He lives in times when the Ming empire was still intact.

Dwelling in the city, dreaming of the countryside: voices from the seventeenth-century context

What ties Licentiate You to the seventeenth-century background of expanding market-places, commerce and consumption is his state of obliviousness to it. On the horizon of his pastoral there lurks the city. Licentiate You makes a point of keeping away from it. The narrative voice stresses that Licentiate You never enters the city except when attending the public examinations. His life dramatizes a popular saying of the seventeenth century that lists the four basic requirements for the ideal life:

To live at a time of peace,
To grow up in a district of lakes and mountains,
To be privileged with a virtuous wife and clever children,
In a family of more than adequate resources.

(Ho, 1987: 25)

You Xizuo's rural idyll *almost* seems to fulfil these requirements as he chooses to ignore any disturbing developments looming on the horizon.

It epitomises an ideal place but by hinting at its background the narrative voice already implies that its existence is threatened.

A similar kind of utopianism pervades the early seventeenth-century novels (*Chanzhen yishi Lost Tales of the True Way*) and (*Chanzhen houshi Later Tales of the True Way*) by Fang Ruhao (fl. 1620s/1630s). Fang's writings share many themes with the *Tale of Marriage Destinies*.¹³ The *Lost Tales of the True Way* and *Later Tales of the True Way* celebrate the return to a self-contained agricultural community in which life runs according to the natural rhythms while abandoning any concern for the urban money economy (McMahon, 1987: 262; 1988: 106–129). The country cottage to which the hero's father Qu Tianmin retires after life in the city presents a miniature version of the utopia of the Great Sharing (*datong*) (CZHS, 7.50). As the modern scholar McMahon notes of Fang Ruhao's novels:

The perspective of the karmic cycle grounds the author's [Fang Ruhao] didacticism, that is, his diagnosis of social ills. The mythic and religious aspects of his works project 'cures' in the form of utopia and spiritual enlightenment. For example, he frequently pits the rural against the urban, where social ills are the worst, and has the rural win; his final social vision is that of an agricultural utopia like the *Datong* community idealized since early times in China.

(McMahon, 1988: 109)

The narrative voice in the story of You Xizuo shares the didactic concern and the utopian vision of Fang Ruhao's novel, perhaps reflecting a certain mood during the last decades of the Ming reign among the literati searching for an alternative better place and a cure for what they perceive as an ailing world.

Many aspiring scholars and literati in seventeenth-century China however did find themselves entangled in city life. They seemed torn between escapism and an addiction to the cosmopolitan world. Another eternal licentiate, the writer and painter Mo Shilong (fl. 1552–1587), longed for a cottage in the countryside away from the 'vulgarity and noise' of the city; nonetheless he admitted that his social responsibilities prevented him from retreating into forests and mountains (BZ, 3a). The poet and scholar Gui Zhuang (1613–73) held a position as a government official but he later opted for a rural and self-sufficient lifestyle. His writings of 1641 celebrate his country cottage while condemning the extravagance and wastefulness of urban life (GZJ, 6.350–1). The scholar-official and artist Li Rihua (1565–1635) dreamt of a pastoral similar to Licentiate You's:

It would be just perfect to meditate sitting cross-legged at the frosty roots of ancient trees.
 It would be just perfect to lie on the back looking up as moonbeams pierce a grove of thinly planted trees.
 The bedroom would lie in the inner apartments near a grotto.
 The study table would stand in a peaceful place under pine trees.
 Fragrant plants would overgrow each step up to the porch.
 Famous flowers would cover the railings of the balcony.
 The chirruping of birds in a cage would ring in one's ears half-way between sleeping and waking.
 Fish with beautiful patterns would fill a pond while I lean against the railing gazing without emotions.
 It would have to be a son of the snow who carries my satchel and arranges my books.
 Those with whom I would sing songs and go fishing would all be fellows of haze.
 When feeling passionate I would brandish my sword in the air,
 Shouting: 'A man follows his inclinations. How long should he wait for fame and for gain?'

(ZTXZZ, 1.32).

Most of Li Rihua's contemporaries spent their lives striving for riches and honours. The dream of retreating to a cottage in the countryside appears as a counter reaction to political chaos, conspicuous consumption and the new social hierarchies that the late Ming economic boom had produced.

