

# The Many Faces of Ruan Dacheng

Poet, Playwright, Politician in  
Seventeenth-Century China

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# Prologue

On a hot day in the late summer of 1646, a group of army officers were riding slowly up the slope of a mountain pass in south-east China, at the head of a large body of cavalry. They had to pick their way carefully over the rough road: if any of their horses fell lame, they would have to leave them behind rather than delay the army's advance, and they could not afford to lose their means of transport. As they rode, they talked and joshed each other about what they had done on campaign. Suddenly one of the officers, a stout, heavily built man, older than the others and with—unusually for a Chinese—a large, bushy beard, dismounted from his horse. 'You young fellows are a bunch of wimps. I'm twice your age, but I can walk to the top faster than it will take you to ride!' And he strode off up the hill, leading his horse, until he disappeared from sight beyond a bend in the road.

There were a few muttered comments from his fellow officers ('What a show-off!' 'Well, at least we don't have to go on listening to his lectures'), but then they forgot about him and continued their cautious uphill progress. As they approached the summit, they could see his substantial figure seated on a rock, leaning against the cliff-face behind him. His horse, nearby, was browsing on the grass by the road. They thought his bravado hadn't quite got him to the top, and he was having a rest before continuing. But as the group of officers reached him, he did not greet them or even move. Was he fast asleep after his exertions? One of the officers—a Manchu, with no great respect for the unwarlike Chinese—reached down from his horse and prodded the still figure with his riding-crop. There was no reaction. Gradually they realised that the man was dead. Had he succumbed to heatstroke or suffered a heart attack from overexertion? There was no way of knowing. They were part of an army on campaign and could not afford the luxury of pausing to establish a cause of death or even to bury the dead. Besides, the man had not been popular with his companions: a member of the resistance government of Ming China who had surrendered to their victorious forces but never let his status as a former enemy prevent him from offering his unsolicited opinion on any subject. They performed a brief ritual of mourning, and the senior

officer gave orders to collect brushwood for a pyre to burn the body. But then an unexpected figure stepped forward and requested permission to speak: the dead man's former servant, who explained to the Manchus that in Chinese culture the body should not be destroyed after death. He was sure that his master's family, whom he had served all his life, would wish him to return the body to their ancestral home for proper burial. Privately, the officers thought that in wartime he was most unlikely to be able to do so, but it would save them time if they did not have to wait for the cremation. In the circumstances they were prepared to be generous, so they had a whip-round and collected twelve taels of silver to help with the expenses. Leaving the dead body by the roadside, in the servant's charge, they recovered the horse, and continued over the pass, to the conquest of Fujian for the new Qing empire.

The servant was determined that his master should have a decent burial: there was no one else to take the responsibility, here or anywhere else, as his master had no son, and his two daughters were married and belonged to other families. He did what he could to lay the body out and protect it with the brushwood that had already been collected for the aborted funeral pyre. Then he set off back down the road, intending to acquire a coffin and some men to help him encoffin the body and transport it on the first stage of the long journey back to Anqing on the Yangtze River. He had money with him in addition to the twelve taels donated by the officers: his master had always been open-handed, and had given him responsibility for buying up the best food available (it was surprising what you could find even in wartime). He thought that surely someone in the neighbourhood would have a coffin prepared and stored in their home, or in the local temple, as the custom was, and they would be willing to part with it for a good price. But he had not reckoned with the devastation caused by the invasion. As he walked back along the road on which the Qing army had advanced, he found that every village was deserted. In one village temple he found several coffins which he could have used, but with no one around to help him move them, they were useless to him. When night fell, he slept in an abandoned house, and continued on his way at daybreak.

Late on the following day, he caught sight of smoke rising from a village in the distance and made his way there. As the village was far enough from the main road, the inhabitants had not been frightened away by the passage of first the retreating Ming army and then the advancing Qing. It was hard to communicate with them, since they spoke a rural dialect more like Fujianese than the Wu dialect of northern Zhejiang, which was not unlike that of Nanjing; the servant had got used to that during his master's residence there. But eventually he understood that the villagers were so poor that no one had a coffin available. However, the servant was resourceful and he had

not come this far to give up now. He noticed a cottage with its wooden door half-detached from its hinges. By judicious use of his cash, he persuaded the householder to sell him the door and find a couple of men to come back with him to fetch the body. Even with the cash, he could hardly expect them to do that for a traitor to the emperor, so he told them that his master had been a prisoner of the Manchu forces, who had obliged him to go with them and then abandoned him. Carrying the door, they trudged back along the road and up the hill.

It had now been three days or more since the servant had left his master's body. It was undisturbed under the brushwood: even scavenging animals seemed to have been driven away by the army's passage. But the processes of nature were at work as always, and the body was now crawling with maggots and disintegrating. The men almost vomited as they manoeuvred it on to the makeshift stretcher. The servant had realised by now that his original plan to transport the body back to Anqing was impractical; the best he could do was to bury the body temporarily here and try to return to Jiangnan himself to tell the family what had happened. Once peace was restored they could make arrangements to exhume the master's bones and bring them home for final burial. It would be safest to conduct the temporary burial in the village his helpers had come from, since they might have some sort of interest in looking after the grave. So they struggled back down the hill again—even in dissolution, the body was a heavy one—and, after the slow journey back to the village, the servant used some more of his diminishing funds to pay for a small patch of earth where, with the villagers' help, he laid his master's body to rest, wrapped in a bamboo mat as though he was a poor villager rather than a famous writer and official from one of the oldest families in the land. He burnt a few sticks of cheap incense from the village temple and knelt to pay his last respects to the departed soul. Then he set off on his slow way back to his distant hometown, to take the sad news to his master's family, and hope that they would still have work for him under the new regime.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This account of Ruan Dacheng's death and burial is based on that of Qian Chengzhi in 'Ruan Dacheng benmo xiaoji', one of the earliest and most reliable sources for Ruan's life. Qian constructed his narrative of Ruan's final days from eyewitness reports.



# Ruan Dacheng in Context

The dramatist and politician Ruan Dacheng 阮大鍼 (zi 字 [formal name] Jizhi 集之, hao 號 [cognomen] Yuanhai 圓海, Shichao 石巢, Baizi shanqiao 百子山樵), who lived from 1587 to 1646, has been widely regarded since at least the 1630s, and indeed right up to the present day, as an utterly disreputable figure: a participant in the factional struggles of the 1620s, who in order to advance his own career became a close associate, even an adopted son, of the notorious court eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627); a factional schemer at the Hongguang 弘光 Emperor's Southern Ming court, who engineered the deaths of his opponents in bloody revenge; and finally a traitor to the Ming dynasty who surrendered to the invading Manchus and took office under their Qing dynasty, cut short by his sudden and mysterious—possibly supernaturally ordered—death on campaign with the Qing army. Despite all this, his contemporaries as well as succeeding generations have acknowledged his greatness as a writer for the stage. Yet, from the story of his servant's care for his body after death given in the prologue, which I have adapted from the contemporary account written by one of his most bitter enemies, we can see that to his servant at least he was deserving of respect, even devotion, amid the dangers of war and without any prospect of recompense.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, one of the leading actors in his household theatre troupe remained loyal after Ruan's death and the dispersal of the troupe, refusing to perform his plays for spectators who were hostile to Ruan.<sup>2</sup>

This disparity between the views of his servants and those of his peers and later commentators—showing at least two faces of the man—presents an enigma, which is intensified if we look more carefully at contemporary or near-contemporary accounts of Ruan. His joint biography with his fellow official Ma Shiying 馬士英 (zi Yaocao 瑤草, 1591–1646/7) in the official *Ming*

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1. Qian Chengzhi, 'Ruan Dacheng benmo xiaoji', in *Suo zhi lu*, ed. Zhu Weiqi, Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2006, pp. 154–5.
  2. Jiao Xun, *Jushuo*, in Zhongguo xiqu yanjiuyuan, ed., *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhu jicheng*, Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, 1980, vol. 8, pp. 201–2.

*History* (*Ming shi* 明史) is unremittingly hostile.<sup>3</sup> It appears to have been strongly influenced by the views of adherents of the Eastern Grove (Donglin 東林) and Revival or Restoration Society (Fushe 復社) factions, old opponents of Ruan, who dominated the writing of unofficial history in the aftermath of the Ming collapse (I will say more about these factions later). The unofficial historian Zhang Dai 張岱 (*zi* Zongzi 宗子, 1597–?1680)—who had in fact been on friendly terms with Ruan in the 1630s, after Ruan’s dismissal from office for his alleged association with Wei Zhongxian—says very little about Ruan’s role in the factional conflicts of the 1620s, though he criticises Ruan strongly for his actions at the Hongguang court.<sup>4</sup> Even more remarkably, Xia Yunyi 夏允彝 (1596–1645) and his son Xia Wanchun 夏完淳 (1630–1647), Ming loyalist martyrs who continued faithfully to fight for their dynasty even when it was a lost cause, and who might be expected to have a very negative attitude to Ruan as a ‘turncoat’ official, contend that Ruan’s alleged association with Wei Zhongxian was a miscarriage of justice and that, for all his moral failings, he was pushed into factional feuding by the excessive hostility of the Eastern Grove and Revival Society factions, the self-styled ‘righteous tendency’, which I mentioned above.<sup>5</sup> We can see, therefore, that despite the later consensus on Ruan’s villainy, which persists to the present day, some of his contemporaries did, in fact, see a different side to him and took a less harsh view. How can we account for this discrepancy?

