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**THE POVERTY OF PREFECTURES: A REEVALUATION OF  
THE MEMOIR OF ZHANG DAYE**

by

**Joshua DeFriez**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

of

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WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

in

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in the Department of Economics and Finance**

**Thesis/Project Advisor**  
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**UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY**  
Logan, UT

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**The Poverty of Prefectures:**  
Reevaluating the Memoir of Zhang Daye

Everything today's readers know about the man Zhang Daye comes from his memoir, *The World of a Tiny Insect* (*Wei Chong Shijie*, 微蟲世界).<sup>1</sup> The manuscript was distributed locally after its completion in 1894, though it never achieved wide-scale circulation. Wang Yongyuan of Zhejiang Normal University donated the only complete copy to the Chinese Academy of Sciences in the early 1950s where Harvard scholar Xiaofei Tian later discovered the manuscript.<sup>2</sup> Since Tian's publication of an English translation in 2013, Zhang's writings have reached a wider audience than he likely ever imagined. As we read *The World*, Zhang's words leave readers reflecting on whether or not we have truly grasped his intent:

*Who truly appreciates  
This wild fellow, Zhang Daye?  
In the whole wide world,  
There is only Mr. Lü the Woodworker.*<sup>3</sup>

Zhang's vivid descriptions of terrors during the Taiping Civil War in *The World's* second section unwittingly distract readers from investigating his motivations for recording them. When a fragment of his horrific memories appeared in the 1955 *Historical Materials*, compilers noted that *The World's* remainder "records many trivial family matters that have no value as historical material," and hence, "were expunged."<sup>4</sup> Family and other matters that Zhang recounts, however, provide an important lens into the dynamics of the world he inhabited. *The World of a Tiny Insect* contains invaluable descriptions of Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> Following Xiaofei Tian's style, I abbreviate *The World of a Tiny Insect* as *The World* in this article.

<sup>2</sup> In most cases, I refer to Chinese names in the traditional surname-given name fashion. Because she publishes under the Western norm of given name, family name, Xiaofei Tian is the only exception.

<sup>3</sup> Zhang Daye, *The World of a Tiny Insect* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 154.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Xiaofei Tian on page 29 of the introduction to her translation.

social and economic conditions at the end of the twentieth century. Xiaofei Tian's translation is masterful—a work of art in its own right. Her description of the text as one of “mourning and remembrance” focused on “coming to terms with the painful memories of a traumatized childhood,”<sup>5</sup> however, deserves reconsideration.

Appearing in print at the end of 2013, two important new studies of the Taiping period presaged *The World's* publication. Stephen Platt's popular December, 2012 account *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom* placed China's civil war in an international context, emphasizing the role of foreigners in determining the conflict's outcome. Tobey Meyer-Fong's monograph *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19<sup>th</sup> Century China* advocated a reconsideration of priorities in recounting the Taiping period. Meyer-Fong presented evidence from local gazetteers, memoirs, and other sources to recount the war's vast devastation, arguing persuasively that the lens of inquiry should be refocused on the lived experiences of those whose lives were swept up in the chaos, and how they pieced their lives back together once it ended. Published in November, 2013 and subtitled “A Memoir of the Taiping Rebellion and its Aftermath,” *The World* initially seems a perfect compliment to Meyer-Fong's argument and is often discussed in the context of *What Remains*, and more broadly, *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom*. Guang Li, a writer for the online Chinese political commentary *Peng Pai* (澎湃), for example, speaks of the three works in concert:

Lately, Americans have begun discussing the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom again. Between the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, two books were published one after the other: Tobey Meyer-Fong's *What Remains* and Steven Platt's *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom*. [...] Meyer-Fong's work has its pair in Xiaofei Tian's new translation of a memoir concerning memories of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, *The World of a Tiny Insect: A*

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<sup>5</sup> *The World*, 9

*Memoir of the Taiping Rebellion and its Aftermath*, which also dwells in the remembrance of the suffering of the common people... Meyer-Fong and Tian Xiaofei's hard work have placed our gaze unceasingly on the people, down to the individual, down to the anguish hidden in the folds and scars of history.<sup>6</sup>

