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Zhenzhen Lu

Touched by a Tale of Friendship: An Early Nineteenth-Century *Zidishu* Manuscript

Abstract: *Zidishu* is a genre of sung verse narrative that flourished in northern China between the mid-eighteenth and the end of the nineteenth centuries. This article examines the earliest dated manuscript containing a text in this genre, copied in 1815 in Beijing, titled *Yu Boya shuaiqin xie zhiyin zidishu* 俞伯牙摔琴謝知音子弟書 (*Yu Boya smashes his zither to mourn a friend, a youth book*). The preface, appendix, marginal and chapter comments added to the main text by the copyist reveal him to have been a fashionable and erudite reader, whose diverse literary interests offer insights into *zidishu*'s early audience and the ways in which elite readers engaged with popular texts.

1 Introduction

The manuscript of *Yu Boya shuaiqin xie zhiyin zidishu* 俞伯牙摔琴謝知音子弟書 (*Yu Boya smashes his zither to mourn a friend, a youth book*), copied in 1815 in Beijing, is the earliest dated manuscript containing a text in the lyrical genre of *zidishu* 子弟書.¹ As both a literature and a performing art, *zidishu* flourished in the urban centers of northern China from roughly the mid-eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century.² Sung in slow beats to the accompaniment of the three-stringed lute and drawing on a rich repertoire of stories, whose sources range from contemporary events to the existing literary tradition, *zidishu* comprised a genuinely popular literature of entertainment that appealed to both discerning audiences and common ears. Our manuscript reveals that

1 Capital Library of China (CLC), *ji* 己 401. The exact meaning of *zidi* in *zidishu* is a subject of debate (*shu* denotes 'book' or 'story'). Literally 'sons and younger brothers', *zidi* has been interpreted to denote amateur performers, young men in general, and youths who belonged to the Qing dynasty's (1644–1911) military and administrative system of the Eight Banners. *Zidishu* has been translated into English as 'youth book' (Elliott 2001a), 'scion's tale' (Goldman 2001) and 'bannermen tale' (Chiu 2018).

2 Idema 2010, 370. Guan and Zhou 1984, vol. 1, 1, gives the period between the Qianlong (1736–1795) and Guangxu (1875–1908) eras.

they were once also the object of serious reading, and provides important insights into their early readers.³

The murky origins of *zidishu* come to us through anecdotal accounts and representations in the texts themselves. In various sources, *zidishu* is associated with the capital's bannermen, the privileged affiliates of the Manchu ruling dynasty who comprised a sizeable resident population in Qing (1644–1911) Beijing.⁴ While we do not know much about the early authors of *zidishu*, we do know that these poetic narratives came to flourish in the Qing capital sometime during the mid to late eighteenth century, including among men of wealth and leisure who took to singing in private gatherings for each other.⁵ These coterie continued to exist at the same time that *zidishu* came to acquire widespread popularity in the capital: the songs were performed by professional musicians

3 See Chen 1977 for a comprehensive overview of the sources of *zidishu*. On this particular manuscript, see Lu 2017 and Chiu 2018, 195–210. The main text, preface and commentary have been collated with other versions of the *zidishu* text and published in Huang 2012b, vol. 1, 200–220 (the appendix is, however, not included).

4 See Chiu 2018, 38–56, and Cui 2005, 7–14, for varying hypotheses on *zidishu*'s origins. On the history of the banners, see Elliott 2001b, 39–88. Qing Beijing was spatially segregated, with bannermen residing in the Inner City and non-banner populations in the Outer City. Bannermen possessed legal and economic privileges (such as pensions and allotments of land), and as such were seen as a population possessed of wealth and leisure; by the late Qing, however, their social experiences varied widely, which one finds reflected in the *zidishu* literature (see Guan and Zhou 1984, vol. 1, 1–4, Huang-Deiwiks 2000, and Zheng 2020, 103–109).

5 On these gatherings, which existed through the end of the Qing, see Cui 2017, 243–248, and Liang 2018. The earliest source which documents these gatherings is the 1797 *Shuci xulun* 書詞緒論 (*Treatise on the lyrical art*) by Gu Lin 顧琳, who mentions the widespread popularity of *zidishu* music in the 'last ten or so years' (Gu [1797], 821; more on this text in Section 4). While this would imply that *zidishu* rose to popularity in the 1780s, the earliest dated imprint of *zidishu*, printed in 1756 in Beijing, suggests that the texts already had a significant reading audience in the mid-eighteenth century (on this imprint, titled *Zhuang shi jiangxiang* 莊氏降香 [Lady Zhuang burns incense], see Huang, Li and Guan 2012a, 121–122).

For an overview of *zidishu* authors, see Huang 2012, who estimates that names of authors are identifiable for no more than one hundred of the over five hundred extant texts of *zidishu* (Huang 2012, 4461). In many instances the only information we know about these authors is the aliases that they have left in the texts; their dates and backgrounds (especially of the early authors) are often difficult to ascertain. Figures with known biographical details include one Aisin Gioro Yigeng 奕賡 (1809–1848), twelfth son of Prince Zhuang 莊親王 (Mianke 綿課, 1763–1826), known in *zidishu* texts as 'Helü shi' 鶴侶氏 ('Companion of the cranes'; see Chiu 2018, 236–257, and Huang-Deiwiks 2000, 65–66); another 'Chunshuzhai' 春澍齋 ('Studio of the spring rain'; b. c.1800), also affiliated with the imperial clan (Qi 1983, 319–210); and Golmin 果勒敏 (1834–1900), a Mongolian general, known by the alias 'Xisuzhai' 洗俗齋 ('Studio of the cleansing of worldliness') (Li 2009).

at public venues such as teahouses, and reproduced by commercial print shops and scribal publishers. Perhaps sometime during the nineteenth century, *zidishu*'s popularity spread from Beijing to other northern locales.⁶

In the extant corpus of *zidishu*, our manuscript stands out not only for its early date but importantly for the commentary which it contains from one reader (see Fig. 1). The vast majority of *zidishu* manuscripts extant today do not contain commentary, which is traditionally associated with the classical exegetical tradition and, in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, also came to be applied to vernacular fiction and drama.⁷ The commentary in our manuscript reveals the work of a reader well versed in these traditions, who saw the minor genre of *zidishu* as worthy of literary attention. His preface, appendix, and chapter and marginal comments together frame the text within a larger realm of elite discourses on friendship – a subject befitting the social world of a fashionable, educated young man living in early nineteenth-century Beijing.

Below, I introduce the manuscript, its background, and its physical characteristics, followed by a discussion of its rich commentarial matter with view to understanding the person who wrote them. It is hoped that this modest introduction to one manuscript will broaden our perspective on how elite readers engaged with popular texts, and shed light on the important role played by personal copies in the transmission of *zidishu*.⁸

2 The manuscript

The manuscript is presently held at the Capital Library of China and belongs to the former collection of Wu Xiaoling 吴晓玲 (1914–1995), a major scholar and

⁶ On the dissemination of *zidishu*, see Cui 2005, 134–147, and Chiu 2018, 259–304. Besides Beijing, Shenyang (Mukden) was another major site of production of *zidishu* in the Qing, and debate exists as to which city was the predecessor. Among extant *zidishu* imprints with identifiable dates and places of origin, the earliest come from Beijing; one finds imprints from a range of other northern locations including Shenyang beginning in the late nineteenth century (Lu 2018, 106–112).