One problem for Ruan’s posthumous reputation appears to lie in the circumstances of his death. He died without a male heir who might have defended his memory, and he died during all the upheaval of the Manchu conquest, shortly after surrendering to the invaders as did many of his contemporaries and associates. The timing of his death made it convenient for those who survived beyond the conquest period to attribute the blame for everything that had gone wrong to Ruan, who had no one to speak for him, and so to deflect attention from their own hasty surrenders and other compromises with the conquerors. Ruan did indeed behave badly under the pressure of late Ming court politics, but it is clear that many others behaved equally badly yet managed to evoke more sympathy for their position.

The two most powerful forces which ensured that Ruan’s bad reputation would survive and even be consolidated long after his death are the *Ming History* biography referred to above (and discussed further below) and Ruan’s representation as the number two villain, after Ma Shiying, in

3. Zhang Tingyu, ed., *Ming shi*, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974, vol. 26, pp. 7937–45.

4. Zhang Dai, ‘Ma Shiying Ruan Dacheng liezhuan (fu Fang Guoan) 馬士英阮大鍼列傳 (附方國安)’ , *Shikuishu houji*, Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1959, pp. 275–83.

5. Xia Yunyi, *Xingcunlu* and Xia Wanchun, *Xu Xingcunlu*, in *Zhongguo lishi yanjiu she*, ed., *Yangzhou shi ri ji*, Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1982, pp. 1–56, 57–74. Xia Yunyi’s fair-mindedness is all the more notable in that he was a prominent member of the Jishe 幾社, a faction quite closely associated with the Revival Society.

Kong Shangren's 孔尚任 (1648–1718) historical drama *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan* 桃花扇, 1699), which dramatises the fall of the Ming.<sup>6</sup> This much-admired play, which was based on careful historical research by Kong, has certainly helped to fix a particular popular view of how the Ming–Qing transition unfolded.<sup>7</sup> Other plays, based on the events of the Ming–Qing transition and composed closer in time to the events they describe, may also have contributed to this interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Ruan's notoriety, however, admiration for his dramatic writing has never faded, though only four of his plays survive, and only a part of one of them, his final and best-known play, *The Swallow Messenger* (*Yanzi jian* 燕子箋), remains in the repertoire today.<sup>9</sup> At least a brief mention of his work always forms part of any serious study of the history of Chinese drama, even if it is often accompanied with condemnation of his moral character.<sup>10</sup> His poetry, on the other hand, has been largely neglected since his own time, when it was admired by his contemporaries, and (apart from the prefaces to his plays) his surviving work in prose, consisting of a collection of essays in poetry criticism and a travel journal, is almost entirely unknown. None of his work was included in the great Qing imperial library collection, the Four Treasuries (*Siku quanshu* 四庫全書). He is arguably the most neglected and underestimated great writer of the late Ming.

As society changes in present-day China, and literary criticism becomes much less politicised, there are signs that attitudes there towards Ruan Dacheng and his work are changing; the blanket condemnation of Ruan as a corrupt and decadent 'feudal' oppressor and despicable national traitor is being reconsidered, and a more impartial approach to his work is being taken. A modern edition of his poetry has been produced by Hu Jinwang 胡金望 and Wang Changlin 汪長林, scholars from Ruan's native city of Anqing 安慶; Hu Jinwang has also written the only published monograph on Ruan in modern times, as well as a number of important journal articles on his

6. Kong Shangren, *Taohua shan*, ed. Wang Jisi, Su Huanzhong, and Yang Deping, Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1988.

7. Lynn Struve actually relates Kong's composition of the play in the 1690s to the concurrent activity in writing both official and unofficial Ming history: Lynn A. Struve, 'History and *The Peach Blossom Fan*', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, vol. 2, no. 1, January 1980, pp. 65–6.

8. See Alison Hardie, 'Political Drama in the Ming–Qing Transition: A Study of Four Plays', *Ming Qing Yanjiu*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–34.

9. Ruan's four surviving plays are published in Ruan Dacheng, *Ruan Dacheng xiqu sizhong*, ed. Xu Lingyun and Hu Jinwang, Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1993 (hereafter RDCX). Only *The Swallow Messenger* has a separate edition: Ruan Dacheng, *Yanzi jian*, ed. Liu Yihe, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986.

10. For example, William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama*, London: Paul Elek, 1976, pp. 99, 102; Guo Yingde, *Ming Qing chuanqi shi*, Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2012, pp. 341–7.

poetry.<sup>11</sup> Apart from a short entry in the reference work *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Dynasty*, and an annotated translation by Robert Crawford of the *Ming History* biography, published in a Taiwan scholarly journal in 1965,<sup>12</sup> there are no works in English (nor in any other European language, so far as I am aware) specifically on Ruan Dacheng's life or his work as a whole, though, as noted above, his writing for the stage is considered in the context of studies of late Ming drama. His role as a clown/villain in Kong Shangren's 1699 historical drama *The Peach Blossom Fan* is quite widely discussed in anglo-phone and sinophone scholarship,<sup>13</sup> but despite the historical setting of the play, and Kong's extensive research into the events and personalities of the Ming–Qing transition, the role of Ruan has very little foundation in reality.

The time is ripe, therefore, for a reassessment of Ruan Dacheng, both as regards his situation and actions in the factional conflicts of the late Ming, and as regards his status in late Ming literature, in poetry as well as in drama. He was a man of many faces, not only a politician but also a significant poet and playwright. The present book has two main strands: one is to examine the facts of Ruan's life and re-evaluate his political choices and significance; the other is to consider his literary work as a whole—not just the dramas, but his poetry, literary criticism, and travel writing also—in the light of the intellectual currents of the late Ming. I focus in particular on Ruan's expression of ideas about personal identity and authenticity, which were of great interest to thinkers and writers of his time.

It is clear that Ruan Dacheng, in both his dramatic and his poetic writing, was responding to such philosophical concerns, ideas originating from the great neo-Confucian innovator Wang Shouren 王守仁 (*hao* Yangming 陽明, 1472–1529), especially his ideas about identity, individuality, and the authentic self.<sup>14</sup> Ruan's dramatic work has been briefly studied in the context of seventeenth-century ideas about authenticity and the authentic self by Richard Strassberg in a paper published as long ago as 1977.<sup>15</sup> Strassberg, however, takes the view that Ruan, unlike his great predecessor Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (*zi* Yireng 義仍, *hao* Yuming 玉茗, Qingyuan daoren 清遠道人, 1550–1616),

11. Hu Jinwang, *Rensheng xiju yu xiju rensheng—Ruan Dacheng yanjiu*, Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004.

12. Earl Swisher, 'Juan Ta-ch'eng', in Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period 1644–1912*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1943 (hereafter ECCP), pp. 398–9; Robert Crawford, 'The Biography of Juan Ta-ch'eng', *Chinese Culture*, vol. 6, no. 2, March 1965, pp. 28–105.

13. For example, Tina Lu, *Persons, Roles, and Minds: Identity in Peony Pavilion and Peach Blossom Fan*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.

14. See Tu Wei-ming, *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-ming's Youth (1472–1509)*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976; A. S. Cua, 'Wang Yangming', in Antonio S. Cua, ed., *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 760–75.

15. Richard E. Strassberg, 'The Authentic Self in 17th Century Chinese Drama', *Tamkang Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, October 1977, pp. 61–100, esp. pp. 78–81.

'did not advance a philosophical argument for authenticity', but represented concerns such as 'spontaneous love', 'ambitions for success', 'innocence derailed by the mechanics of life', and 'society's tendency to deceive and be deceived'.<sup>16</sup> He does, on the other hand, refer to Ruan's 'understanding of the dual tendencies in human nature which were unleashed by the pursuit of authenticity' and suggests that 'The confused world which Ruan creates reflects his anxiety about a reality which may no longer be comprehensible to those in it, where mere good will, good intentions or authentic commitment is insufficient to prevail over complexity and increasing disarray'.<sup>17</sup> This insight is entirely correct, but I believe also that Ruan is in fact much concerned, in his poetry as well as his drama, with authenticity as a philosophical concept. I would not suggest, however, that Ruan's primary interest is in participating in philosophical debates about authenticity, so much as in responding or contributing to the ways in which those debates were reflected in literature and literary criticism, especially within the Gong'an 公安 school of writers, about which I will say more below.

The concept of authenticity and authentic identity was not just a philosophical or literary notion but also a concept which had arisen from contemporary social developments. The unstable and contingent nature of identity in early modern societies, where self-fashioning becomes increasingly possible, in place of a forced acceptance of the role and status into which one has been born, is clearly reflected in the culture of the late Ming: Lynn Struve, in her study of 'conquest-generation' memoirs, refers to 'increasingly plural, convertible social roles' as characteristic of the transition to modern consciousness.<sup>18</sup>

Modern scholarly writing on issues of authenticity and identity in the late imperial period has often focused on the expression of these concepts in literary works. Thus we have the work of Tina Lu on identity in *The Peach Blossom Fan* and in *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭) and of Stephen Roddy on the fictional representation of literati identity particularly in *The Scholars* (*Rulin waishi* 儒林外史).<sup>19</sup> There has as yet been no in-depth study

16. Strassberg, 'The Authentic Self', pp. 79, 80, 81.

17. Strassberg, 'The Authentic Self', p. 81.

18. Lynn A. Struve, 'Chimerical Early Modernity: The Case of "Conquest-Generation" Memoirs', in Lynn A. Struve, ed., *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004, p. 338 (she argues, however, that the memoirs she studies do not demonstrate an 'early modern' sensibility).

