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It was 1939, two years after the disastrous Battle of Shanghai and the infamous "Rape of Nanjing," which epitomized the Japanese conquest of the Yangzi-delta region. In a badly damaged economy and traumatized society, one long-established lineage in Changzhou, halfway between Nanjing and Shanghai, nevertheless managed to accomplish something of utmost importance to it at the time: publication of two works, respectively, by two of its patrilineal ancestors of the Ming dynasty (1363–1644). Earlier in the year members of the lineage had found the means to fund the lithographic reproduction of the Xueziyongyu (Common Sayings of Master Xue), a collection of wise thoughts by the famous Ming scholar, philosopher, and statesman Xue Yingqi (1500–1573), from an exemplar of the original 1569 edition that had been passed down in the family. (See figure .) Then, despite a shortage of paper (not to mention food and other consumer goods) in the occupied areas and the destruction of major publishing sites in the metropolises, Xue family members heroically followed that project with a lead-type, cord-bound first publication of a text entitled Xue Xiemeng xiansheng biji (Jottings of Mr. Xue Xiemeng), the personal journal of a less prominent
The reproduction of the Xuezi yongyu (Common Sayings of Master Xue) by Xue Yingqi, showing features that were easily added to the 1569 edition by the lithographic process.

Left, the first recto page of the calligraphed new preface by
Qian Zhenhuang, and right, the colophon, which announces the year of the reprinting. Photographs of the exemplar in the collection of The East Asian Library and The Gest Collection, Princeton University, no. 1319/4400.
The beginning of the original preface with two added items: a statement printed in the upper margin that the book on which this edition was based is the common property of Xue Yingqi’s lineal descendants and, at the bottom of the first column on the right, the seal of Xue Tao, the probable custodian of that exemplar in the 1930s.
forebear, Xue Yingqi’s great-great grandson Xue Cai (1595–1655). Under such daunting conditions, in the midst of a great national emergency, why did this Xue lineage expend precious resources on these undertakings? Clues present themselves mainly in the paratexts to the Xue xiemeng xiansheng biji—the preface and two postscripts—as well as in the organization of the text itself, which appears to have been extensively altered under those motivations.

When Xue Cai began, in the spring of 1642, to keep the journal that we now know as the Xue Xiemeng xiansheng biji, he was well into middle age and had much to reflect on in his heritage as well as in his own life. That reflection was characterized by ambivalence—between upstanding loyalty and pride-of-association on one hand and shame and disgust on the other. He was very proud of the achievements of his ancestors and their stalwart service to the Ming state at crucial points in its history. Not only had Xue Yingqi served with integrity under pressures from the much-maligned grand secretary Yan Song (1480–1565), he also had fostered among his students one Gu Xiancheng (1550–1612). The latter, aided by Gao Panlong (1563–1806), and Xue Yingqi’s younger grandson (Xue Cai’s grandfather), Xue Fujiao (1589 jinshi), had founded and guided the reformist Donglin movement through successive crises in the latter decades of the Wanli reign (1573–1620). Xue Yingqi’s elder grandson (Xue Cai’s granduncle), Xue Fuzheng (jinshi), had served with such distinction in suppressing a rebellion as regional inspector of Sichuan that he was accorded the rank of vice minister in the Court of the Imperial Stud. In view of this family history, Xue Cai’s father (who died when Xue Cai was in his mid-twenties) had received an honorary ministerial title.

Moreover, having handily passed the jinshi examination in — in thirty-third place among — as a candidate from Wujin district of Nan Zhili, Xue Cai had helped to perpetuate the outstanding record of Wujin in supplying “advanced scholars” and officials to the Ming government. He had earned a seat at a special table, so to speak, in the highly exclusive club of jinshi degree-holders and had become, thereby, strongly invested in the culture of the civil service examinations. Beside
him at that table were three maternal uncles, the youngest not far from him in age despite the generational difference: Liu Xizuo (jinshi), Liu Yongzuo (jinshi, d.), and Liu Mianzuo (jinshi)—who were to become known as the “Three Loyal Lius” (Liushi sanzhong). Liu Mianzuo had already died righteously while fighting bandits as a magistrate in Jiangxi; the older two brothers, both active in Fushe (Restoration Society) circles, were currently serving in provincial positions in Huguang and Fujian where piracy and rebellion were rampant. Eventually they too would become martyrs for the Ming state.