⁷ For an overview of the commentarial tradition surrounding fiction, see Huang 2021, Rolston 1990, 3–34, and Rolston 1997, 1–21. I have benefited greatly from the terminology used by David Rolston to describe various kinds of commentarial matter (Rolston 1990, 52–57). On drama commentaries, see He 2021.

⁸ For a brief overview of these kinds of manuscripts, see Lu 2018, 112–116.

collector of Chinese vernacular literature.⁹ Among Wu's notable personal collection, amassed from his decades of residence in Beijing, are seventy-three titles of *zidishu* in eighty-four volumes. The texts reflect *zidishu*'s wide-ranging subject matter, from contemporary city life in the capital to the celebrated stories of drama and fiction. The books also represent the varied channels of *zidishu*'s transmission: there are manuscripts from scribal publishers who specialized in copying entertainment literature for sale, woodblock imprints from commercial print shops, and personal manuscripts copied by Wu and his father. The manuscript presently under scrutiny came to Wu from his middle school teacher Zheng Qian 鄭騫 (1906–1991), also an important scholar of Chinese literature.¹⁰

The slim volume of forty-three folios, measuring 12.6 cm × 26.9 cm, has undergone substantial preservation treatment, with backing applied to the original folios and rebound with four-hole sewing. While the original cover is lost, the content appears to be intact. The neatly prepared manuscript presents the full text of *Yu Boya shuaiqin xie zhiyin zidishu* 俞伯牙摔琴謝知音子弟書 (*Yu Boya smashes his zither to mourn a friend, a youth book*; hereafter *Smashing the zither*) along with a preface and table of contents at the beginning of the book. The *zidishu* is divided into five chapters (*hui* 回), each five folios long; each chapter is followed by a prose essay (*ping* 評, literally 'comment') in one or two folios, while comments in smaller characters also appear in the spacious top margins of pages, above the main text (see Fig. 1). The manuscript concludes with a sixth 'chapter', which is actually not part of the *zidishu* text but rather an appended collection of maxims on the subject of friendship.¹¹

We know the name of the commentator because he recorded his name, date, and location in detail at the end of the preface: 嘉慶二十年歲在乙亥小陽月既望北平王錦雯兩帆氏題於京師之一石山房 'Signed by Wang Jinwen, courtesy name Yufan, of Beiping, at the Rustic Hut of the Single Picul in the capital, on the 16th day of the tenth month of 1815' (see Fig. 2).¹² That Wang gave his true name, followed by his seals, suggests that the preparation of manuscript was a serious endeavor. Given that the entire manuscript is written in the same hand,

⁹ The information on the collection below comes from Wu Xiaoling 1982; see also Wu Shuyin 2004.

¹⁰ On Zheng, see He [2021]. Zheng was a native of Tieling 鐵嶺, Liaoning, but grew up in Beijing. He was a professor at National Taiwan University 1948–1981.

¹¹ The typical unit of textual division in *zidishu*, *hui* 回, shares the same character as the 'chapter' in the vernacular short story and novel, but is much more brief, perhaps to accommodate singing. *Hui* can also refer to a 'session' of storytelling performance.

¹² CLC, *ji* 401, fol. 4^r. While here translated as a unit of weight ('picul'), *shi* 石 can also be interpreted as 'stone'.

including the marginal and chapter comments, we have good reason to believe that it was copied by Wang – a personal commentarial ‘edition’ – although his exact intentions for it are unclear.¹³ The orderly appearance of the writing suggests that it was most likely not a first draft, but rather intended for perusal, whether by Wang himself or by his friends; as we will see later, the comments reveal a curious awareness of a reading audience, drawing the reader into conversation through the evocative subject of friendship.

Being dressed in commentary, our manuscript differs markedly in appearance from many extant manuscripts which, copied with a standard layout, originated from scribal publishers in Qing Beijing that specialized in the handwritten production of *zidishu*. These shops, which produced and sold manuscripts of a variety of entertainment literature, dominated the book market of *zidishu* in the Qing dynasty.¹⁴ Manuscripts which originated from these shops have a long, vertical format, with verses written in four columns to a page. Chapters are labeled on the first folio, typically above the first line, while the character *wan* 完 (‘complete’) often appears at the end of the book. Typically, these manuscripts also feature L-shaped marks throughout the text, possibly to assist reading or singing (see Fig. 3).¹⁵ Being the product of professional scribes, the manuscripts are copied in practiced hands. That they are products intended for sale is indicated by seals of scribal publishers and prices labeled on the title pages.¹⁶

It is certainly possible that Wang Jinwen’s personal manuscript is based on such a copy – in his preface, Wang divulges that he had made his annotated copy based on an existing book he bought, although he does not give any other

13 It is possible that the copyist is not the author of the preface, though the presence of the seals would suggest otherwise. The characters that are occasionally skipped and inserted on the side by the copyist in his marginal comments suggest that, though neatly prepared, the manuscript is a not pre-print copy (nor does Wang mention any intentions to print it in his preface).

14 See Lu 2018, 104–109; on one prolific scribal publisher and that publisher’s manuscript products, see Lu, forthcoming. It is not clear when these shops initially came into being, but extant sales catalogs from them can be dated to the nineteenth century on the basis of stories they contain which refer to contemporary events.

15 The L-shaped marks appear at the bottom of pages every 8–10 lines, marking subdivisions within each chapter. Their actual function in the context of singing and reading *zidishu* is subject to investigation. Of note is that the L-shaped marks are not exclusive to manuscripts of *zidishu* from scribal publishers, but also appear in some personal manuscripts, although not CLC, *ji* 401.

16 For images of such title pages, as well as pages inside *zidishu* manuscripts from scribal publishers, see Lu, forthcoming.

information about his source.¹⁷ Indeed, *Smashing the zither* appears to have been one of the most beloved stories of the *zidishu* genre, attested by no less than nineteen extant copies from varying sources, including at least two from scribal publishers.¹⁸ Comparison between Wang Jinwen's manuscript and one likely from a scribal publisher reveals a number of similarities in the visual organization of the *zidishu* text, with four columns to a page, corresponding page breaks, and similar, if not completely identical texts (Fig. 3).¹⁹ Yet Wang's manuscript is also noticeably different: there is copious space in the top margins for marginalia; section titles and pagination appear in tiny characters on the side margins of pages; the verse is uninterrupted by L-shaped marks; and there is no 'wan' 完 character to mark the end of the *zidishu* text. Tellingly, the paper used as writing support also differs from the thin variety one commonly finds in manuscripts from scribal publishers.