In the spirit of Meyer-Fong's urging to listen attentively to the people of late nineteenth century Chinese history, however, this essay reevaluates the place of *The World* by asking what social, historical and economical contexts could have contributed to Zhang's authorial choices. His preface was audacious. In it, Zhang insinuated that *The World* was important for the emperor himself.<sup>7</sup> In the opening sentence, Zhang trumpeted the great value he placed on his writing: "From the cry of a tiny insect, one can hear the sound of a vast world." Crying from his personal vantage point as an attentive wanderer, Zhang insisted that his observations revealed the state of the "vast world" through which he wandered. Zhang's intent was not mourning and remembrance. Piece-by-piece, he constructed an argument for how to solve the problems of inequity and corruption he witnessed in rural China.

*The World* was written in 1893-94 as message to China's governing powers. It is more relevant to that time period than for the Taiping era. Preceding the fall of the Qing dynasty by only eighteen years, Zhang witnessed the banditry, poverty, corruption, and changes in the patterns of local power that paved the road to the 1911 fall of the imperial power. His writing was an expose of the poverty of the counties of Taizhou prefecture in eastern Zhejiang province and an attempt to formulate a solution. Such prescriptions are particularly interesting because of his reliance on tradition to provide answers. Zhang called on the threefold traditions of the Chinese intellectual past, repeatedly emphasizing the importance of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism working together to restore stability to the nation.

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<sup>6</sup> Aside from quotations from *The World* and the poet Cold Mountain, all translations of Chinese source material in this paper are my own. Guang Li, "Meiguo ren zai taolun taiping tianguo de shihou tamen zai taolun shenme" (The Paper, August 8, 2014) [http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1253561](http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1253561)

<sup>7</sup> *The World*, 9

Though *The World* is history's only record of Zhang Daye, its contents reveal a man of many dimensions and provide a compelling window into his world of meaning and understanding. Since the publication of Xiaofei Tian's translation, many more than a woodworker from Suzhou have come to appreciate that "wild fellow," but few have recognized him for the reasons he felt worthy of appreciation. Through a close exploration of his writing, this paper endeavors to come to a fuller understanding of Zhang Daye on his own terms, as well as his reasons in writing *The World*. In the one hundred and forty-eight pages he copied painstakingly by hand. The task of this paper is two-fold: the first is to demonstrate the error in labeling *The World* as "a memoir of the Taiping Rebellion and its aftermath" by searching for Zhang's stated intentions in writing. The second is to contextualize *The World* within the social, economic, and political circumstances of eastern Zhejiang in the late nineteenth century, extracting the insights that *The World* provides to historical literature germane to this particular time and place.

### ***The World's Context and Structure***

Turmoil in the wake of China's exponential population growth between 1625 and 1850 framed Zhang Daye's life. By the end of the nineteenth century, China's population threatened a Malthusian crisis. He Bingdi attributed this growth to "unusually favorable material conditions," especially during the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Between 1750 and 1850, China's population doubled from 200 to slightly more than 400 million people.<sup>9</sup> When the Taiping rebellion spread throughout southern and central China during the 1850s and 60s, population pressures had increased poverty throughout China, fanning the fire of revolt. After Qing and foreign forces defeated the Taiping movement together in 1864, the population returned to its

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<sup>8</sup> Ping-ti, Ho, *Studies on the Population of China* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), xii-xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Rankin, Mary, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 6.

rapid growth pattern.<sup>10</sup> In her 1986 study of transformation in the power dynamics of Zhejiang province, Mary Backus Rankin argued that rapid population growth caused an increase in mobility, trade, and social organization, and that these trends diminished the efficacy of local bureaucracies. By the close of the nineteenth century, “the Qing government could no longer intervene vigorously” in local issues. This was especially pronounced in Zhang Daye’s childhood home of Shaoxing Prefecture. James Cole’s 1986 monograph on Shaoxing suggested population pressure in that area mounted as early as the Kangxi period. Cole characterized late nineteenth century Shaoxing as “one of the most fiercely competitive environments in human history.” In Cole’s words, there were “too many scholars, too few jobs. Too many peasants, too little land. Too many people, too much struggle for survival.”<sup>11</sup> It was through the cracks and crevices of China’s late nineteenth century landscape of power that the tiny insect, Zhang Daye, crept and crawled, revealing the changing nature of a vast world in his cry.