19. Lu, *Persons, Roles, and Minds*; Stephen J. Roddy, *Literati Identity and Its Fictional Representations in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998. See also Robert E. Hegel and Richard C. Hessney, eds., *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985; Martin W. Huang, *Literati and Self Re/Presentation: Autobiographical Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century Chinese Novel*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995; Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001.

of authenticity in Ruan's work, although Richard Strassberg provided a brief discussion of this in his 1977 paper on 'The Authentic Self'.<sup>20</sup> These studies have not placed any emphasis on the relevance of such issues to the life experience of the authors of the literary works under consideration. Hu Jinwang's study of the relationship between Ruan's life and work, on the other hand, does not concern itself with matters of identity or authenticity.<sup>21</sup> The present study is a first attempt to combine an examination of identity and authenticity in Ruan's work with consideration of how this related to and was influenced by his own personal sense of grievance at how he was (as he saw it) misjudged by others, and his sense that the authentic self perceived by himself and his true friends was entirely different from the personality wrongly perceived by others. In this sense it is an attempt to integrate the different faces of Ruan into a coherent whole.

In my opinion Ruan, far from being an exceptional and transgressive individual, is in many ways—apart from his outstanding literary talent—a very typical late Ming literatus, and therefore the views on identity and authenticity which he presents can shed further light on the worldview of literati at this significant juncture in Chinese history. The late Ming was a time of great social change and instability; this instability both fed into and was fed by new currents of thought in philosophy, literature, and the arts. Ruan Dacheng and members of his family were closely connected with some of these new ideas, and Ruan shared many, if not most, of the elite interests of the time. Here I will endeavour to place Ruan, in all his different aspects, in the context of his time, and to demonstrate the range of activities and interests which marked him as a typical member of the literati elite.

Ruan's fascination with dramatic writing and stage performance—he directed his own theatre troupe as well as writing for it, and even performed himself—was shared by many of his contemporaries, such as Zhang Dai and Qi Biao (祁彪佳, *zi* Youwen 幼文, *hao* Shipai 世培, 1603–1645). Drama, as a performance art and one which was seen as a vernacular rather than elite art form, was generally regarded by Ming literati as belonging to a quite different category from poetry, but during the late Ming, particularly under the influence of the Gong'an school, it came to be seen as worthy of serious attention as literature; many plays were written primarily to be read rather than performed, though this was certainly not the case with Ruan's plays, Ruan himself being deeply interested in performance. As we will see in relation to Ruan's sense of identity, his fascination with performance carried over into his non-theatrical life, in which he sometimes seems to be 'performing' his own identity.

20. Strassberg, 'The Authentic Self', esp. pp. 78–82.

21. Hu Jinwang, *Rensheng xiju yu xiju rensheng*.



Prior to the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), drama had been an entirely vernacular art form, which would be performed either at temple festivals, particularly in the countryside, or for entertainment in the cities. During the Yuan dynasty, when many Chinese literati were either unable or unwilling to take office under the Mongol government, they turned their attention to other activities, one of which was drama composition. The dramas which survive from the Yuan dynasty are known as *zaju* 雜劇 ('miscellaneous plays') and they are in the northern style, using a range of northern tunes and fairly simple and easily comprehensible language, in a generalised northern dialect; however, the literati input means they are more polished than a purely popular performance would have been.<sup>22</sup>

The *zaju* or northern drama tradition continued into the Ming dynasty, with some adaptation, and had some distinguished exponents even among southern writers, such as the eccentric Shaoxing literatus Xu Wei 徐渭 (*zi* Wenchang 文長, 1521–1593), who was also a great painter. But at the same time the southern drama tradition came to literary prominence. Later known as *kunqu* 昆曲 (Kunshan opera), it is referred to in the Ming as *chuanqi* 傳奇 (transmission of the strange/unusual). This was the style in which Ruan Dacheng wrote. It used a less percussive and more melodic musical style than northern drama, and was performed in a form of the Wu dialect spoken in the Yangtze Delta region (known as Jiangnan 江南, the region 'South of the River'). The plots tend to be more romantic than those of northern drama; they are often described as 'scholar and beauty' (*caizi jiarén* 才子佳人) stories, and they are generally—though by no means always—based on existing stories, whether folk tales, historical narratives, or literary creations. The stories are often lengthy and complex, and it is not unusual to find dramas stretching to forty scenes. Even a scene which looks quite short on the printed page might stretch to considerable length through the singing of a long-drawn-out aria. It would be impossible to perform a whole drama of such a length in one evening, so the whole drama might be performed over two or three consecutive days, or else just a few scenes, highlights of one or more plays, would be selected for performance on a single evening.

The outstanding exponent of *chuanqi* in the Ming was Tang Xianzu, best known for his great drama *The Peony Pavilion* and coincidentally a near contemporary of William Shakespeare (1564–1616). Tang Xianzu came from Jiangxi province, not part of the prosperous south-eastern cultural heartland, and we will see that Ruan Dacheng was somewhat critical of Tang's handling of the language of *chuanqi*. Ruan, however, was viewed by contemporaries as being a direct inheritor of Tang's style and the tradition of drama

22. See Chung-wen Shih, *Injustice to Tou O (Tou O Yüan): A Study and Translation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972; Liu Jung-en, tr. and intr., *Six Yüan Plays*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972.

inaugurated by him, which was known as the Linchuan 臨川 school, from the name of Tang's birthplace.

An interesting and little researched aspect of drama which was a creation of the late Ming, continuing into the early Qing, is the existence, referred to above, of a distinct genre of drama in which current events, or at least events of the very recent past, were directly represented on stage (rather than through the mediation of allegory, a long-standing Chinese literary tradition).<sup>23</sup>

This new genre of plays is worth surveying for what it tells us about the theatrical environment of the late Ming in which Ruan was writing. The earliest extant example of the genre, and one of the best known, is the sixteenth-century play *The Cry of the Phoenix* (*Ming feng ji* 鳴鳳記), traditionally attributed to the official and literary critic Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590) and probably written by a member of his literary circle. The play dramatised the conflict between corrupt minister Yan Song 嚴嵩 (1481–1568) and upright official Yang Jisheng 楊繼盛 (1516–1555), an associate of Wang Shizhen's father Wang Yu 王忬 (1507–1560).<sup>24</sup>

In the late seventeenth century, half a century after the Qing conquest, the genre reached its apogee in the form of Kong Shangren's great historical play *The Peach Blossom Fan*, completed in 1699, which dramatises the fall of the Ming through the love story of the real historical persons Hou Fangyu 侯方域 (zi Chaozong 朝宗, 1618–1655) and Li Xiangjun 李香君 (dates unknown), played out against the background of factional conflict and dynastic collapse. Ruan Dacheng himself, as we have noted, achieved a dramatic afterlife as one of the chief villains in *The Peach Blossom Fan*.<sup>25</sup>

In between these two well-known plays, however, we also have a substantial number of much less well-known dramas which present recent events on stage; Qi Biaoja, in *Distant Mountains Hall's Assessment of Lyrics* (*Yuanshantang qupin* 遠山堂曲品), lists about forty such plays. Following on from *The Cry of the Phoenix*, the evil deeds of Yan Song and his son Yan Shifan 嚴世藩 (?–1565) were a popular topic. Another villain whom late Ming and early Qing audiences loved to hate was the chief eunuch of the Tianqi 天啓 reign (1621–1627), Wei Zhongxian. At least eleven plays in which he plays a central role are known, of which three survive: Fan Shiyan's 范世彥 *Eunuch Wei Grinds Down the Loyal* (*Wei jian mo zhong ji* 魏監磨忠記, also known simply as *Mo zhong ji* 磨忠記), the Clear-Whistling Scholar's (Qingxiaosheng 清嘯生) *A Happy Encounter with Spring* (*Xi feng chun* 喜逢春), and Li Yu's 李玉 (zi

23. On this genre of drama, see Hardie, 'Political Drama in the Ming-Qing Transition'.

24. For a recent view of the political resonance of the play, see Kenneth J. Hammond, *Pepper Mountain: The Life, Death and Posthumous Career of Yang Jisheng*, London: Kegan Paul, 2007, pp. 116–20.

25. Kong Shangren, *Taohua shan*, esp. Scenes 3, 4, 12, 15, 16, 21, 24, 25, 29, 32, 36.



Xuanyu 玄玉, 1591?–1671?) *A Roster of the Pure and Loyal* (*Qing zhong pu* 清忠譜).<sup>26</sup> The first two plays date from the Chongzhen 崇禎 period (1628–1644), in the immediate aftermath of the events they recount, contemporaneous with the plays of Ruan Dacheng; the last seems to date from the Shunzhi 順治 period (1644–1661), so was written in the wake of the Ming collapse.<sup>27</sup> Significantly, none of these near-contemporary plays names Ruan Dacheng as an associate of the notorious chief eunuch, although they do mention other contemporaries.

In addition to overtly political plays such as these, there are also plays based on more or less contemporary events with no political elements, such as Shen Zijin's 沈自晉 (1583–1665) *The Pavilion Overlooking the Lake* (*Wang hu ting* 望湖亭), a story of love and examination success, with supernatural elements, which is said to have occurred in the author's home town in the Wanli 萬曆 reign (1573–1619), or plays with a fictional plot but a real historical background and involving some historical figures, such as Zhu Kuixin's 朱葵心 *The Return of Spring* (*Hui chun ji* 回春記), written in autumn 1644; this appears to be a fictional story of late Ming factionalism, but involves the rebel leader Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606–1645) and the Ming official Shi Kefa 史可法 (*hao* Daolin 道鄰, 1601–1645), who were both still living at the time of writing.<sup>28</sup>

Ruan's plays should be understood in the context of this genre of political drama, which must have predisposed audiences to see political significance even in plays which were not about overtly political or current topics. As we will see, Ruan's dramas carry allusions to contemporary issues such as the defence of the northern frontier or popular unrest in the interior of China, as well as more general satire on the vicissitudes of official life.