Xue Cai’s own proclivities as a scholar were more literary than those of his stellar forebears, and his governmental service certainly was more middling. Like many scholar-officials (jinshen) of his time, he was keen on accessing the prestige and privileges of the jinshi degree but not so keen on assuming onerous administrative positions. He truly idolized the Chongzhen emperor (r. – ) and was committed to serving him in some capacity, but he did not see himself as strong leadership material. Xue reputedly performed well in a decent succession of relatively comfortable posts—in the Directorates of Education in Beijing and Nanjing and in the Nanjing Ministry of Justice. His last and most harrowing appointment, which he undertook reluctantly in , was as prefect of Kaifeng, where the prefectual city also served as the provincial capital of Henan. Unfortunately, Xue Cai’s posting to Kaifeng corresponded with a period of fierce attacks on Henan by the roving-rebel armies of Zhang Xianzhong (–) and Li Zicheng (?–), and he soon came into conflict over tactics and strategy with the generals and high officials deputed by Beijing to pacify the Central Plain. Angry and frustrated to the point of illness, Xue Cai begged for permission to resign, but when that was denied, he abandoned his post and returned home in the winter of . This experience engendered in him both a sense of personal failure and great bitterness toward Ming officialdom, which he felt had become ridden with venal, self-serving, opportunistic appointees.

Back in Wujin, Xue Cai resumed the role of local notable and fond paterfamilias, staying as convenience dictated either in his Wujin city residence or in his rural home, apparently relying on ample landed-income. Among the activities that he undertook as a fairly typical man
of scholar-official status was to place in order and edit the books, papers, and writings of his patrilineal forebears, a task he hoped his son, Xue Jizhen (dates unknown, who had just reached marriageable age), could carry forward in the future. In this context, he may have resumed journal-keeping out of a felt obligation to inform his descendants of their family heritage and from a desire to leave something intimate of his own—partly an apologia—by which they might gain an empathetic sense of him and those who had shaped his life. In any case, the biji (jottings) that he began to write in differ from a record that he kept in earlier years mainly of his occasional literary compositions. (See figure .)

When the sections of the Xue Xiemeng xiansheng biji are read in chronological order (see discussion below), one can discern that Xue Cai began the journal in an avuncular, reminiscent mood, jotting down some stories about his own literary associates and friends but mainly sharing edifying remembrances of his elders—a boyhood doctor, his teachers, and especially his great grandfather, great grandmother, grandfather, father, and his grandfather’s famous colleagues in the Donglin movement. He rather pompously associates his own male forebears with the special greatness of the Ming and maintenance of the dynasty’s esprit de corps in times of challenge from scurrilous eunuchs and northern barbarians. The mood darkens in the winter of , when Xue learns of the horrendous destruction of Kaifeng city by flood the previous autumn, at which time maneuvers by the besieging rebels and would-be Ming relief forces caused a rupture in nearby dikes on the Yellow River. Stricken with grief at this news, which deepens Xue’s guilt over deserting his post at Kaifeng, he writes several remembrances of figures he had admired and cultural assets he had treasured during his tour of duty in that city. By the fourth month, however, Xue had largely regained his upbeat outlook: he writes, for instance, a paean to the Chongzhen emperor, cherishing the glimpse he had caught of him when serving in Beijing, praising his conscientiousness in seeking the right men for office, and expressing confidence in certain of his recent appointees. Another darkening occurs in mid-summer , the records from which entirely concern ominous strange phenomena—celestial and terrestrial, human, animal, and spectral—which Xue interprets as signs of an impending, untoward “change of the age” (shibian). But by the eighth
Two successive pages of the manuscript entitled Xue Cai shiwen gao (Manuscript Text of Xue Cai’s Poetry and Prose) (n.p., n.d.) probably written in Xue Cai’s own hand. The manuscript as a whole shows that Xue Cai was a journal-keeper in the years before the commencement of the Xue Xiemeng xiansheng biji (Jottings of Mr. Xue Xiemeng). While Xue commonly wrote of everyday affairs and
occasionally included dream recollections (e.g., beginning in the eighth column of the left-hand page), copies of his literary compositions predominate. Bold brush markings, here and throughout the manuscript, suggest that someone was making selections for an edition of Xue's poems. Photograph of the exemplar in the National Library of China, Beijing, no. 13971, used with permission.
Enlargement of a portion. This manuscript text was written on paper grid-ruled in red, the lines of which are faintly visible. Two tear-shaped marks in the upper margin at the left were made in red ink.
month he is back in a typical, pedantic biji (jottings) mode, setting forth his views on history, editing, calligraphy, and contemporary attitudes, with little indication of personal anxiety.