Whatever the basis of Wang's manuscript was, he transformed it in the process of copying, presenting the *zidishu* text anew as an object of literary scrutiny and dressed in the trappings of a fine book. The verses making up the main text are presented almost in the manner of calligraphic art, in vivid contrast to the neatly punctuated preface, marginalia and chapter comments.²⁰ The beginning of each chapter, too, is uninterrupted by the usual chapter title, leaving only the

17 CLC, *ji* 401, fol. 3^v.

18 Judging by its large number of extant copies, *Smashing the zither* makes it into the top ten titles of the *zidishu* literature. A survey of extant *zidishu* (587 titles in total) reveals between one and thirty-five extant copies for each title, with the average being 5.24 copies (Lu 2018, 103). See Huang, Li and Guan 2012a, 25–28, for a list of the extant copies of *Smashing the zither*. The majority are manuscripts, but there are four woodblock imprints representing two editions (a 1907 edition from Tongletang 同樂堂 and an undated edition from Beijing's Jingyitang 經義堂). Of the two copies from scribal publishers, one comes from Baiben Zhang 百本張 ('Hundred volumes Zhang') and one from Jjuantang 聚卷堂 ('House of accumulated scrolls'). Both are in the collection of the Chinese National Academy of Arts 中國藝術研究院, which is not presently accessible to the public. I have thus based the following comparison on a published facsimile of a manuscript in the collection of the Academia Sinica in Taipei, which, while missing its original title page, shares the features of manuscripts from scribal publishers (Fu Sinian Library, T10-123; the facsimile is published under the title 'Shuaiqin' 摔琴 in *Suwenxue congkan* 俗文學叢刊 (500 vols), Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 2001–2004, vol. 384, 373–422).

19 Compare with Fig. 1. Many (but not all) of the breaks within lines (when some characters are written in smaller size to fit into the seven-character line) are the same in the two manuscripts. Some character variants are present.

20 Works of calligraphy are typically not punctuated, while reading matter often is. Of course, the verse here is intended to be read (and verse is usually unpunctuated in books of *zidishu*).

spacious margins to announce the flowing lines of verse and a dramatic reading experience about to unfold.²¹

3 The story, preface, and commentary

The story from which the manuscript takes its title, *Yu Boya smashes his zither to mourn a friend*, centers on the friendship between two men of Chinese antiquity, Zhong Ziqi 鍾子期 and Yu Boya 俞伯牙, the latter of whom was a master of the *qin*.²² According to legend, Ziqi understood Boya like no other, perceiving Boya's every intention with his music. It is in association with this story that the Chinese term *zhiyin* 知音 – roughly translatable as ‘one who understands the tones’ – comes to stand for the best of friends, while *yin* in its full range of connotations includes not only musical sound but also the deep resonances of the heart-mind.²³

21 In a rare manner for *zidishu*, the chapter titles are listed together in a table of contents at the beginning of the book (Fig. 4). The two-character titles capture the plot with great poetic economy and echo the ways that dramatic scenes are often named: ‘Meeting over the zither’ 琴遇 (The first chapter); ‘Sealing the bond’ 敘盟 (The second chapter); ‘Woeful parting’ 情別 (The third chapter); ‘Fulfilling the promise’ 踐約 (The fourth chapter); and ‘Smashing the zither’ 摔琴 (The fifth chapter). In manuscripts from scribal publishers, one typically does not find such poetic titles but simply numbered chapters.

22 The *qin* is an instrument with usually seven (occasionally five or nine) strings strung over a long wooden sound box, played by plucking the strings using the right hand while fingering is applied with the left hand. Here I have employed the common, if somewhat liberal translation of *qin* as ‘zither’; alternative translations (‘lute’ and ‘psalter’) are discussed in van Gulik 1969, viii–ix, n. 4–5. While in the *zidishu* (and the early seventeenth-century short story described in the following paragraph) the protagonists are known as Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi, in earlier texts the former is known simply as Bo Ya, and the latter sometimes as Zhong Qi. For the sake of consistency, I refer to the two henceforth as ‘Boya’ and ‘Ziqi’.

23 On this story and early Chinese music theory, see Berthel 2016. Versions of the story appear in the *Liezi* 列子 (date uncertain), *Lü shi Chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 (*The annals of Lü Buwei*; c. 239 BCE), and *Han shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (*The Han commentary on the Book of Odes*, c. 150 BCE), the last two of which describe Boya to have broken his *qin* upon Ziqi's death, though none of these accounts mention the term *zhiyin*. The earliest source which employs the term in connection to the story may be Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226)'s ‘Yu Wu Zhi shu’ 與吳質書 (‘Letter to Wu Zhi’), collected in the influential sixth-century compilation *Wen xuan* 文選 (*Anthology of fine writing*), which comments on Boya's renunciation of music-making as an act of grief for the loss of a rare, true friend (‘*zhiyin*'). On these early sources, see Nylan 2001, 106–107, and Shields 2015, 47–48. In texts from before the Han dynasty (202 BCE –220 CE), the term *zhiyin* referred primarily to the understanding of music, a meaning which it retained through the Tang dynasty (618–907),

The story comes to us in various forms, but the probable direct source for the *zidishu* is the version contained in the early seventeenth-century short-story collection *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 (*Words to admonish the world*), compiled by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646), from which at least three other works of *zidishu* have been adapted.²⁴ In this regard, our *zidishu* text resembles many other works of the same genre in deriving from vernacular fiction, while the verse form itself also draws on a long poetic tradition.²⁵ While we do not know when this particular text was written or by whom, it exhibits the skillful blend of colloquial expressions and classical cadences which one finds in the finest works of the *zidishu* literature. Dramatized into scenes (Fig. 4), and teeming with the sounds and images of classical poetry, the lyrical narrative brings to new emotional heights a celebrated story of friendship found and lost.

As the story goes in the *zidishu*, Boya was a minister in the ancient kingdom of Jin, and Ziqi was a rustic woodcutter in the kingdom of Chu. One autumn night, while traveling by boat through the Chu countryside, Boya took out his *qin* to play under the moon, only to be overheard by Ziqi on the shore. Summoned to the minister's boat, Ziqi revealed himself to be wonderfully versed in the art of the *qin*, and was able to perceive from Boya's music what he had on his mind – first the towering mountains, then the flowing river. Barring worldly formalities, the two became the best of friends. They made a vow to meet again at the same place a year later, but Boya would return to find himself alone under the moon. Meditating on his boat deep in the night, Boya is visited briefly by

even as it came to be used increasingly in the sense of 'close friend' as seen through poetry (see Shields 2015, 47, n. 51).

²⁴ See Chen 1977, 27–30, and Yin 2017. Compared to the classical texts cited in the previous note, Feng's vernacular short story is a much more elaborate version, and may itself have drawn on earlier sources from the Ming dynasty, including a vernacular story and a *qin* song (see Hanan 1981, 229, n. 15, and Wu Zeyuan 2020, 53, n. 16; in the latter, pp. 51–88 contain a detailed reading of the story alongside late imperial Chinese discourses on *qin* music). See Wu Shuyin 1994, 1–13, for an annotated version of this story. For a list of translations into European languages, see Bishop 1956, 129–130; see also the translation in Yang and Yang 2005, 7–20.