In the conventional schema of Chinese literary development, the Tang dynasty is associated with *shi* 詩 poetry, the Song with *ci* 詞 lyrics, the Yuan with drama, and the Ming and Qing with fictional narrative. This is of course grossly oversimplified, and in many ways positively misleading. There is a particular tendency to believe that there is no *shi* poetry worth talking about after the Tang, or the Song at the latest, but in fact there were several great *shi* poets in the Ming; some would include Ruan in their number. At the same time, because of huge growth in the publishing industry, an enormous amount of ephemeral verse came into the public domain, making it a challenge to sift out work of lasting value. Another problem with Ming poetry, as compared for example with Tang, is that, while Tang poets were writing on a relatively clean slate (with a mere one and a half millennia or so of literacy restricted to a small elite to look back on), Ming poets were faced with the

26. Li Xiusheng, ed., *Guben xiqu jumu tiyao*, Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1997, p. 370.

27. See Li Xiusheng, ed., *Guben xiqu jumu tiyao*, pp. 341, 366–7, 396–7.

28. For these and other such plays, see Li Xiusheng, ed., *Guben xiqu jumu tiyao*.

whole corpus of Chinese poetic literature up to their own time, written by a greatly expanded cohort of literate men and women, stretching back to the Tang and beyond; unless they were truly creative and clear in their aims, they could sink in a morass of cliché and conventional allusion.<sup>29</sup>

Ming writers themselves were well aware of this danger, and there was lively debate in the sixteenth century about how poetry, and indeed prose, should be written. One school of thought was that the model for prose should be that of the Qin and Han dynasties, and the model for poetry that of the Tang. Adherents of this school were the proponents of archaism (*fugu* 復古), represented by the Earlier and Later Seven Masters (*qianhou qizi* 前後七子), of whom Wang Shizhen was one. It should be noted that they were not rigid and indiscriminate archaisers, but men who believed that the language of poetry needed to be purified from over-elaborate accretions by looking back to earlier and simpler times. In opposition to them, there developed what can be thought of as a more 'modernist' tendency represented by the so-called Gongan school, named for the native place of its leading lights, the Yuan 袁 brothers, Zongdao 宗道 (1560–1600), Hongdao 宏道 (*zi* Zhonglang 中郎, 1568–1610), and Zhongdao 中道 (1570–1624). Directly influenced by the ideas of Wang Yangming on 'innate knowledge' (*liangzhi* 良知), especially as interpreted by Yuan Hongdao's friend, the radical thinker Li Zhi 李贄 (*zi* Zhuowu 卓吾, 1527–1602), the Gongan writers pointed out that times had demonstrably changed since the Han or Tang dynasties and urged that writers should reflect contemporary reality and make use of more vernacular language to express their own current experience and their 'native sensibility' (*xingling* 性靈), regardless of classical precedent. Yuan Hongdao himself wrote that 'As the ways of society undergo change, literature must follow suit. So it is natural that the present need not imitate the past 世道既變，文亦因之，今之不必掌古者也，亦勢也', while another important Gongan writer, Huang Hui 黃輝 (1554–1612) asked, 'Isn't it true that literature follows the vicissitudes of the times?'<sup>30</sup> They particularly admired the achievements of Song dynasty writers, especially Su Shi 蘇軾 (*hao* Dongpo 東坡, 1036–1101), in developing a new, non-Tang style to reflect the new realities of Song times. They also championed the vernacular forms of fiction, drama, and folk song as serious

29. On this problem, see William H. Nienhauser Jr., ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, vol. 1, p. 71.

30. Jonathan Chaves, 'The Expression of Self in the Kung-an School: Non-Romantic Individualism', in Hegel and Hessney, eds., *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature*, p. 136, quoting Yuan Hongdao, *Yuan Zhonglang quanji*, Hong Kong: Kwong Chi Book Co., 1935, 'Chidu', pp. 36–7, and Huang Hui, *Huang Taishi Yichun tang yigao* [1604], Taipei: Weiwen tushu chubanshe, 1976, pp. 163–7. I have been unable to trace the Chinese for the Huang Hui quotation.

## ‘Out of the Profundity of His Heart’

### Life into Literature

Forming a bridge between the establishment of an accurate biography of Ruan and a discussion of key themes in his literary work based on a close reading of his plays and poems, this chapter outlines how Ruan’s creativity and sense of identity—and mistaken identity—grew out of the circumstances of his family origin and life experiences. As a basis for detailed discussion in the following chapters, I provide a summary of Ruan’s literary work: his early volume of poetry, *Harmonising with the Flute* (*Hexiaoji*), previously unstudied by modern scholars,<sup>1</sup> the later volumes of *Poems from the Hall of Chanting What Is in My Heart* (*Yonghuaitang shi*), his *Poetry Talks from Stone Nest* (*Shichao shihua*; previously unstudied), his plays, and his travel journal, *A Trip to the Three Hills* (*Sanshan youji*; previously unstudied). It is quite surprising, given Ruan’s importance in the history of Chinese drama, that his other literary work, even his poetry, has been so comprehensively neglected. If his political notoriety led to neglect of his writing, why did this not apply to his dramatic composition as well? If his dramatic work was deemed to be of value despite his reputation, why was this excuse not extended to his other writing? A partial explanation may lie in the general view of drama as essentially a more frivolous art form than other types of literature: Ruan was reputed to have led the Hongguang Emperor astray by indulging his taste for the theatre, and therefore the plays could be regarded as ‘evidence’ of Ruan’s evildoing, while the quality of Ruan’s work in the serious genre of *shi* poetry does not fit with the popular narrative about his moral failings.

Examination of Ruan Dacheng’s life undertaken in the preceding chapters has thrown some light on the origins of his sense of identity and of his concern with the themes of the authentic self, the instability of identity, the conflict between engagement and reclusion, and the fascination with the exotic which I have indicated as characteristic of his literary work.

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1. With the exception of a brief notice by Xie Guozhen 謝國禎 (1901–1982) in his *Jiang Zhe fangshu ji* 江浙訪書記, reprinted in YHTS, pp. 542–3. Hu Jinwang also included a list of the poems’ titles in YHTS, pp. 539–42, but at that time had not seen the book itself (personal communication).

First of all, we can see that for Ruan—as for many literati—his family and his home region were of great importance in establishing his sense of self. His family was a prominent one locally, and indeed to some extent nationally, his great-uncle Ruan Zihua in particular having distinguished himself both as a poet and as an official. Ruan was proud of the family's supposed descent from the great poet Ruan Ji. He evidently felt close ties to his parents, uncles, brothers, and cousins. He also appears to have maintained cordial relations (at least before his return to office in the Southern Ming) with gentry neighbours such as the Fangs of Tongcheng. His love of the landscape around Anqing is clear from his poetry, and we know also that he was involved in measures to try to suppress banditry in the area in the early 1630s, as would be expected of a member of the local gentry.

Given his family background, with several Presented Scholars and Elevated Persons in recent generations, and Ruan's own early success in the provincial examinations and subsequent success in the metropolitan examinations, it is not surprising that he felt entitled to a good career in government. As we have seen, his career was initially quite successful, and he must have expected that it would continue to be so. Even when the Eastern Grove tried to block his promotion in 1624, he was able (presumably with some help from the Palace, that is from Wei Zhongxian) to have his appointment confirmed, although whatever support he had was insufficient to avoid his subsequent resignation. Nevertheless, after the fall of Wei Zhongxian in 1627, on the accession of the Chongzhen Emperor, Ruan was able to return to office and in fact received a significant promotion (from rank 7a to rank 5a). It was not until about two years later that he was dismissed, as a result of the Chongzhen Emperor's obsessive search for more and more alleged members of the 'Wei faction'. This could indeed be regarded as a miscarriage of justice, as Xia Yunyi and Xia Wanchun suggested. It is not surprising, then, that Ruan felt misunderstood and mistreated; he had good reason to be sensitive to the discrepancy between perceived and authentic identity.

Despite his distinction in literature, his attempts at developing his social networks, and his emphasis on his expertise in statecraft, particularly his claimed knowledge of border affairs, Ruan was never able to return to office under the Chongzhen Emperor. He received a further blow to his prestige in 1638, with the Revival Society's attack conveyed in the 'Proclamation of Nanjing'. This harsh personal attack, coming from men who were mostly considerably younger than Ruan, now in his fifties, was insulting enough, but, if it is the case that Ruan, conveniently present in Nanjing, was being used as a stalking horse to attack others (primarily Yang Sichang) who were much closer to the centre of government and less accessible to the members of the Revival Society, that was, if possible, even more insulting: Ruan was not even worth attacking for his own sake, but merely as a sprat to catch

a mackerel. Fortunately for him, there were still a number of friends and acquaintances (such as Zhang Dai) who kept in contact with him, but this must have drawn his attention even more to the distinction between those who, in his view, recognised his true nature and those who wilfully misrepresented him and wished to cast him out from society. Small wonder that authenticity, identity, and the marginal play such an important part in his literary work.

I now turn to an overview of his work, and the opinions of his contemporaries on it, as a basis for the analysis to be undertaken in the following chapters.