A temporal hiatus and qualitative break occur in the journal, however, between the eighth month of 1643 and the second month of 1644, an interval that corresponds not only with dramatic increases in roving-rebel potency to the north and west of Jiangnan, but also with the terminal illness and death of one of Xue Cai’s paternal uncles, Xue Xianyue, who had assumed greater importance in Xue Cai’s life after the death of his father. Xue Xianyue, a National University student, after failing to place in the metropolitan examination of 1624, had returned home disillusioned, forsaken his scholar’s attire, and withdrawn from scholar-official life to “roam with abandon among the lakes and hills.” When Xue Cai attained jinshi status, we are told, he implored his uncle to dress in his official robes again. But Xue Xianyue refused, saying that a period of chaos had already begun and that he, unlike his son or nephew, at least could be buried in classical Han-Chinese dress (rather than in that of barbarians) and face his forebears without shame. Xue Xianyue died in the first lunar month of 1644.

Early in the spring of that year, Xue Cai clearly starts to feel besieged, fearing the unrest among common people in his home area and the real possibility of rebel invasion from Jiangxi. Responding to reports of horrible deaths inflicted on men of his class in rebel-seized parts of the country—the worst being that of his uncle Liu Mianzuo at the hands of Zhang Xianzhong’s creatures in Yongzhou, Huguang—Xue begins to write in his journal more frequently. Whereas in the previous two years he had written seasonally, then at intervals of one or two months, he now usually writes every few days, or daily, even twice a day. And his stance shifts continually between public-style moralistic comment on people’s political and military behaviors and revelation of extremely personal feelings and cares, between self-exculpation for his behavior and confession of his inescapable guilt.

Also at this point in time, the journal begins to exhibit its most distinctive feature: records of dreams that in their frequency, length, vividness, and intensity well surpass those that Xue Cai had noted before. In all, the Xue Xiemeng xiansheng biji recounts forty-seven spates
of dreaming by Xue himself and two by others close to him; only three of these occur before the end of  

Xue Cai's remarkable dream recollections constitute the principal value of the journal for present-day historians, offering rare insights on the subjective consciousness of a fairly typical member of the late-Ming political class as the structures of his world crumbled around him, forcing him to seek not only physical refuge but also an alternative social and creedal identity.

Interestingly, Xue Cai seems to dream most memorably when he is away from home. He records no dreams during the most shocking period of —from the third month when he learned of Li Zicheng's direct attack on Beijing, through the sickening receipt of news about the suicide of the Chongzhen emperor and the deaths of the empress, princesses, and princes in the North, and through the faction-ridden establishment of a rump Ming court in nearby Nanjing. Declining to serve Nanjing's newly enthroned Hongguang emperor (r. — ) or even to advise the Wujin magistrate, Xue Cai instead retreated into the Wujin hills, and by the beginning of the eighth month he was residing on the southern side of Tai Lake (Taihu), on West Dongting Island (Dongting xishan), whose resident Daoists had impressed him on previous visits. From this point onward, with one brief exception, Xue lives away from home through the end of the journal in the third lunar month of and, we know from other sources, at least through the fourth lunar month of  