²⁵ See Qi 1983, 321–323. Qi points out *zidishu*'s affinities with a variety of verse genres, from narrative ballads to classical poetry, and makes note of *zidishu*'s tremendous formal flexibility through the use of a basic seven syllable line padded with any number of additional syllables (a technique known to the writing of drama and *ci* poetry). Notably, Qi also observes *zidishu*'s affinities with classical prose writing in the form of the 'eight-legged prose essay' (*baguwen* 八股文) (323–325).

the ghost of Ziqi, who comes to bid him a final farewell.²⁶ In the last scene, a devastated Boya meets Ziqi's aged father onshore, who leads him to visit Ziqi's grave. After playing his *qin* one last time, Boya smashes it against the stone terrace – upon the loss of one who truly understood him, he would never play again.

The bond of music, the poignant turn of events, the idealized image of a friendship formed on intuitive understanding – these have all contributed to the enduring legacy of the story of Boya and Ziqi in literati culture.²⁷ In traditional Chinese literary criticism, the deep, intuitive understanding of another's mind is often extended to the experience of reading itself, where many a commentator has sought to authorize his own readings of a text with the claim of true understanding.²⁸ In our manuscript, Wang Jinwen applies serious reading to an unusual genre, drawing inspiration from the commentarial tradition as well as from a range of anecdotal literature on friendship. Combining literary criticism, philosophical contemplation, and personal reflections, the preface and comments interspersed throughout the manuscript fashion an image of Wang as a reader both erudite and full of feeling.

Wang's preface begins with expounding the importance of friendship among the five relationships (*wu lun* 五倫) of Confucian ethics. These are the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and that between friends; Wang observes that, while friendship feels out of place among them, it is actually crucial, for each of the pairs in the preceding relationships can in fact be friends. Wang goes on to cite the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) on a friend being a second self – this would have come from *Jiaoyou lun* 交友論 (*De Amicitia*), the missionary's famed treatise on friendship, first printed in 1595 in Chinese and widely influential in elite circles in succeeding centuries – and notes appreciatively that Ricci 'understood deeply the meaning of 'one who knows the self'' (*shen ming zhiji zhi jiezhe ye* 深明知己之解者也).²⁹ Then, citing 'a person of former times' (*xiren* 昔人),

²⁶ This scene does not appear in the short story. There is another scene unique to the *zidishu*, which depicts Ziqi's conversation with his parents after his initial encounter with Boya; there his filiality is emphasized.

²⁷ Lam 2007, 70–73, discusses the story in connection to music and male friendship in the Ming. Also see Wu Zeyuan 2020, 42–74. The tradition of *qin*-playing itself has a long history of associations with literati culture; on this topic, see van Gulik 1969, Watt 1981, and Yung 2017, among others.

²⁸ Huang 1994, 53–55; 61–66.

²⁹ The term '*zhiji*' 知己 ('one who knows the self'), like '*zhiyin*', denotes the best of friends. Wang does not explicitly cite the *Jiaoyou lun* in his preface, but may take the source to be

Wang proceeds to elaborate on how quick friendships often turn out to be disastrous, as the joys of initial association become replaced by doubt and hatred, and intimate friends end up as foes. Here Wang has in fact borrowed half the preface of a late Ming collection of erotic short stories, *Huanxi yuanjia* 歡喜冤家 (*Lovers and foes*).³⁰ He deftly weaves the impassioned exposition on the fickleness of romantic relationships into his remarks on the decline of ‘the Way of Friendship’ (*you dao* 友道) in the present world, where relationships are governed by the desire for profit and by self-interest. In the face of easy friendships, laments Wang, one hardly comprehends the rarity of encountering one who genuinely understands the self – a truth attested by the tale of *Yu Boya smashes his zither to mourn a friend*. He concludes the preface with a personal touch:

予幼而失學。於一切深文奧旨。不能明悉。嘗自撰一聯云。詩書門外漢。市井箇中人。雖自賦庸愚。然每於稗官野史。凡無違於名教者。必細心玩味。偶購得此書。見其事可傷心。文堪寓目。[...] 閱之使人感慨難釋。故不嫌鄙陋。謬加評點。貽笑大方。諧鐸有云。非敢放顛。亦非作達。然凡我同心。見此書者。幸憐[予]之苦心。諒予之痴態可也。

I did not complete my schooling in my youth, and am thus unable to comprehend profound essays and abstruse treatises. I have once composed a couplet [to describe myself]: ‘An outsider to the world of letters / I’m an insider of the markets’. Though I claim to be vulgar and ignorant, I would time and again [come across] the wild histories of storytellers, and so long as they do not betray the Confucian teachings, I would linger over them with care.³¹ By chance I purchased this book; I saw that its story is capable of moving the heart to sorrow, and that its writing is worthy of perusal. [...] Reading it, one is full of uneasy feelings that do not give way to sighs. Thus I didn’t care for my own humble station and presumed to add commentary to the text, all the while making a fool of myself. As *The*

obvious to the reader. On the reception of this work in China, see the introduction in Billings 2009; Hosne 2014; Vitiello 2011, 85–89. Ricci’s first and most popular work in Chinese, it comprises a diverse collection of sayings on the subject of friendship. The quote on a friend being one’s second self is part of the first maxim, and comes from Aristotle (see Billings 2009, 158; introduction, 26–28).

30 See Hanan 1981, 161 and 235, n. 62, and Lévy 1998 on this collection, whose preface is dated 1640 and signed with the name ‘The Reclusive Fisher of West Lake’ (Xihu yuyin 西湖漁隱). The collection has over a dozen extant editions from the Ming and Qing, printed under various titles; a facsimile reprint of the 1640 edition can be found in the *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 古本小說集成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), vols 62–63. Hanan speculates that its author was a Gao Yiwei 高一葦 of Hangzhou. That Wang deliberately avoided citing his source may be due to its erotic content.

31 ‘The wild histories of storytellers’ refers to the trivial literature of fiction and its milieu. In the Chinese term *baiguan yeshi* 稗官野史, *baiguan* (‘storyteller’) refers literally to minor officials in early dynastic times who purportedly collected stories from the streets. He 2013, 3, translates the term *bai* as ‘huckster’ in reference to its root meaning as rice-like weeds.