As money rather than learning became the key to success, the scholar-official and poet Yuan Hongdao (1568–1610) envisaged a better world without it. In 1603 he composed this poem:

Life in my country cottage makes me feel contented and happy.
 Flowers on a wattle fence grace the riverbanks.
 Old peasants sit around crushing lice between their fingers.
 Girls from the rivers fall asleep holding on to their fishing rods.
 In this small port tenants pay their lease in reeds.
 The granaries store the grain taxes paid by the junks.
 With mullet and pure wine
 We can make merry
 Without ever talking of money.

(YHDJJJ, 29.962)

Yuan Hongdao found inspiration and sought refuge in the utopia of the peach blossom spring. It appears as a frequent theme in his poetry written during the first years of the seventeenth century (for example YHDJJJ, 31.1009–13). The imagery conveys his displeasure at officialdom and his desire to withdraw into a pastoral. In 1604 he proclaimed:

I now have time to enjoy reading [Tao] Yuanming's [Tao Qian's] [works], I shall spend the last penny to buy the brook of the household to the East, In the western corner a grove of trees will grow around my cottage.

(YHDJJJ, 30.992)

Yuan however found that paradise existed nowhere. When living in his retreat among hills and willows he soon confessed to boredom (YHDJJJ, 747, 1274). He too remained ambivalent about the choice of his perfect place.

The utopia of the cottage in the countryside also features in the stories written and retold by Feng Menglong (1574–1646) in the 1620s and 1630s. The story 'Zhang Gulao plants melons and marries Wennü' (*Zhang Gulao zhong gua qu Wennü*) depicts how Wei Yifang, the son of a scholar-official, enters across a river at the foot of Mount Mao (Maoshan) into a land of immortals called Peach Blossom Estate (Taohuazhuang) (YSMY, 33.487–500).¹⁴ As Wei arrives there the narrative voice comments:

The ultimate source of happiness is life on the country estate,
 In my cottage among bamboo fences in deep seclusion.
 In spring I plough, in summer I sow, in autumn I harvest,
 In winter I watch the auspicious snow.
 Dead drunk I fall into bed and the blanket covers my head.
 Outside my door I plant many elm and willow trees.
 Willow catkins drop and fill the brook.
 I know no dejection or worry.
 I laugh at those who hanker after fame and gain
 – the slaves to the marketplaces and shops

(YSMY, 33.497).

Utopia here too appears as a peach blossom paradise. It resembles Licentiate You's pastoral but here the cottage in the countryside connotes withdrawal from all public ambitions.

The late Ming scholar-official and writer Tu Long (1542–1602) portrayed in *The Travels of Master Mingliaozi* (*Mingliaozi you*) an official-turned-Daoist who roams China far and wide but finally finds happiness

when he builds his cottage on Mount Siming (Simingshan) in Zhejiang province where he settles (MLZY, A.3, B.14). His utopia suggests a mood of indifference and resignation. Although Licentiate You remains less detached from worldly ambitions, his story shares with *Mingliaozi* the same dream of a rural idyll.

The scholar and novelist Dong Yue (1620–86) expressly linked the theme of escapism to political conditions. In 1642 he claimed: 'Since China sank into gloom and bitterness all men with insight have been turning to the land of dreams' (FCA, 2.12a). The late seventeenth-century novel (*Shuihu houzhuan Sequel to the Water Margin*) by Chen Chen (1613–after 1666) describes the flight of the surviving *Water Margin* heroes across the borders of China into utopian realms abroad. The scholar Ellen Widmer has shown how the theme of Ming loyalism after the fall of the dynasty here engenders utopianism (Widmer, 1987: 51–77, 157–82). In the *Sequel to the Water Margin* – a product of the early Qing (published 1664) – the entry into an idyll on the model the peach blossom spring implies the theme of escape from China's wartime devastation (SHHZ, 22.197).