Ruan Dacheng's position as a poet in the late Ming literary environment has generally been overlooked in favour of his work as a dramatist. However, he was a prolific poet, and some of his contemporaries had a very high opinion of his work. Yuan Zhongdao regarded him as a worthy follower of his brother Yuan Hongdao, the leader of the Gong'an school in literature, as he said in his preface to Ruan's poems. This laudatory preface—most likely written around 1617, when Yuan and Ruan saw each other socially in Beijing—reads as follows:

Of those who have made contributions in the field of poetry in the present dynasty, there is no one to equal Lixia [Li Panlong]. His intention was to make the most of a lofty and splendid temperament to do his best to fill the gap left after the Dali reign-period [AD 766: the 'High Tang']. In his time, the habits of Song, Yuan, and recent times were washed clean by him. After his time, those who imitated him became steeped in his style, but exceeded him in their superficial sounds and vacuous voices. Everything they had in their hearts and wanted to utter, they became too repressed to utter, and so the Way of poetry fell sick.

My late brother Zhonglang [Yuan Hongdao] put things straight; his intent was to put the emphasis on expressing one's innate sensibility, and only thus could he fully express what he had in mind to utter, bring to fulfilment his poetic feeling, and explore to the full its variations, so that fading flowers were revived, and people were given a whole new outlook. After his time, those who imitated him went a little too far into colloquial and pedestrian diction. There was no area which they found unacceptable and no emotion which they did not describe; they said virtually anything that came to their lips and stopped being selective, so that the Way of poetry was about to fall sick again.

Looked at from this point of view, those who imitate do harm to their model, while those who make changes actually do him credit. Because Zhonglang could no longer bear to see the world doing harm to Lixia, he did his best to make changes, and so was a meritorious follower of Lixia. How can later gentlemen fail to do Zhonglang credit, in the same way as Zhonglang did Lixia credit? Yet whenever I express these ideas to other people, they find them utterly far-fetched. Only my friend Ruan Jizhi is profoundly at one with me.

Jizhi's talent is very great and his learning is very wide. When he sets pen to paper and writes poetry, he bases it on the wisdom of his heart and brings it out of the profundity of his heart; he is especially unwilling to toss it off lightly and casually. I am very much affected by this. Generally speaking, with men of wisdom and talent, when they start out, one's only fear is that they will not be able to express themselves fully, but in the end, one's only fear is that they have nothing more to express. Jizhi has been writing poetry since he was a boy, and has gone through several developmental phases. At this point, although he is not constrained by rules, neither is he at the mercy of his talent. His poetry is unusual without being disorderly, fresh without being paltry; he is doing his best to make a change to the storm-in-a-teacup style of recent times, and so he has made great contributions to poetry in the style of Zhonglang. In the past, those who were a credit to Lixia imitated his lofty and splendid temperament while making every effort to put a stop to the later fault of trivial superficiality. Nowadays, those who are a credit to Zhonglang imitate his expression of innate sensibility, and make every effort to put a stop to the later habit of using colloquial and pedestrian diction. Once someone has initiated a style, it is only to be expected that it will peter out; and when it peters out, then it is time for a revolution. This is how the heartbeat of poets through the ages keeps going by succession into infinity. I am well aware that I will never bring this Way to completion; with whom should it find a home if not with Jizhi?

國朝有功於風雅者，莫如歷下。其意以氣格高華為主，力塞大曆後之竇。於時宋元近代之習，為之一洗。及其後也，學之者浸成格套，以浮響虛聲相高；凡胸中所欲言者，皆鬱而不能言，而詩道病矣。先兄中郎矯之，其意以發抒性靈為主，始大暢其意所欲言，極其韻致，窮其變化，謝華啓秀，耳目為之一新。及其後也，學之者稍入俚易，境無不收，情無不寫，未免衝口而發，不復檢括，而詩道又將病矣。由此觀之，凡學之者，害之者也；變之者，功之者也。中郎已不忍世之害歷下也，而力變之，為歷下功臣。後之君子，其可不以中郎之功歷下者功中郎也哉？每以此語示人，輒至河漢。惟吾友阮集之，深相契合。

集之才甚高，學甚博，下筆為詩，本之以慧心，出之以深心，而尤不肯以輕心慢心掉之，予甚心折焉。大端慧人才子，其始也，惟恐其出之不盡也；其後也，惟恐其出之盡也。集之束髮為詩，亦屢變矣。至是雖不為法縛，而亦不為才使。奇而不囂，新而不纖，是力變近日濫觴之波，而大有功於學中郎之詩者也。夫昔之功歷下者，學其氣格高華，而力塞後來浮泛之病。今之功中郎者，學其發抒性靈，而力塞後來俚易之習。有作始，自宜有末流；有末流，自宜有鼎革。此千古詩人之脈，所以相禪于無窮者也。予自度不能竟此道也，微集之其誰與歸？<sup>2</sup>

This preface, which is known only from Yuan's collected works, and does not appear in the extant editions of Ruan's poetry, puts Ruan into a line of succession from the great sixteenth-century poet Li Panlong 李攀龍 (zi Yulin 于鱗, hao Cangming 滄溟, 1514–1570; he was from Lixia in Shandong),

2. Yuan Zhongdao, 'Ruan Jizhi shi xu', *Kexuezhai ji*, vol. 1, p. 462. Liu Zhizhong ('Ruan Dacheng jiashi kao', p. 199) is mistaken in relating this preface to the work of Ruan Zihua.



through Yuan Hongdao, to Ruan himself. Yuan Zhongdao is consciously presenting a paradoxical view, since the classicising Later Seven Masters, of whom Li Panlong was a leader, are often contrasted with the Gongan school, represented by Yuan Hongdao. But Yuan Zhongdao's view is that the 'revolution' carried out by the Gongan school was necessary to keep alive the spirit of true poetry upheld by Li Panlong, and that Ruan Dacheng has continued this spirit in his turn. As we will see, the influence of the Gongan school is quite marked in Ruan's poetic work. Interestingly, Ye Can, in his 1635 preface to Ruan's poems, when discussing the fact that critics can legitimately differ in their opinions on different poets and should not be narrow-minded in their views, takes his argument up to date by saying, 'Even among famous writers of recent times such as Wang [Shizhen], Li [Panlong], Zhong [Xing], and Yuan [Hongdao], there are bound to be both good and bad points: how can one lightly make comparisons between them? 及近日王、李、鍾、袁諸名士，即其中不能無利鈍，何容輕置擬議於其間耶？'<sup>3</sup> The implication is that Ruan's poetry cannot be fitted into a single 'school'—whether the Later Seven Masters represented by Wang and Li, or the Gongan school represented by Zhong and Yuan—but is of wider value.

Another contemporary who evidently had a high regard for Ruan's poetry was Qian Qianyi, who in the years after the fall of the Ming became the leading figure in the literary world of Jiangnan. As noted in the discussion of the sources for Ruan's life in Chapter 1, Qian included six of Ruan's poems in his anthology *A Collection of Poems from All the [Ming] Reigns*, published in 1649, together with a brief comment on Ruan's life. This does not offer any opinion on Ruan's poetry, and implies disdain for his moral character, but the mere fact of inclusion in the anthology shows that Qian took Ruan seriously as a poet.

Ruan's work is deliberately omitted from another major collection of Ming poetry compiled in the early Qing. This was Zhu Yizun's *Synthesis of Ming Poetry* (*Mingshi zong* 明詩綜), completed in 1705. Zhu Yizun, who also helped to edit the official *Ming History*, and was himself a serious poet, comments indirectly on Ruan Dacheng in connection with the work of Ruan Zihua, one of whose poems he includes in the *Synthesis*. Zhu says: 'When reciting poetry and discussing current affairs, gentlemen would prefer to reject the Hall of Chanting What Is in My Heart in favour of the *Spirit of the Mist Collection*. 君子誦詩論世寧舍詠懷堂而取霧靈集也。'<sup>4</sup> *Spirit of the Mist Collection* was the title of Ruan Zihua's collected poems. Zhu thus indicates that, while he does not have a very high opinion of Ruan Zihua (since he includes only one of his poems), he thinks even less of Ruan Dacheng. The reference to 'discussing current affairs' shows that this is not a purely literary

3. YHTS, p. 525.

4. Zhu Yizun, *Mingshi zong*, Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1962, 58.27a.

## ‘Expressing Himself in a Distinctive Way’

### Identity and Authenticity

Now that we understand something of Ruan Dacheng’s life and experiences, as well as his literary production, we can understand why authenticity and the contested nature of identity would be major themes in Ruan Dacheng’s thinking. His interest in concepts of identity and authenticity both connects him to the main currents of late Ming thought which influenced elite society at large, and gives us greater insight into his own life and work. Yangming thought seems to have influenced Ruan primarily as mediated by the Gongan literary movement, and it was in literature and literary criticism that he explored these ideas. It is likely that this literary influence would have led to an interest on Ruan’s part in issues of authentic identity, even if they had not had a very direct relevance to his own life, but once he felt ‘misunderstood’, not just over his association with Wei Zhongxian, but even earlier with the Eastern Grove’s opposition to his appointment as Chief Supervising Secretary, such issues naturally took on great immediacy. We can see this reflected throughout his work, most vividly in the plays, but also consistently in the poetry, as well as in his minor writings.

A general sense of the gulf between appearance and reality helps to explain the interest, amounting to an obsession, in drama and the theatre among members of late Ming elite society. Ruan, as we know, shared this obsession. Like Shakespeare, he sees that ‘all the world’s a stage’:

Success and fame are a puppet-show,  
A shadow-play for infants.

功名傀儡場，  
影弄嬰兒像。<sup>1</sup>

[Life] is all just  
Puppets in the limelight  
While the audience applauds.