“A tiny insect,” Zhang wrote in his preface,

“is [...] unable to see the sun, the stars, great mountains, and large rivers, when it sees a cup of water and a burning torch, it is startled and filled with admiration, thinking that perhaps they are none other than the so-called sun, stars, great mountains, and large rivers. It leaps with excitement, looks up, cries out, and writes down in private what it has seen.”<sup>12</sup>

Zhang’s depiction of the insect as impulsive and bouncing with excitement, mirrors both his own constant travels and the overall muddled feeling of his writing to ordinary readers. At various points in his life, Zhang wandered as far north as Qinghe, the small, central Jiangsu

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<sup>10</sup> See Zheng Xiaowei, “Loyalty, Anxiety, and Opportunism: Local Elite Activism During the Taiping Rebellion in Eastern Zhejiang 1851-1864” (*Late Imperial China* 30:2, December 2009) for a discussion of the hiring of troops by local governments in the Eastern Zhejiang region. Steven Platt’s 2012 *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom* provides broader analysis for the international context of cooperation between Qing authorities and foreign forces and the important role that foreign troops played in determining the conflict’s outcome.

<sup>11</sup> Cole, James, *Shaohsing: Competition and Cooperation in Nineteenth-Century China* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1986), 1.

<sup>12</sup> *The World*, 36.

city where his father held public office, and as far south as Taizhou's Huangyan County. The area of his travels included massive urban centers, such as Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Ningbo, as well as small, rural villages like Bao and Pig's Jaw. In addition to his extensive familiarity with the land, his experience spanned multiple socioeconomic classes. As a result, he wrote variously of the hunger of common people, visits to Daoist recluses to discuss the Way, and time spent with governing officials debating the nature of banditry. His broad experience makes for jumbled writing, but provides a glimpse into the geographical and socioeconomic disparity and transformations of his time, offering important insights that complement the analyses of Cole and Rankin.

*The World's* disjointed organization is most pronounced in the chronological scattering of its three sections, which seems arbitrary to the casual reader. The first section recounts Zhang's travels through Taizhou Prefecture in 1893 on his way to pay final respects to the grave of his friend, Mr. Yuan Jichuan, the district jailor in Taizhou Prefecture's Xianju County. The second, and shortest, section recounts his childhood during the chaos of the early 1860s; this is the section that has garnered the most attention.<sup>13</sup> His third section recounts his life after his father's death, traveling from place to place to "make ends meet" between the early 1870s and late 1880s. To the attentive reader, however, there is an important element of organization and purpose apparent in this tripartite division.

In the 1890s, to travel from Ningbo to Taizhou Prefecture by land, one had to traverse Zhejiang's mountain ranges. In the beginning pages of his first section, Zhang recounted traversing the Huishu range on his way to Taizhou's Xianju County. Though he never made the distinction so clear, it is useful to view the Huishu range as a symbolic

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<sup>13</sup> In a discussion of whether or not to use *The World* in teaching Chinese history to undergraduates, for example, Alan Baumler discussed Zhang's memoir as if the second section were the entire thing, providing lengthy quotes only from Zhang's memories of the Taiping Rebellion, ignoring the remainder of the work. His post can be found at <http://www.froginawell.net/frog/2014/11/shen-fu-vs-zhang-daye/>



barrier between the wealthy core of Ningbo and the impoverished periphery of Taizhou, the economic disparity between which Zhang clearly articulated.

Of the ten prefectures of Zhejiang, Ningbo is the richest, and Taizhou the poorest. The two places are adjacent, but they are exactly opposite in every way. The people of Ningbo are good at accumulating wealth. Every day they devote themselves to financial dealings and management, which is certainly an excellent way of preserving abundance and maintaining peace. [...] Today, however, Taizhou is regarded as the gathering place of bandits.<sup>14</sup>