Joke Bell has said: 'it is not that I dare to be so audacious; nor am I feigning my disregard'.³² To everyone who is of the same mind as myself and reads this book, please pity the pains that [I] have taken, and forgive me for my mad act.³³

In this preface, Wang emerges as both worldly and sentimental, self-professedly ignorant yet surprisingly well-read. In spite of his apologies for his humble educational background, his apparent learning emerges through the fluent writing in classical Chinese, while the texts quoted betray an intimate familiarity with the literature of the late Ming, a time when friendship came to the forefront of both socio-political discourse and literary representation.³⁴ In many ways, the seventeenth-century short story on which the *zidishu* is based exemplifies the ideas of egalitarian friendship and authenticity of feeling which informed philosophical discussions of its time. Wang's familiarity with this earlier literature emerges through the texts he quotes in his preface and commentary; employing the rhetoric of *qing* 情 ('feeling') and *li* 理 ('principle'), and fashioning himself as a reader of feeling, he emerges at once as a connoisseur of late Ming literature and a nostalgic reader of his own times.³⁵

The wide range of texts Wang quotes reveals his familiarity with the spectrum of anecdotal literature that informed the cultivated intellectual life. These include the works of some of the most prominent men of the Ming and Qing; in their informal writings, they displayed their knowledge of diverse subjects, from history to hearsay, and led the way in literary fashion and debate. Besides the late eighteenth-century *Joke Bell* cited by Wang in his preface, Wang cites two other contemporary anecdotal collections, the *Xianqingtang ji* 閒青堂集 (*Recollections from the Leisurely Blue Hall*) of Zhu Lunhan 朱倫瀚 (1680–1760) and the *Yuwei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記 (*Random jottings at the Cottage of Close Scrutiny*) of

³² This is a 1791 collection of humorous anecdotes by the dramatist Shen Qifeng 沈起鳳 (b. 1741).

³³ CLC, *ji* 401, fol. 3^{r-v}. I inserted the character in brackets, which would have appeared on a missing part of the page.

³⁴ See McDermott 1992; Huang 2007; Billings 2009, 22–39; Vitiello 2011, 83–92. In the re-evaluation of Confucian ideas by scholars of this time, some highlighted friendship's foundational place in the five cardinal relations, while others argued for friendship founded on shared ideals. Qing scholars continued to wrestle with the tensions between equality and utility, and between friendship and kinship and other social relations (Kutcher 2000, 1622–1625); this later intellectual context remains to be more fully explored.

³⁵ For example, see CLC, *ji* 401, 3 *hui*, fol. 1^v, marginal comments. In 5 *hui*, fol. 6^v, chapter comment, Wang quotes four lines of verse from the short story, uttered by Boya upon smashing the zither; he does not refer explicitly to the story as his source, but rather describes it as 'the *qin* song of Boya' (*Boya qin ge* 伯牙琴歌).

Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805).³⁶ The appendix at the end of the manuscript, titled ‘Axioms on making friends discreetly, compiled by The Banal One’ (*Yongxing bian shenjiao geyan* 庸行編慎交格言), itself employs the anecdotal form of maxims (Fig. 5). In five folios, it contains a feast of quotations gathered loosely around the theme of friendship, drawn from a range of sources including Matteo Ricci’s *Jiaoyou lun* and the anecdotal writings of prominent Ming scholars such as Xue Xuan 薛瑄 (1389–1464) and Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639).³⁷

The collage of voices that can be found in Wang’s commentary includes not only anecdotal literature, but also songs, proverbs, colloquial sayings, and contemporary *zidishu*.³⁸ It appears that Wang was not lying when he reveals his keen interest in the ‘wild histories of storytellers’, which alludes to fiction and other minor genres. His undertaking of writing commentary on a work of *zidishu*

36 Zhu Lunhan served as a lieutenant general in the banner system during the Qianlong era (1736–1795) and was an accomplished painter, calligrapher, and poet. Ji Yun, prominent scholar-official, is best known as the chief editor of the imperially commissioned *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (*The complete library of the four treasures*) in the 1770s. In a chapter comment (5 *hui*, fol. 6^r), Wang cites ‘poems mourning friends’ (*wanyou shi* 挽友詩) from each of the two above-mentioned collections. He appears to have confused *Ru shi wo wen* 如是我聞 (*Thus have I heard*), the second compendium of anecdotes in Ji’s voluminous *Random jottings*, with a different compendium in the same collection, the *Luanyang xiaoxia lu* 灤陽消夏錄 (*Record of spending the summer at Luanyang*) (Wang cites the former as his source but the verse actually comes from the latter). The translations of the titles of Ji’s works here are borrowed from Chan 1998, 12–13.

37 For the most part, Wang does not identify the sources he quotes, though in two instances he does name Chen Meigong 陳眉公 (Chen Jiru) and a Tiansui xiansheng 天隨先生. Through searching the *Scripta Sinica* database (<<http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/>>, accessed on 15 Nov. 2020), I found that some of the quoted ‘axioms’ correspond with texts in various Ming editions – *Xinke housheng xunzuan* 新刻厚生訓纂 (*The newly carved compendium of advice for preserving longevity*); *Xue Wenqing gong dushu lu* 薛文清公讀書錄 (*Reading diaries of Mr. Xue Wenqing [Xue Xuan]*); Ricci’s *You lun* 友論 (*Treatise on friendship*); and the *Ande zhangzhe yan* 安得長者言 (*The elder’s words*) attributed to Chen Jiru. Whether Wang gathered these passages from an intermediate source is subject to investigation. I suspect that a number of other ‘axioms’ alluding to romantic relationships come from fiction commentaries; this is a topic for further investigation.

38 Often Wang does not cite the sources of his quotations, but rather leads them with an introductory phrase such as ‘the ancients have said’ (*guren yun* 古人云), ‘a former person has said’ (*xiren yun* 昔人云), ‘someone has said’ (*huo yue* 或曰), ‘as the common saying goes’ (*suyu yun* 俗語云), ‘as the ancient saying goes’ (*guyu yun* 古語云), or ‘an ancient song has said’ (*guqu yun* 古曲云). Twice in his comments, Wang cites lines from *Qiao dongfeng* 俏東風 (*The fair east wind*), a romantic story that was among the earliest works of *zidishu* to have become popular in the capital (4 *hui*, fol. 3^r, marginal comment, and 5 *hui*, fols 6^v–7^r, chapter comment; in these instances he does cite the source). On this *zidishu* text, see Huang, Li and Guan 2012a, 348.

may well have been inspired by this literature, which by the nineteenth century had a well-developed tradition of being read alongside commentary. In many a printed work of fiction and drama from the Ming and Qing, comments may be found interspersed throughout the pages, where commentators asserted their own voices through remarks on the skillfulness of the writing, the plot and characters, or even other literary works and topics of intellectual debate.³⁹ Wang's familiarity with this tradition of literary criticism can be seen in a number of examples, such as in a chapter comment which likens lines from the *zidishu* to those from *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (*The story of the western wing*), a classic work of drama from the Yuan dynasty popularized as a kind of lovers' bible in succeeding centuries:⁴⁰

不如不見。免得牽連。二句真乃絕世妙文。記得西廂記有云。你也掉下半天風韻。我也拋卻萬種思量。此皆一樣筆法。[...]