1. From *Spring Lantern Riddles*, Scene 39: RDCX, p. 168.



總是  
傀儡燈前，  
排場喝彩。<sup>2</sup>

As we will see in the next chapter, Ruan spent time and effort ‘trying on’ various metaphorical and actual costumes as ways of asserting his identity, ranging from hermit to military official. Although he often expresses the idea—shared by many writers—that only his true friends understand his authentic identity while others cannot perceive it, he still finds it necessary to ‘perform’ his identity both in public and in his writing, especially in his plays. Yuming He sees the late Ming as a time when ‘social and theatrical performance merged in a new concept of the “performative self”’,<sup>3</sup> and it would be fair to see Ruan as a man who spent much of his life consciously performing a role, both on and off stage.

Ruan himself believed that understanding the poet’s life and times is vital to understanding his work, and he expresses this view in *Talks on Poetry from Stone Nest*; although he is ostensibly discussing earlier poets, this is clearly significant in relation to the issues of identity and authenticity in Ruan’s own work. In the *Talks on Poetry* he says:

When you read the poetry of the ancients, you must examine their daily lives, their home region, the people they associated with, and the places they stayed for shorter or longer periods . . . If you read poetry without thinking over the subject matter and the author three times, but merely seize hold of the sound, it can be said that you have only considered about half the meaning. I am afraid you will mistake a camel for a horse with a lump on its back, or the grain of pearwood for the pattern of damask.

讀古人詩，須核其平生里爵，與所遭會，所棲寓之地……觀詩不三復其題與其人，而獵其聲響，輒曰思過半焉。吾恐見駝為馬瘡背，以棟樑為綾綺者。<sup>4</sup>

This is rather a contrast to the view of Jiang Yingke 江盈科 (1556–1605), one of the major theorists of the Gongan school, who thought that the essential meaning of a poem could be grasped on first reading: ‘Poetry is based on the nature and the emotions (*xingqing*). If a poem is a real poem, then a single reading will suffice to bring the poet’s nature and emotions [i.e. personality] before one’s eyes.’<sup>5</sup> Ruan was always ready to trust his own judgement rather

2. From *Double Examination Success*, Scene 43: RDCX, p. 464.

3. Yuming He, *Home and the World: Editing the ‘Glorious Ming’ in Woodblock-Printed Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013, p. 13.

4. SCSH (IV).

5. Chaves, ‘The Expression of Self in the Kung-an School: Non-Romantic Individualism’, p. 136 (romanisation altered). Chaves attributes the quotation to Jiang Yingke’s *Xuetao xiaoshuo* 雪濤小說, but it appears in fact to come from Jiang’s *Xuetao shiping*: *shipin* 雪濤詩評·詩品. The Chinese is: 詩本性情，若系真詩，則一讀其詩，而其人性情，入眼便見。

than take literary opinions at second hand, even if they were the opinions of a leader in the literary school which he himself followed.

The poets whom Ruan gives as examples to support his argument are Wang Wei and (perhaps inevitably) Ruan Ji, but he is surely thinking also of his own work, and the importance of understanding his circumstances to the full comprehension of his poetry, and his dramatic work also.

What is the identity to which Ruan lays claim, and how does he present this in his literary work? First of all, it is clear that, to Ruan, his position as a member of a leading gentry family in the Anqing area, with a lengthy tradition of government service allegedly going back as far as Ruan Ji, was of great importance. He was proud to be a member of this family, and he felt that his lineage, as well as his intellectual attainments, qualified him for government office.

Ruan's sense of his descent from his great ancestor Ruan Ji, as an important part of his identity, is a matter not just of family lineage but of poetic succession also. The naming of his studio as the Hall of Chanting What Is in My Heart, and the subsequent naming of his poetry collection from the studio name, show the importance to Ruan Dacheng of his relationship to Ruan Ji as a writer. The name of Dove Ridge Thatched Hall, probably located on the Stone Nest estate, also appears, as we have seen, to be a reference to Ruan Ji's ode 'The Doves', and so to refer to Ruan Dacheng's sense of himself as a virtuous but wronged official. Within the poems themselves, there are frequent allusions to Ruan Ji, and we will see later that such allusions occur in the dramas also. It is worth remembering, too, that Ruan Dacheng was not the only one to make this identification: as we saw in Chapter 4, his one-time friend Li Yingsheng, in one of his last poems, used the name of Ruan Ji as a substitute for Ruan Dacheng.

In 'Miscellaneous Songs on Garden Living 園居雜詠', relating to the Assembly Garden in Nanjing, there is another indication of Ruan's self-identification with his ancestor Ruan Ji. In 'Drinking to Antiquity Studio' (*Zhuogu zhai* 酌古齋), the poet recalls the distant past, in implied contrast with the decadent present; the ancient worthies whom he cites are specifically the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, and, since Ruan Ji was one of the Seven Sages, this suggests that Ruan identifies with the political frustration of the earlier poet:

*Drinking to Antiquity Studio*

We pour wine and raise our glasses to remotest antiquity.  
Its light is buried and will never awake again.  
In sympathy with the Sages of the Bamboo Grove,  
Autumn grasses are sprouting around the overgrown pond.

酌古齋

斟酌向遼古，埋照無醒期。  
為憐竹林賢，秋草生蓬池。<sup>6</sup>

In the late Ming, gardens were an important medium through which members of the elite could represent their identity to their peers, and we can see Ruan doing this in the instance just mentioned. The six poems in 'Miscellaneous Songs on Garden Living' cover different aspects of garden culture.<sup>7</sup> In 'Ten Endowments Belvedere' (*Shilai ge* 十賚閣), the focus is on Daoist eremitism and withdrawal from the world to pursue spiritual cultivation:

*Ten Endowments Belvedere*

The accomplished man abandons external things;  
He accumulates spiritual gifts above the haze.  
The bells by the stream at times produce a noise,  
Clink-clank, as though the pines were sounding.

十賚閣

至人遺外事，靈貺集霞上。  
流鈴時有聲，泠泠若松響。<sup>8</sup>

A reference to 'plucking fragrant flowers' in 'Damask Snow Pavilion' (*Qixue ting* 綺雪亭) suggests the presence of women to accompany the wine in the 'mountain goblet', providing a contrast to the more austere imagery of 'Drinking to Antiquity Studio' or 'Ten Endowments Belvedere':

*Damask Snow Pavilion*

The flower petals comply with ancient instinct:  
As your gaze plays over them they turn spontaneously into damask.  
Do not be reluctant to tip up your mountain goblet;  
Here you can start to pluck the fragrant flowers.

綺雪亭

花葉循古情，目玩自成綺。  
莫惜倒山樽，拏芳從此始。<sup>9</sup>

In 'Fragrant Islet' (*Xiang yu* 香嶼), the focus is more practical:

*Fragrant Islet*

Alone I stand and stroll beyond the eaves:  
Where does that fragrance in the air come from?  
Colourful butterflies are fluttering around the high branches;  
Only now do I realise that the wooden slaves have blossomed.

6. YHTS, p. 163: 'Yuanju zayong', no. 5.

7. YHTS, pp. 163-4; complete translation in Hardie and Campbell, eds., *The Dumbarton Oaks Anthology of Chinese Garden Literature*, pp. 460-1.

8. YHTS, p. 163.

9. YHTS, p. 163.

香嶼

獨立步欄外，空香何處來。

高枝颺彩蝶，始悟木奴開。<sup>10</sup>

Although the blossoming orange trees are valued by the poet for their fragrance, the use of the phrase ‘wooden slaves’ reminds us of their economic value in producing fruit.<sup>11</sup>

The most striking of this sequence of poems is that on ‘Mirror Boat’ (*Jing fang* 鏡舫). Mirror Boat is presumably a building in the shape of a boat at the edge of a pond, from which one can look down directly into the water. Buildings of this type can often be seen in traditional Chinese gardens; there is one, for example, in the Artless Administrator’s Garden (Zhuzhengyuan 拙政園) in Suzhou, named Fragrant Isle (*Xiangzhou* 香洲).

*Mirror Boat*

The water is so clean that suddenly it appears to have no substance:

The pale pike seem to be swimming in the void.

If you bend down to look you can see the spring birds,

Twisting and turning among the waterweed.

鏡舫

水淨頓無體，素鮪如遊空。

頰視見春鳥，時翻藻荇中。<sup>12</sup>

This vivid, paradoxical (almost ‘metaphysical’) imagery, in which the fish are swimming in the void, or in air, while the birds (in the form of their reflections) are flying through the water, is a fine example of Ruan’s attention to personal observation, under the influence of the Gongan school.

The name of the site Rock Obeisance Level (*Shibai ping* 石拜坪) might suggest that Ruan, like the eccentric painter Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107), wishes to pay his respects by bowing to a venerable rock, but it turns out in the last line that it is the rock, apparently moved by his music, which bows to Ruan, like those which were moved by the Buddhist sermon of Master Daosheng (Zhu Daosheng 竺道生, 355–434); this draws the sequence of poems to a rather arrogant conclusion:

*Rock Obeisance Level*

I have plucked you out from a clump of thorns and hazel,

And set you up by the window where I write and play the zither.

When a distant breeze rustles your creepers,

You seem to bow your head in my direction.

10. YHTS, p. 163.

11. ‘Wooden slaves’ as a kenning for orange trees dates back to the Three Kingdoms period, and refers to their economic value; see Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China*, London: Reaktion Books, 1996, p. 41.

12. YHTS, p. 163. My dictionary tells me that *wei* 鮪 are a kind of sturgeon, but I doubt if sturgeon could be found in a pond in Nanjing; pike seem more plausible.