In the *Tale of Marriage Destinies*, by contrast, the vision of an ideal world remains within the boundaries of the Chinese empire. Utopia happens right here and now. Its place lies in the heartland of China. The golden age of Mingshui which Licentiate You inhabits paradoxically belongs to the narrative present, not a distant past. It is set in 1457, the year the Emperor Yingzong (r. 1436–49, 1457–64) resumes government after his release from captivity in the camp of Mongol invaders when order returns to the empire. Utopia thus occurs in the very midst of the temporal setting of the novel. (YYZ, 24.354)

The painter Shitao (1642–1707) used a similar technique in his vision of the Peach Blossom Spring. He presents utopia neither as a nowhere place nor as an otherworld removed from the world of the observer – in contrast to paintings of utopia by earlier and later artists. As the modern art historian Richard Edwards points out, Shitao has turned the story of the peach blossom spring around. He does not lead the spectator into the grotto and through the passage. The spectator is right from the beginning there, in the midst of the peach blossom realm. The painting emphasizes that utopia lies in China, the world around Shitao (Edwards, 1989: 136–9). In Shitao's vision, as in the *Tale of Marriage Destinies*, utopia and contemporary (that is seventeenth-century) China appear as one and the same.

The country utopia depicted in chapters 23 and 24 of the *Tale of Marriage Destinies*, like other late Ming visions of the perfect world,

remains static rather than kinetic. It does not take the reader on a journey to the heights of heaven (as in Chinese utopias of earlier ages) or into foreign countries (as in Qing dynasty fiction). Rather it represents the search for a lost paradise and the desire to revive the utopian past. The vision of life in a country cottage appears as a return to the perceived simplicity of antiquity and the idyll of a pastoral world. The German scholar Wolfgang Bauer summarizes the ideals of late Ming utopianism thus:

Its ideals, an amorphous conglomeration of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism certainly represented a desirable outlook from the point of view of the government, for it combined the Confucian demand for loyalty with the Taoist love of life and the Buddhist disdain for misery in an admittedly illogical but uncommonly useful blend. The conquest of heaven has been replaced by the pensioner's experience of nature, the man 'who builds himself a hut'.

(Bauer, 1976: 262)

The urge to follow the Confucian call to public service dominates Licentiate You's utopia. But he never leaves his retreat. The country cottage here appears not only as the would-be scholar's dream but also as his fate.

Urban dwellers and merchants have no place in the utopian chapters of the *Tale of Marriage Destinies* while playing a major role in the Di and Chao plots. Late Ming fiction such as Feng Menglong's trilogy 'The Three Collections' (*Sanyan*) and Ling Mengchu's (1580–1644) story anthologies 'The Two Collections' (*Erpai*) frequently focus on merchants and city life. But even these stories imply that it would be better to stay in one's cottage in the countryside (Huang Renyu, 1974: 133–53; Aida, 1978: 1–23; Mann, 1987: 52–69). The urban way of life, commerce and consumer society appear as inverting the traditional social hierarchies and creating social and sexual imbalances. In the *Tale of Marriage Destinies* too, microcosm and macrocosm succumb to such influences.

Concluding remarks

The paradox of setting Mingshui's golden age of the past within the present time in the narrative also suggests that the *ideal place* really exists *no where*: as soon as we enter the world of Di Xichen in the Di plot, paradise has vanished. The pastoral dream systematically undergoes inversion and turns into anti-utopia. Mingshui has lost its rural and idyllic

nature. Business and commerce begin to flourish, turning Mingshui into a booming market town. The ills of urban civilization soon follow: sin, sickness, violence, crime and disregard for traditional values and ethics engulf the city. But the spectacle of human depravity also provides entertainment.

Life in the city – in contrast to Licentiate You's country cottage – has action and amusement. The narrative voice dissects human follies under the satirical magnifying glass. The faces of the characters in the world of fallen Mingshui have more individualistic features than the inhabitants of utopia. The narrative voice provides a detailed account of their actions and lets the actors speak in their own words. Details, dialogue and action (which are lacking in Licentiate You's story) make their world come alive much more than the schematic sketch of the ideal world. Licentiate You's world epitomises utopia but paradoxically it also turns out to be boring. Didacticism here thrives at the expense of entertainment. This effect in turn undermines the didactic message: suspense grips the reader only when watching how paradise crumbles. The literary construction of the countryside as a utopian paradise and a didactic model for society appears ambiguous. As we lose sight of conventional rhetoric and conservative worldviews, however, we also gain a sharper view of perceived reality in seventeenth-century China.