'It would have been better had we not met at all; that saves one from [a certain] painful longing.' These are truly marvelous lines without equal! I remember that *The story of the western wing* has said: 'You've thrown down half a heaven of beauty, / And I've tossed away a thousand kinds of worry.' The method of writing [*bifa*] is the same [...].⁴¹

What stands out about the commentary in the manuscript, aside from remarks on the literary aspects of the *zidishu* text, are the personal responses and ruminations which Wang records as a reader. Sympathizing with the fate of the characters in the story, Wang frequently reveals himself to be 'shedding tears' (*luo lei* 落淚); from time to time, he also expresses his personal yearning for friends of true understanding. In these moments he appears charmingly personal while

39 David Rolston traces three stages in the development of fiction commentaries, including an influential final stage taking place in the last two-thirds of the seventeenth century, when commentators not only wrote commentaries but also took editorial control of the texts they commented on (Rolston 1997, 1–10). Yuming He 2021 discusses the commentarial culture around drama, whose commercially printed editions proliferated in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; she notes how, in this publishing context, 'the provision of commentarial notes became part and parcel of making a book' (180).

40 These lines come from a moment in the play when the male protagonist, Scholar Zhang, longingly recalls his first encounter with the female protagonist, Yingying, at the temple; her glance at him upon her departure threw him head over heels.

41 CLC, *ji* 401, 3 *hui*, fol. 6^{r-v}, chapter comment. The lines quoted from *The story of the western wing* seem to be a variant of the received text; possibly, Wang is citing them from memory. The translation in West and Idema 1991, 199, is: 'You've thrown down half a heaven of beauty, | And I've picked up a thousand kinds of worry' (In the translation above, I have changed the verb in the second line according to the text given in the manuscript).

curiously attentive to potential readers. In the scene ‘The bond’, just before Boya and Ziqi seal their friendship, Boya asks Ziqi his age, and Ziqi says that he is twenty-seven. Wang divulges in his marginal comment above the main text:

看此書時。予年正二十有七。因思子期為古之名賢。予乃今之俗子。固不能如古人之奇遇。然亦有好俗之友。故每逢會及。雖不能言古人之同調。亦能有心心相照。語語投机之樂。即有依依不忍暫離之意。恐過此情緣。難期再會。人生壽夭。寔難預料。因自警之餘。願告普天下之好友者。如遇其人。不可捨之而去。務須以伯牙為前車之鑑。

As I am reading this book, I am exactly twenty-seven years old.⁴² I’ve been thinking, Ziqi was a man of virtue famed in antiquity, while I am merely a crude man of the present, so naturally I can’t have the marvelous encounters of the ancients. But I, too, have friends who are fond of my crudeness, so that every time we meet, though we can’t speak of having the same sentiments as the ancients, we can still share the joys of heartfelt understanding and the happy meeting of words. It follows that there arises the feeling of not bearing to part, for fear that when the present gathering is dispersed, it shall be hard to meet again. Life and death are truly hard to predict. And so, besides cautioning myself, here is to all who are fond of friends: if you encounter the person, do not leave him behind; you must take Boya’s case to be a lesson.⁴³

In spite of the distinct voice which emerges through comments such as this one, we do not know anything about Wang besides what he divulges in the manuscript – that he was a resident of the capital in the Jiaqing era (1796–1820) and a native of Beiping 北平.⁴⁴ Were he indeed twenty-seven at the time of copying the book, he would have been born around 1790, in the last years of the Qianlong era (1736–1795) during the high Qing and the advent of *zidishu*’s heyday in the city. We might ponder Wang’s curious couplet in the preface describing himself as being ‘an insider of the markets’ while an ‘outsider to the world of letters’. Is it simply part of the humble self-image he affects, just as he speaks elsewhere of his own ‘worldliness’? Could this couplet allude to his involvement in the book trade, playing on the image of bookdealers as merchants of culture who are themselves uncultured? If so, this may explain his appetite for ‘the wild histories of storytellers’ – popular sellers of the book market – and may even suggest a motive behind the manuscript he prepared.

⁴² By our count he would be twenty-six years old; the age given in premodern Chinese texts typically includes an extra year from when a person is born, to account for time in the mother’s womb.

⁴³ CLC, *ji* 401, 2 *hui*, fol. 5^v, marginal comment.

⁴⁴ It is not clear to me whether this ‘Beiping’ in fact refers to Beijing. Beiping was the name of the capital during the fourteenth century and in the Republican era (1911–1949), but it can also refer to places in Hebei and Liaoning provinces.

We have nevertheless no direct information on Wang's livelihood, the book he had bought and copied from, or his exact intentions for the finely prepared manuscript. But surely he was aware of a community of readers who, like himself, enjoyed reading, writing, and pondering, who sought sympathetic company in reading as in life, and who were 'fond of friends.'

4 For further study

While Wang Jinwen presents a fully guided reading of *Yu Boya smashes his zither to mourn a friend*, it is notable that his comments do not refer to the singing of *zidishu*, which had come into vogue in Beijing's elite circles during the late eighteenth century. A contemporary native of the capital, Gu Lin 顧琳, mentions *Smashing the zither* in his *Shuci xulun* 書詞緒論 (*Treatise on the lyrical art*) of 1797, a sophisticated text in classical Chinese presenting *zidishu* as an elegant art of performance.⁴⁵ In a series of essays, drawing on an earlier tradition of informal prose writing, Gu applies the language of drama criticism to *zidishu*, touching on aspects from taste and aesthetics to instrumental accompaniment and the articulation of the voice. The final section is devoted to 'establishing clubs' (*li she* 立社) – elegant gatherings of small groups of friends who would sing for each other.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Gu [1797], 831. Like Wang Jinwen, Gu presents his text in a carefully copied manuscript, accompanied by a preface and commentary – in this case penned by a friend of Gu's who similarly dabbled in fashionable literary circles, one Li Yong 李鏞 of Tieling 鐵嶺, Liaoning. By Li's description, 'Sir Gu is a fashionable gentleman, who pursued the miscellaneous arts in his youth and dropped his studies; when he grew old, he regretted it greatly, and resolutely pushed aside all worldly distractions to focus on writing, and has since obtained many results [...]' 顧子，個儻士也，幼驚雜技，廢讀，長頗悔，力摒一切煩囂，矢志筆墨，邇來多所獲。[...] (Gu [1797], 818). Li's preface is followed by Gu's own, signed with Gu's seals (facsimile in Guan and Zhou 1984, vol. 1); there Gu divulges that storytelling is a great hobby of his, and that, while he hardly aspired to officialdom, he found his monthly stipend to be sufficient to support his family. This suggests that he was a bannerman of at least middling rank. Guan and Zhou 1984 contains a typeset version of the entire text of *Shuci xulun* with its prefaces and commentary, along with facsimiles of two folios from the beginning of the manuscript, but does not give further information as to the whereabouts of the book.

⁴⁶ See Gu [1797], 829–830. In Gu's vision, such clubs should not be raucous gatherings, but rather serious, elegant events, made up of a small core group of close friends and with the singing of *zidishu* at the center. Gu suggests that these groups be held every month or eight times a year, with a rotating leader who is in charge of collecting money from group members to cover the costs of wine and food.