## 'Outside the Walls'

### The Exotic and the Marginal

A particular theme in Ruan's dramas, and one which also makes an appearance in his poetry, is that of the exotic, which can be related to Ruan's own sense of marginalisation and alienation from the Chinese polity. The late Ming was a time when China was coming in contact with an increasing range of exotic objects and people, in both beneficial and dangerous ways. Ming literati became fascinated by the exotic,<sup>1</sup> and Ruan Dacheng was no exception. This can be seen both in his poetry and, more obviously, in his dramas.

I will first look briefly at some of the *Poems from the Hall of Chanting What Is in My Heart* which pertain to the theme of the exotic. The role of the exotic in Ruan's poetry is much more circumscribed than in his dramas. This theme appears chiefly in those of his poems which are concerned with current affairs, and specifically in those concerned with affairs on the northern border. Apart from these, which I will address shortly, there is also a poem of 1636 addressed to the Jesuit missionary Francesco Sambiasi, who must certainly have appeared as an exotic figure in Ming Nanjing; he had arrived in China in 1613, went first to Beijing, later to the Jiangnan area, and in 1634 became employed at the Nanjing imperial observatory.<sup>2</sup> The poem is as follows:

*To Bi Jinliang (Jinliang is a Western cleric)*

You, holy man, have come aboard a raft from Wozhou;  
For the days and months of ten years you have shared in our central currents.  
Though your scriptures have passed through thunder and lightning, their  
words still endure;

- 
1. See Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, pp. 58–60, and He, *Home and the World*, ch. 4: 'The Book and the Barbarian: A History of the *Luochong lu*', pp. 202–44; this chapter is a revised version of her article 'The Book and the Barbarian in Ming China and Beyond: The *Luochong lu*, or "Record of Naked Creatures"', *Asia Major*, vol. 24, 2011, pp. 43–78. 'Naked creatures', as distinct from, e.g., hairy or scaly ones, are humans and human-like creatures such as barbarians.
  2. Goodrich and Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, pp. 1150–1; Dunne, *Generation of Giants*, pp. 122, 149, 240.

Your hands pluck the stars from their courses and you never cease investigating them.<sup>3</sup>

Leisurely soaring on the roc's wind, you observe the movements of the ocean;

Silently modulating your turtle respiration, you participate in heavenly journeyings.

I know that you have become aware, from unknowing, of the directives of the Dark Prime;<sup>4</sup>

You can be expected to wield the lecturing rod<sup>5</sup> beyond the realm of forms.

贈畢今梁（今梁西方教士）

若士乘桴自沃洲，十年日月共中流。

書經雷電字長在，手摘星辰較不休。

閒御鵬風觀海運，默調龜息與天游。

知君冥悟玄元旨，象外筌蹄亦可求。<sup>6</sup>

Despite its foreign addressee, the poem tends, if anything, to downplay the exotic note (this may provide some measure of how successful the Jesuits were in their acculturation project): Sambiasi is assimilated to indigenous Daoist hermits and immortals, practising 'turtle respiration' (*guixi* 龜息), a Daoist longevity practice, rather than Christian prayer and contemplation, and his place of origin, 'Wozhou 沃洲', which must be intended to represent Europe (Ouluoba 歐羅巴 or Ouzhou 歐洲), is also the name of a mountain in Zhejiang associated with Daoist reclusion. Curiously enough, in 1644, some time after Ruan's own return to office, Sambiasi was delegated by the Hongguang Emperor to request help for the Southern Ming from the Portuguese in Macau, although this does not seem to have had any substantive result.<sup>7</sup>

The 'frontier affairs' poems are more determinedly exoticising. As we know, Ruan Dacheng claimed expertise in frontier affairs and hoped to use this as a means to return to office. His poems on the subject therefore have to be understood to some degree as advertisements for his unique selling point.

It is worth noting that Li Panlong, one of the leading members of the Later Seven Masters of Ming poetry, whom both Yuan Zhongdao and Ruan himself regarded as an important forerunner of and influence on Ruan's work, wrote a number of poems which were concerned with frontier events. Frontier policy was an important and highly contested aspect of Ming government in Li Panlong's time—as it remained down to the end of the

3. Alluding to Sambiasi's employment as an astronomer.

4. This may mean the directives of Laozi, or the way of heaven.

5. In Buddhist/Daoist parlance, this may mean the ultimately dispensable means to the end of enlightenment.

6. YHTS, p. 316.

7. Goodrich and Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, p. 1151. Sambiasi appeared at the Hongguang court in late 1644 (Li Qing, *Nandu lu*, p. 304).

Ming—and conflicts between the powerful minister Yan Song and officials such as Wang Yu, the father of Li Panlong's friend and poetic associate Wang Shizhen, revolved around this question. Li wrote a set of eight poems 'Mourning Minister Wang 輓王中丞' after Wang Yu's execution as a result of this conflict; the poems refer to the events on the north-east border which had contributed to Wang Yu's downfall.<sup>8</sup> Earlier, Li had written a set of 'Four triumphal songs on Minister Wang's defeat of the barbarians at Liaoyang 王中丞破胡遼陽凱歌四章'.<sup>9</sup> A poem of farewell addressed by Li Panlong to Wang Shizhen and a set of four 'Border Ballads 塞上曲' also for Wang Shizhen refer to this issue too, as do others of his poems.<sup>10</sup> Aside from his own interest in the subject of the military situation on the northern frontier, Ruan Dacheng may have felt that Li Panlong's concern with it gave added resonance to the topic. We may also recall that, according to Ye Can, Ruan regarded as one of his major influences the Tang poet Gao Shi 高適 (c. 700–765), who had a largely military career and became known as a poet of the frontiers (*biansai shiren* 邊塞詩人).

Ruan had always been quite serious about frontier affairs: an early set of four poems 'In response to events in Liaodong 感遼事', from 1619, when he was just a recent graduate embarking on his official career, already shows his interest, as I indicated in the previous chapter.<sup>11</sup> The 'events' were the disastrous routs of four large columns of the Ming army on campaign against the Manchus under their great leader Nurhaci, in the battles of Mount Sarhu in April 1619; Ruan writes of 'white bones strewn over the stinking sand beneath the setting sun 落日腥沙白骨橫'. From about a decade later than Ruan's poems 'In response to events in Liaodong', we have his poem of the early Chongzhen period, 'Planting chrysanthemums in my garden, I hear of an alarm about barbarians surrounding the capital 園中種菊聞雲中虜警', to which I also referred in Chapter 6. In this case, Ruan expresses his inability, as someone who is out of office (a 'mountain farmer 山農'), to do anything about the situation, which is being mishandled by court officials.<sup>12</sup>

Ruan's later poems on frontier events, though few in number, take a more activist approach, appropriate to someone endeavouring to provide solutions to a problem. A set of poems from 1641 entitled 'Hearing of an

8. Li Panlong, *Cangming xiansheng ji*, ed. Bao Jingdi, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992, pp. 321–3.

9. Li Panlong, *Cangming xiansheng ji*, p. 314.

10. The poems addressed to Wang Shizhen are 'A Farewell Sent to Yuanmei [Wang Shizhen] 寄別元美' (Li Panlong, *Cangming xiansheng ji*, p. 252) and 'Four Border Ballads Sent to Yuanmei 塞上曲送元美' (pp. 305–6). Other examples of frontier poems are a set of four on 'Climbing Huangyu and Maling Mountains 登黃榆、馬陵諸山' (pp. 198–9) and two on 'Watching a Hunt 觀獵' (p. 327).

11. YHTS, pp. 286–7.

12. YHTS, p. 130.

alarm at the frontier pass 聞關門警', was written in response to one of the major military crises of these years, when Hong Chengchou, a senior official with great military ability, went to relieve the frontier fortress city of Jinzhou, which was being besieged by the Manchus, and found himself besieged in another city.<sup>13</sup> This became a resounding defeat for the Ming; Hong was at first believed to have died in battle, but in fact he surrendered to the Manchus and later fought on their side.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Hong, like Ruan, was a Presented Scholar of 1616 no doubt encouraged Ruan to take a particular interest in these events.

*Hearing of an alarm at the frontier pass 聞關門警*

In the eighth month the Liao River is already sealed with ice.  
Outside the walls of Jinzhou are rank upon rank of barbarians.  
There is no limit to the quislings among men:  
Who will seize Yanzhi Mountain and relieve Baideng?<sup>15</sup>

八月遼河已合冰，錦州城外虜層層。  
人中傀儡無邊岸，誰奪燕支解白登。

Red sweet potatoes and green hay are fodder for the camels.  
On a moonlit night at the pass, many barbarian pipes can be heard.  
Our lads on the frontier are so thin that the shape of their bones predicts  
they will be enfeoffed as marquises.<sup>16</sup>  
Another report comes that the supply vessels have been unable to cross the  
river.

紅薯青芻飼駱駝，關門月夜虜筋多。  
邊兒瘦盡封侯骨，還報漕船未過河。

Their iron breastplates are caked with frost and their barbarian horses stink.  
After hundreds of battles on the frontier, bones are scattered around.  
The barbarian striplings laugh as they quaff grape wine.  
Drunk on the highland plateau they loose their gyrfalcons.