The journal informs us intimately about transformations in Xue Cai's outlook and spiritual mood during three of five discernible phases in his life after the late summer of . First, in the ten months he spent mainly on West Dongting Island, Xue Cai tried to assess the often faulty information that reached him about the continuing rebel threat, the intentions of the Manchus who had taken over Beijing and most of North China, the actions— and inactions—of the Hongguang court, and the eventual Manchu-Qing ( — ) penetration of Jiangnan and elimination of the Nanjing government. During this time, Xue contemplated but then eschewed "leaving the world" via clerical Daoism. Second, most incredible were the three and one-half months after the devastating death, from a torturous illness, of Xue Cai's beloved daughter. He and immediate family members transported her coffin across Tai
Lake in the midst of the Manchu invasion of the delta, and Xue ended up residing in the Buddhist monastery near which, somewhat by force of circumstance, he eventually buried her. During this time, Xue’s obsessive concern over the karmic debt in his family line and its effect on his daughter’s transmigration, as well as his deepening friendship with the head monk at the Sheng’en Monastery (Sheng’ensi) overlooking Tai Lake from the Xuanmu hills (Xuanmushan) in southwestern Wu district (Wuxian), led Xue to a heartfelt appreciation of Buddhist salvation. Third, in the three and one-half months after the final propitiatory rites for his daughter, Xue apparently remained in the vicinity of the Sheng’en Monastery, desperate for signs of effective resistance to the Manchu-Qing juggernaut but receiving mostly news of successive massacres of cities that had thwarted the Qing armies and of the deaths and humiliations of many acquaintances who had refused to submit to the Manchus.

Through these phases, certain characteristics of Xue Cai’s dreams especially reveal his state of mind. Xue, for instance, frequentlydreams of being in the presence of authority figures—rulers, examiners, teachers, his father, or other senior, male family members—in situations that make him feel ignored, rejected, ashamed, or out of place. He dreams remarkably often about the examination system and its representatives, in ways that expose it all as a wasteful sham. Certainly his sense of needing to flee but finding no path of escape is palpable in several dreams, which exhibit blockages in the homologous forms of locked doors, obstructed gates, mountain chains, and piles of stones. Class issues also are vivified, as dream images and situations impugn the integrity of Xue Cai’s scholar-official peers but also show his fear of contact with the unwashed masses or reduction to their living standard. And the association of upper-class personal fastidiousness with moral cleanliness is manifested inversely in dreams where soiling or dampening, particularly of the feet, correlate with feelings of sham or shame. Most revelatory, however, are the dreams that explain, in effect, why Xue Cai, disillusioned with Confucian culture, ultimately turned to Buddhism rather than Daoism.

It must have been not long after the fifteenth day of the third lunar month of 1646, the date of the last dated item in the journal, that Xue took the tonsure and became a Chan monk. Interacting occasionally with many other Ming literati who had fled into the Xuanmu hills—an area
dotted with small Buddhist abbeys as well as prominent monasteries—
Xue remained there at least until the fourth month of 1647, when it was
rumored that Manchu troops were coming into those hills to get him and
several other Ming-loyalist figures. The last phase of Xue's life, from
this point until his death in 1665, is very sparsely documented, but it
seems that he made his way back to his home area and lived unobtru-
sively as a literatus-monk, supported by his family (which had gone relatively
unscathed in Wumu) and unmolested by the Qing authorities.

Among contemporaries in the first decades of the Qing dynasty, memo-
ries of Xue Cai were molded somewhat by the cultural-historiographical
stereotype of the yimin ("remnant subject") Chan-Buddhist monk, that
is, as a survivor from the previous dynasty who wrote wistfully poignant
poems and behaved in mildly eccentric ways, expressive of a detached
mentality born of pain and disillusionment. Xue's journal, as he prob-
ably intended, remained in the possession of his patrilineal descendants
who, working as secretaries and teachers and leaving the ancestral home
in Wumu to live wholly in the conurbation of Wujin and Yanghu, did
not enter the civil service, achieve higher-level examination success, or
exercise prominent local leadership until the nineteenth century. Whether
any of them read the journal, or if they did what they made of it, we are
not given to know.

The reemergence to historical view of Xue Cai's oeuvre and
certain of his descendants is related to the development of the "Changzhou
school" of Han Learning into a major intellectual and political force early
in the nineteenth century under the leadership of Li Zhaoluo (1769–
1841) and Liu Fenglu (1776–1829). Li had drawn inspiration from the
late-Ming Donglin movement and from the statecraft scholarship of
certain Ming-period forebears from Changzhou, especially Xue Yingqi.
This may have been a factor in the special favor Li Zhaoluo accorded to
one young government student who became his pupil (and who lived for
a time in the home of Liu Fenglu), Xue Ziheng (dates unknown), and
who eventually made his own mark in late-Qing classical studies. In
Xue Ziheng, a patrilineal descendant of Xue Yingqi and Xue Cai,
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薛譜孟筆記上冊

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