Whether these clubs had also facilitated the reading of *zidishu* – and just how the social worlds around *zidishu* changed over time – are questions that remain to be explored. Wang Jinwen’s manuscript draws our attention to a large and lasting realm of private reading and writing, through which *zidishu* texts continued to be transmitted alongside their lives in performance. In the early decades of the twentieth century, as the songs faded from the capital’s ears, readers continued to copy, compile, and comment on the texts, which may account for the substantial numbers of extant manuscripts from this time.⁴⁷

Smashing the zither appears in the Republican-era (1911–1949) collection of another Beijing resident, a Sanwei shi 三畏氏 (‘Thrice-reverent one’) of Jintai 金臺, who took great pains to assemble the scattered texts with the help of a friend and fellow collector.⁴⁸ The visible original bindings of the manuscript indicate its probable origin among Beijing’s scribal publishers of an earlier era.⁴⁹ By their time, the two collectors tell us, the elegant songs had long fallen out of fashion, and the once ubiquitous books were hard to find. Yet their prefaces reveal their solace in having found each other; in his preface, Sanwei shi further expressed his wish to print the collection, so as to make it known to others who shared his love.⁵⁰ While *zidishu* belonged to a bygone era, then, the hope for friendship did not fade. In reading and collecting, one finds a community of like-minded others, and continued hope for true understanding.

47 Much remains to be understood about the decline of *zidishu*, commonly thought to have taken place at the end of the Qing dynasty, when it came to be replaced by other popular genres of performance (see Cui 2005, 31–34). The large numbers of extant books of *zidishu* that date to this time and beyond call for further study. For a preliminary discussion, see Lu 2018, 112–116.

48 See the preface by Sanwei shi, dated 1922, in *Lütang yinguan zidishu xuan* 綠棠吟館子弟書選 (*A selection of youth books compiled by the Poetry Studio of the Green Pear Trees*), Capital Library of China, *ji* 己 486, fols 2^v–3^v, which appears among nine folios of prefatory writings bound together with a motley mix of six *zidishu* in a composite volume (the prefatory writings are reproduced in Huang, Li, and Guan 2012b, vol. 10, 4455–4460). ‘Sanwei’ was an alias of Yunhe 蘊和 (b. 1868), a Manchu writer and collector who served in the mansion of Prince Gong 恭 during the Qing dynasty; on his life and works, see Li 2020. ‘Jintai’ as a place name commonly refers to Beijing; the aforementioned Gu Lin also signs himself as a native of Jintai.

49 The manuscript appears as part of a composite book, along with five other items which would have originally been separate books; the original binding in green and red threads resembles that of manuscripts from the scribal publisher Jujuantang, and reveals that the text was originally copied into two volumes. It is not clear to me whether Sanwei shi decided to bind all these items together or whether this took place at a later time. His preface indicates that he had at one time assembled one hundred *zidishu*, but these appear to be the only ones extant.

50 CLC, *ji* 486, fol. 3^v.

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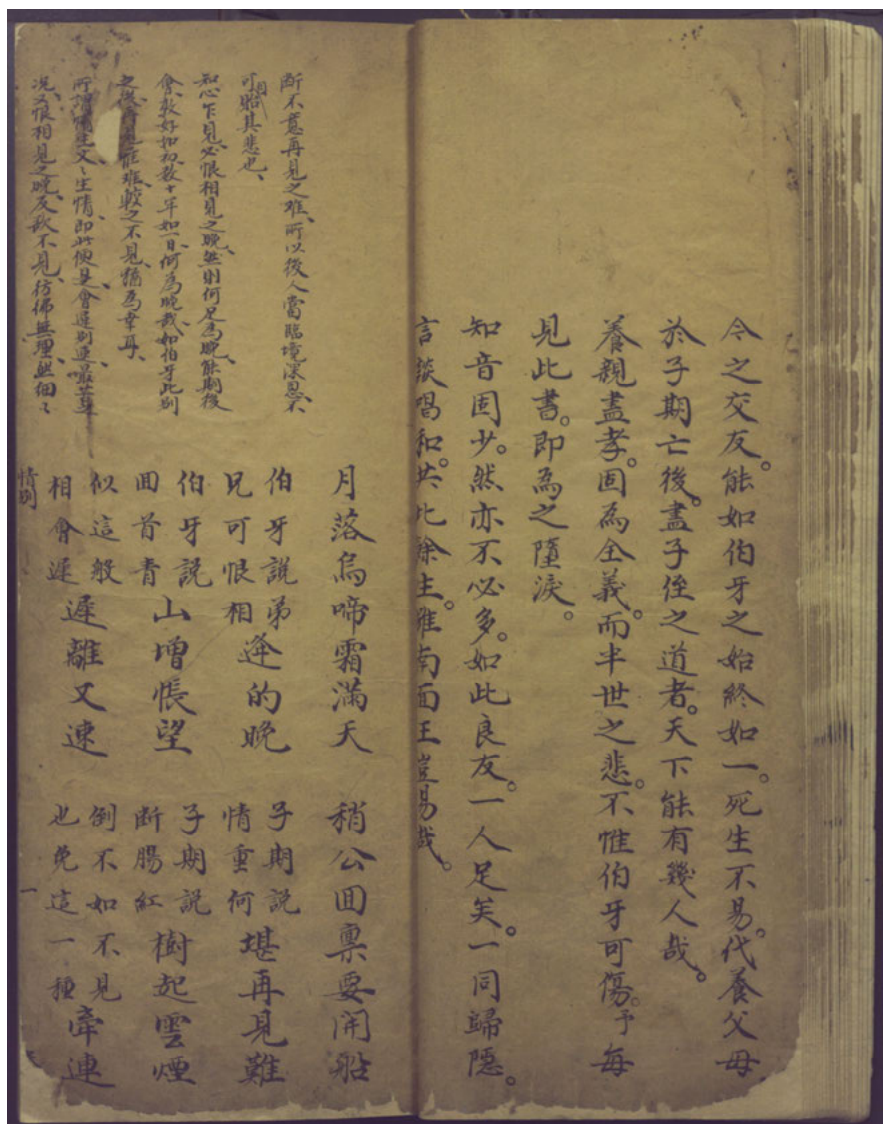


Fig. 1: Capital Library of China, ji 己 401, fols 18' and 19' (right: end of chapter comment to Chapter 2; left: beginning verses of Chapter 3, with marginal comments at the top). Courtesy of the Capital Library of China, Beijing.



Fig. 2: Capital Library of China, ji 己 401, fols 3^r and 4^r (right to left). From the preface signed by Wang Jinwen, with his seals. Courtesy of the Capital Library of China, Beijing.

<p>伯牙說弟 兄可恨相 伯牙說弟 回首青山 似這様 相會遲</p>	<p>三回 月落烏啼霜滿天</p>	<p>又子期青春有 問子期青春有 伯牙說長十餘 下官痴長十餘 二人一知心的 笑暉作知心的</p>	<p>自反于心真可愧</p>
<p>子期說 情重何堪再 子期說 斷腸紅樹起 到不如二人 也免得這一</p>	<p>稍公回稟要開舡</p>	<p>鍾嶽回道二十七 和你結你莫推 為兄弟你莫推 話正濃見秋江 月落那雲漢星</p>	<p>何日与你手共提 歸來</p>

Fig. 3: Fu Sinian Library, A T10—123, fols 9^v and 10^r (right: end of Chapter 2 verses; left: beginning verses of Chapter 3; note L-shaped mark near the bottom left corner). Courtesy of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica.