On one side of the Huishu range, life was competitive, but orderly. On the other side, it was destitute, filled with bandits and corruption. Just like a tiny insect passes unnoticed through the highest walls, Zhang passed the Huishu range with ease, musing “truly I must have a predestined relationship with the mountain spirit,” and giving tips and pointers for how to make the journey most pleasant.<sup>15</sup> Zhang’s predestined relationship with the barriers of late nineteenth century China clarify the organization of his narrative. The first section contains Zhang’s vast knowledge of Taizhou Prefecture, ending with a beautiful series of poetry in which he identifies deeply with the suffering of its inhabitants. The contents of the second section illuminate the source of his empathy in the depth of his own experience with suffering. The narrative of the final section is the summit of the Huishu range, where Zhang saw the path from the destitute world of Taizhou to the prosperity of Ningbo, cried out as the tiny insect that had passed unnoticed between worlds, and delivered a powerful message that he deemed “of use to the Sage in his consideration of the world.”<sup>16</sup>

Taizhou Prefecture was the focal point of Zhang’s reflection. He proposed that Taizhou’s residents were likely the people whom the historian Ban Gu (32-92 CE) called the

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<sup>14</sup> *The World*, 61.

<sup>15</sup> *The World*, 40-41

<sup>16</sup> *The World*, 36

“people of Eastern Ti.”<sup>17</sup> Taizhou was better known by the time of the Tang Dynasty, when poets called it “the dwelling place of gods” and “an immortal isle.” The establishment of the Guoqing temple on Mount Tiantai in the prefecture’s northwest corner at the end of the Sui dynasty likely increased travel to the region. According to Zhang, however, Taizhou’s prosperity was again declining by the end of the Yuan Dynasty, and it had been low so ever since.<sup>18</sup> The prefecture was most epitomized by the contrast of Tiantai County in the northwest and Xianju in the southeast, which serves as its symbolic poles, the focus of Zhang’s narrative, which I shall analyze in details below.

Both Mary Rankin and James Cole briefly referenced Taizhou Prefecture in their work, though neither provided any degree of depth to our understanding of the area. Taizhou was presented in both works as a peripheral, impoverished area, home to bandits and corruption. Zhang’s memoir complicates and clarifies this generalization, revealing the disparity within Taizhou prefecture. Zhang’s wrote that the inhabitants of each county differed significantly in temperament and wellbeing and that the governing officials differed in capabilities and corruption. Zhang’s descriptions of Taizhou’s six counties and their socioeconomic condition provide the most detailed account of late nineteenth century Taizhou in the English language, enabling readers to conduct an attentive reading of his account.

Expanding population pressures throughout the nineteenth century accentuated and altered the barriers between rich and poor, core and periphery, order and chaos that defined the socioeconomic world of late imperial China. Zhang Daye traversed these barriers with the finesse of a tiny insect, organizing his writing to clarify his message for the vast world. With a

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<sup>17</sup> *The World*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> *The World*, 61

firm grasp of the context and structure of his writing, I shall move on to an analysis of what Zhang revealed of his personality and life in *The World*, in order to achieve a deep appreciation for what motivated his writing and his possible purpose in writing.

### **The Tiny Insect**

Zhang's comparison of himself to a tiny insect was more than traditional Confucian self-depreciation. It reflected his own lived experience. Born on January 29, 1854, Zhang was raised in a large land-owning family in Shaoxing. His family was likely very wealthy at the time of his birth; he noted that at one point they possessed a calligraphy and painting collection that "spread throughout thirteen rooms."<sup>19</sup> It's unclear how many wives Zhang's father had, but we know that his mother was not the first. He refers throughout the text to his "legal mother," birth mother, as well as a concubine whom he calls "Madame Li." Zhang's father was educated and clearly held a degree of some sort; Zhang reported staying with him as a child where he once held public office, in South Qinghe.<sup>20</sup>

Zhang recounted a pleasant childhood, often playing with his dozen cousins; together they were "as noisy as a boiling cauldron."<sup>21</sup> He began studying with an elderly licentiate scholar at the age of four, but his education was interrupted at seven when Taiping rebels attacked Shaoxing. Anticipating the incursion, the family's hired hand Lu Sanyi took Zhang with him to his village on October 29, 1861. The Taiping rebel forces under the "Coming King" (*lai wang* 來王) and support of He Wenqing, local gentry who had switched sides a few years earlier, invaded Shaoxing one day later, on October 30, 1861.<sup>22</sup> Separated from

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<sup>19</sup> *The World*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> *The World*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> *The World*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> For more details on the nature of the Taiping incursion in eastern Zhejiang, see Zheng, "Loyalty, Anxiety, and Opportunism: Local Elite Activism During the Taiping Rebellion in Eastern Zhejiang 1851-1864."

his father and legal mother, who were still in South Qinghe where his father held office, Zhang encountered horror after horror after being swept up in the chaos of civil war, often surviving only through a series of events he deemed miraculous.