Glossary

Bi Jin 畢進
Changzhou 常州
Chanzhen houshi 禪真後史
Chanzhen yishi chan 禪真逸史
Chao 晁
Chen Chen 陳忱
Ch'oe Pu 崔溥
datong 大同
Datong 大同
Dengzhou 登州
Di 狄
Di Xichen 狄希陳
Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢
Dong Yue 董說
Erpai 二拍
Fang Ruhao 方汝浩
Feng Menglong 馮夢龍
Fujian 福建
Gaoyou 高郵
Gui Zhuang 歸莊

Hangzhou 杭州
Hong Taeyong 洪大容
Huguang 湖廣
Huixianshan 會仙山
Jia Fuxi 賈魯西
Jinan 濟南
Jinhua 金華
Jining 濟寧
Li Cuiran 李粹然
Li Rihua 李日華
Liji 禮記
Ling Mengchu's 凌濛初
Linqing 臨清
Lǐshi chungiu 呂氏春秋
Maoshan 茅山
Ming 明
Mingliaozi you 冥寥子游
Mingshui zhen 明水鎮
Mo Shilong 莫是龍
Ningbo 寧波
Qin Liangyu 秦良玉
Qing 清
Qingzhou 青州
Qu Tianmin 瞿天民
Sanyan 三言
Shi Tao 石濤
Shuihu houzhuan 水滸後傳
Simingshan 四明山
Sun Langji 孫蘭姬
Suzhou 蘇州
Taian 泰安
taiping 太平
Taishan 泰山
Tamhōn yōn'gi 湛軒燕記
Taohuayuan ji 桃花源記
Taohuazhuang 桃花莊
Tao Hongjing 陶弘景
Tao Qian 陶潛
Tao Yuanming 陶淵明
Tianjin 天津
Tianmushan 天目山
Tian Yiheng 田藝衡
Tu Long 屠龍
Turnu 土木
Wang Yangming 王陽明
Wei Yifang 韋義方

Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛
Xingshi yinyuan zhuan 醒世姻緣傳
xiucai 秀才
 Xiujiang 繡江
 Xi Zhou 西周
 Xi Zhou sheng
 Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道
 Yingzong 英宗
 You Xizuo 游希酢
 Zhang Dai 張岱
Zhang Gulao zhong gua qu Wennü 張古老種瓜娶文女
 Zhang Han 張瀚
zhanghui xiaoshuo 章回小說
 Zhangqiu 章丘
 Zhejiang 浙江
 Zhuangzi 莊子
 Zhucheng 諸城

Notes

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1. On the economic conditions see (Yamane Yukio (1960) Jing Su and Luo Lun (1978).
 2. For a study of the concept of utopia in Chinese literature see Wu Qingyun (1995). On the genre of the satirical anti-utopia see von Koppenfels (1982: 16–66).
 3. Hu Shi (1931) first proposed Pu Songling (1640–1715) as the author, but this and other attributions of the novel to Ding Yaokang (c. 1599–1670) (Zhang Qingji, 1991) and Jia Fuxi (1589–1675) (Xu Fuling, 1993: 56–76) have all been refuted, see for example Chen Bingzao 1985; Wu, 1986: 19–58; Cao Dawei, 1988; Yuan Shishuo, 1993: 1–5.
 4. The text refers to the historical personages Li Cuiran (fl. 1620s/30s) and Qin Liangyu (1574–1648) as contemporaries, see YYZ, 49.720, cf. Sun Kaidi (1931: 1521–22); Zhang Qingji (1991: 211–12).
 5. On Ch'oe see Meskill (1965: 1–4).
 6. For example CKPAJQ (18.324–5) describes an extravagant boat trip on the West Lake in Hangzhou; see also the discussion in Mote (1977a: 245).
 7. On the author Zhang Dai see Hummel (1943: 53–4), Chang and Chang (1992: 158–62), Wu (1992: 65–88, esp. 72ff).
 8. On pawnshops in Feng Menglong's stories, see also Huang Renyu (1974: 136, 147).
 9. On Hong see Ledyard (1982: 63–103).
 10. On Wang Yangming's school of thought see Shimada (1949) and de Bary (1970).
 11. On Tao see Davies (1983). On utopianism in Chinese fiction, see Dudbridge (1988).

12. For a late Ming comment on hermits, see WLYHB (23.584–7); for discussions see Peterson (1979), Bauer (1985); on escapism and utopianism in the seventeenth century, see Widmer (1987).
13. For example karmic retribution functions as a thematic framework, reincarnation plays an important part in the narrative structure and the four vices of excess, that is: over-indulgence in wine, women, wealth and wrath, appear as crucial in depicting human folly.
14. Mount Mao in Jiangsu. There Tao Hongjing (456–536) received the revelation texts of Maoshan Daoism.

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