鐵甲凝霜蕃馬腥，邊頭百戰骨丁零。  
胡雛笑飲葡萄酒，醉上高原放海青。<sup>17</sup>

13. These manoeuvres are described in some detail in Swope, *The Military Collapse of China's Ming Dynasty*, pp. 163–7.

14. ECCP, pp. 358–60.

15. Yanzhi Mountain (also written 焉支) is in present-day Gansu. It was captured from the Xiongnu by the Han-dynasty general Huo Qubing 霍去病 (140–117 BC). Baideng is in Shanxi; the first Han emperor Liu Bang 劉邦 was besieged there by the Xiongnu. Neither place is anywhere near Liaodong: Ruan uses the place names to equate the Manchus to the Xiongnu as enemies of the Han.

16. This bizarre expression is an allusion to the biography of Zhai Fangjin 翟方進 (?–7 BC) in *Hanshu*, *juan* 84. Zhai's unusual bone structure led to a prediction that he would rise to high status, and eventually he was duly enfeoffed as Marquis of Gaoling 高陵侯. Here the expression seems to mean rather that the soldiers have grown so thin that their bones are clearly visible, though there may also be an implication that their heroic service deserves recognition and reward.

17. YHTS, p. 465.



Another poem on frontier affairs is connected with the figure of General Wang Zhenji, a military officer who can be identified as the intermediary between Ruan and Hou Fangyu in Ruan's attempt to reduce the pressure from the Revival Society after the 'Proclamation of Nanjing' (see Chapter 3). The final couplet draws a contrast between the courageous activity of the frontier troops and the peaceful life enjoyed by the Chinese populace under their protection (a somewhat ironic contrast given what was soon to happen).

*On board a boat on a rainy night, listening to General Wang Zhenji talking about events in Liaodong*

Where the *bukruk* plants of Yiwulü Mountain spread their autumnal clouds,  
You have ridden in a light chariot in pursuit of the Virtuous Prince of the Left.<sup>18</sup>

Today we extend the awning and listen at leisure to the rain;  
As you discuss swordsmanship through the night, your voice flows like a stream.

Beside the stove, from your white horse, you uttered a prolonged call for wine;

After the hunt you personally cut fresh meat from the brown antelope.

To block the passes we rely on your forceful determination;  
Look at us using rice-fed bullocks to cultivate our spring fields.

舟中雨夜聽王將軍貞吉談遼事

豎閭苜蓿散秋煙，曾副輕車逐左賢。

此日推蓬閑聽雨，中宵說劍響如泉。

壚邊白馬長呼酒，獵罷黃羊自割鮮。

絕塞馮君橫意氣，看予飯犢種春田。<sup>19</sup>

Ruan's treatment of the exotic aspects of border affairs shows his characteristic weakness of overestimating his own capabilities. He demonstrates familiarity with all kinds of abstruse knowledge about frontier history, piling on exotic plants, place names, names of historical tribes, terms for barbarian chieftains, but there is more show than substance: for all his abstract, academic knowledge, he does not demonstrate any specialised understanding of the current situation. In the absence of any surviving memorials on frontier policy or other prose documents in which he might have set out his views in detail, we cannot judge or even guess at his actual policies, and it would certainly not be fair to make a judgement on their validity based on his poetic output, but the apparent lack of even factual knowledge does not inspire confidence. His poetic allusions are all to the campaigns of the Han against the Xiongnu or the Tang against the Khitans and Turks: although

18. Mount Yiwulü is in the western part of present-day Liaoning province, i.e. in Manchuria. The name of the *bukruk* plant (Chinese *musu*, the *Medicago* genus), like the plant itself, originates from central Asia. Virtuous Prince of the Left was the title of a Xiongnu chief.

19. YHTS, p. 322.

# Conclusion

The aims of this book have been firstly to uncover the many faces of the historical Ruan Dacheng, disentangling him from the rumours and assumptions which gathered around him during his life and—even more—in the aftermath of his death, and then to study his literary work in the light of his life experiences. It has been an attempt to reassess Ruan Dacheng, both as regards his role in the factional politics of the late Ming and as regards his contribution to seventeenth-century literature and his position in Ming literary history. I have tried to accomplish these aims by examining afresh as many reliable (or at least contemporary) sources as I could identify for Ruan's life and by reconstructing on that basis the events of his life, as the initial step in developing a real understanding of his actions and associations, the attitudes of his contemporaries to him, and the ways in which his life and experiences might have influenced his literary work.

In this way I hope I have clarified Ruan's political career and shown that in his lifetime he was not in fact widely regarded as a particularly close associate of the notorious chief eunuch Wei Zhongxian—as he was later thought to have been—and that the general view of Ruan as an exceptional and unmitigated villain which prevailed from the early Qing onwards was a highly tendentious one, born of the extreme feelings which arose among the adherents of the Eastern Grove and the Revival Society in the bloody purges of the Tianqi years. Until Ruan's harsh revenge on his political enemies during the brief reign of the Hongguang Emperor, the opposition to him among the Eastern Grove and Revival Society members was not shared by others who were less partisan, such as Zhang Dai or Wang Siren, who remained open-minded and continued to associate with him during his years out of office.

I have also shown through the events of his life and his wide range of interests—in theatre, poetry, literary criticism, publishing, travel, garden culture, and so on—that he was in many ways a typical literatus of his time. From the present study we can see that Ruan was intimately involved not

only in the production and criticism of literary work but also in many of these other key concerns of late Ming literati.

Ruan's interest in gardens is quite clearly an aspect of his concern with identity, as we can see from his choice of names for garden features, and the way that he uses poems on his gardens—as well, no doubt, as using the gardens themselves—for self-representation, whether as a recluse or as an official in waiting. In this use of gardens and garden culture for self-representation, Ruan is entirely typical of the late Ming elite, for whom gardens—already primarily understood as aesthetic rather than productive spaces—formed an important location for self-representation within the social activities and exchanges which took place in garden settings.

Ruan's travel diary, short as it is, with its associated poems, also demonstrates how the activity of leisure travel, the socialising which took place as part of this activity, and the recording of the activity to be read by others, could be used—like garden culture—as a means of self-representation. Ruan frames himself within the travel diary as a man of authentic emotion, in his reaction to the landscape—we have seen how he even identifies himself with the rocks defaced by the monks of Jinshan—and to its historical associations, in his relationships with his travelling companions and the friends met along the way, and perhaps most of all in his deep grief for his deceased friend Pan Yigui, with whom he had originally intended to make the journey. The diary is in fact a record of friendship as much as of travel itself, and in this way it can also be related to the expression of personal authenticity in the dramas, where that authenticity is apprehended only by the positive characters: Ruan's authentic self, as shown in his emotional reactions to his travel experiences, is recognised and validated by his friends' appreciation—expressed partly in the large number of prefaces to the diary—and perhaps even more by the lasting emotion of the friendship between Ruan and Pan Yigui, who, we are led to believe, truly understood and appreciated each other's worth.

In his use of the 'record of travel'—which could take the form of a continuous narrative as well as of a diary—as a means of self-expression, Ruan can once again be seen as an entirely typical member of the late Ming literati. His forerunners and mentors, the Yuan brothers, also made use of the genre in this way, as did many other writers, whether or not they were associated with the Gongan school.

Leisure travel, in Ruan's case as in that of many other late Ming literati, often involved visits to Buddhist sites. Ruan can be seen as fitting the pattern in which the late Ming gentry used various forms of patronage of Buddhist establishments to assert a collective identity. Thus Ruan's visits to Buddhist sites were not only a matter of 'reclusion', of participating in philosophical or religious discussion or practice, or of taking pleasure in historic sites and beautiful scenery, but also of asserting membership in a class which felt it

had a right to involvement in the administration of local and national affairs and wanted to 'be seen by society at large as acting in the highest interests of the community'.<sup>1</sup>

My argument, therefore, is twofold: on the one hand, Ruan Dacheng is a typical late Ming literatus, and therefore his literary work can give us further insights into the intellectual and cultural world of the late Ming, to supplement and add detail to what we already know of it; on the other hand, as such a typical figure, he should no longer be regarded as an exceptional and transgressive individual, while his outstanding contribution to literature—poetry as much as drama—should be acknowledged. Although he was in many ways the author of his own misfortunes, and he would probably have suffered much less than he did if he had not been so convinced of his own brilliance and had known how to keep his mouth shut, Ruan Dacheng was unfortunate both in being conspicuous in Nanjing just at the time when the Revival Society was looking for a target for its revenge on the 'Eunuch Party', and in the timing and circumstances of his death, which made it possible for survivors of the Ming factional conflicts to use him as a scapegoat for the dynasty's collapse. Calling him a scapegoat, held responsible for the faults of a wide range of people, should not, however, detract from his own responsibility for the acts of factional attack and revenge which he personally carried out under the Hongguang regime, even if he may have felt compelled to take such measures to forestall others' attacks on himself.

I have suggested that Ruan's own life experiences made him sensitive to an unusual degree to the questions of authentic identity and the conflict between appearance and reality which were subjects of discussion in the intellectual world of the late Ming, and even percolated into the zeitgeist as they were popularised by thinkers such as Lü Kun and Wang Gen, influencing popular culture so that even men and women of no great intellectual ability and with only a basic level of literacy and education were enabled to become aware of these concepts.

The ideas ultimately originating with Wang Yangming went beyond the realm of philosophical and moral discourse to have a decisive effect on the development of literature. They were particularly important in the literary theorising of the Gong'an school, influenced by Li Zhi in their appreciation of 'native sensibility' and authentic emotion. The Gong'an school was concerned not only with the exploration of these ideas in their literary output but also with the internalisation of authenticity as a key component of their literary method. The ideas and observation to be expressed must themselves be authentic and come from the actual experience and genuine emotions of the writer himself (or indeed herself). They should not simply be borrowed,

1. Brook, *Praying for Power*, p. 217.

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