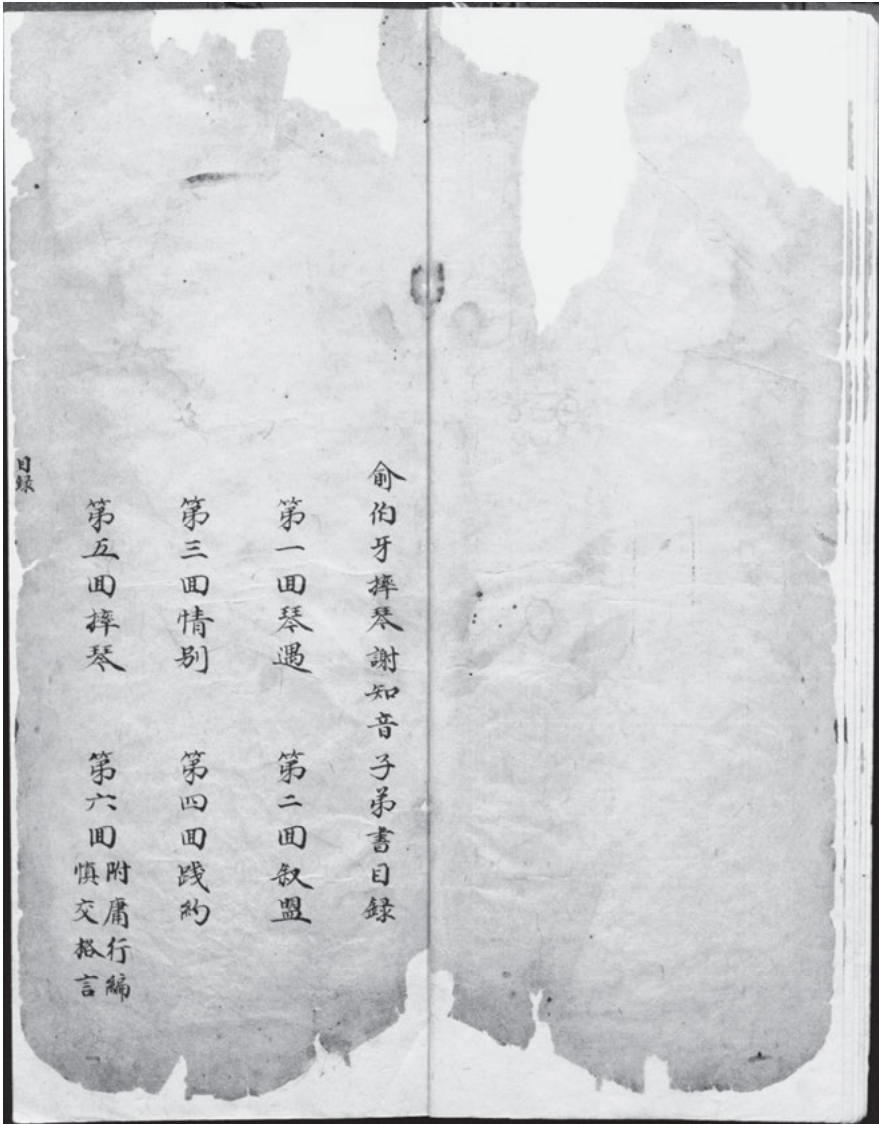


Fig. 4: Capital Library of China, ji 己 401, fols 4^v and 5^r (right to left; left: table of contents).
Courtesy of the Capital Library of China, Beijing.

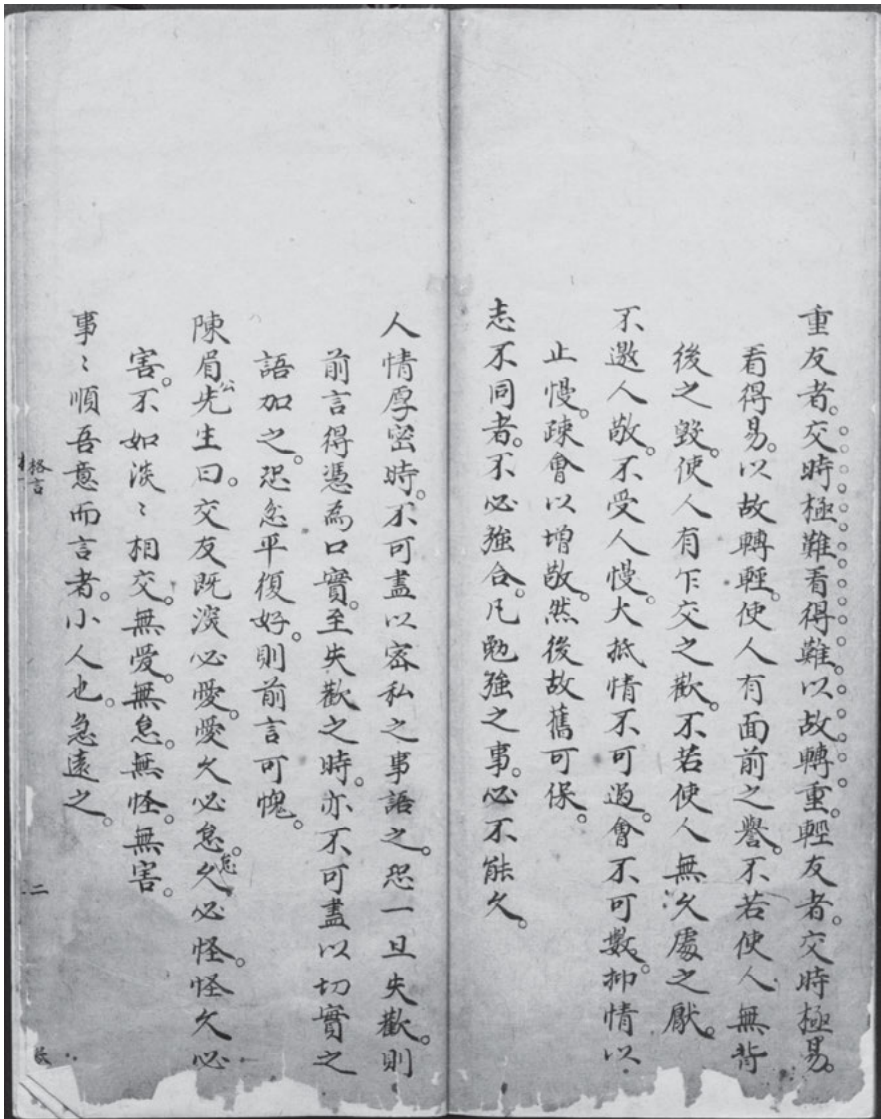


Fig. 5: Capital Library of China, *ji* 己 401, fols 39'-40' (right to left), from the appendix, 'Axioms on making friends discreetly, compiled by The Banal One'. Courtesy of the Capital Library of China, Beijing.