By the time the chaos ended and Zhang was reunited with his family, his father's property had all been lost, and presumably his public position, as well. Zhang studied diligently for five years between the ages of twelve and sixteen. When he turned seventeen, his father died and he "[began] to travel for [his] livelihood,"<sup>23</sup> presumably conducting some sort of business. He continued this until 1887, when he secured a position working for the magistrate of Xianju County. It is unclear from the text what sort of business he conducted to sustain himself prior to that position, or whether he ever married or had children. More than anything, it is apparent that he considered himself a failure: a tiny insect living a "down-and-out life." Immersed in solitude, Zhang recorded that his loneliness reached its apex in 1886, when his "debtors crowded the door" and "with a jug of ale," he "looked at [his] shadow in despondence." In his misery, he composed heart-wrenching poems.

*A candle burning out, with its ashes,  
the dejected soul melts away.  
This lonely life—who would feel with me  
about parting,  
And snap a willow branch for my sake  
At the waystation?<sup>24</sup>*

Loneliness in Zhang's time and place was not merely an emotional hardship. The importance of lineage and family relationships in securing any sort of material success in the harsh competition of Zhejiang in the late nineteenth century made loneliness a matter of life and death.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Zhang's probable lack of children was embodied in his asking

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<sup>23</sup> *The World*, 107

<sup>24</sup> *The World*, 158.

<sup>25</sup> See Cole, 1-11.

who would “snap a willow branch for [his] sake.” With little family left, and no one to pay respects to his spirit after he died, Zhang felt without place in both this world and the next. As a Shaoxing native, however, he was able to rely on at least one powerful social network.

The population pressures that created the fierce competition documented by James Cole within Shaoxing also increased emigration away from its counties, pushing inhabitants into other prefectures and provinces.<sup>26</sup> “Three things are to be found everywhere,” ran a late nineteenth century proverb quoted in Cole’s analysis, “beancurd, sparrows, and Shaoxing natives.” Shaoxing was also well known for its level of culture and education. It produced more degree-holders than any other area in China, expanding its social network far away from Eastern Zhejiang. Once away from their home, intense competition transformed into loyalty and cooperation among Shaoxing natives. Cole postulates that Shaoxing natives were able to take control over Central Boards in the complex system of Qing bureaucracy, enabling them to appoint sub-officials, secretaries, and clerks.

While 1886 was the zenith of Zhang’s despair, in 1887, he began to find relief. Early that year, Zhang found his way to Hangzhou with “only about a thousand cash in [his] wallet.” Here he met “Brother Li,” a Shaoxing native who was “particularly hospitable” because he “considered [Zhang] a fellow townsman.” Hangzhou’s network of Shaoxing natives was extensive. By the 1920s, it would become known as a “colony of Shaoxing natives.”<sup>27</sup> After meeting Brother Li, Zhang connected with a certain Commissioner Xu, who later sent a letter of commendation to the magistrate of Xianju on Zhang’s behalf. While there is no textual link between the Shaoxing network and Commissioner Xu’s commendation, the network’s vast connections, its penetration of the bureaucracy, and

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<sup>26</sup> James Cole succinctly labels the central causal factor in Shaoxing emigration: “the engine of exodus was relative overpopulation.” Cole, 75

<sup>27</sup> Cole, 80.

Zhang's prior connection to a member of that network suggest the possibility that the Shaoxing network played a role in helping Zhang secure commendation to Xianju.

The text of *The World* contains no evidence that Zhang Daye held any degrees or offices prior to traveling to Xianju, nor any evidence for the nature of the work he conducted there.<sup>28</sup> As a literate, scholarly man with no degree and no means by which to purchase one, the most likely position he filled was that of *muyou* (幕友), a private secretary hired by a magistrate.<sup>29</sup> Zhang also never recorded how long he stayed at Xianju in this position. It could not have lasted longer than five years, however, because he describes having not seen Yuan Jichuan, the Xianju district jailor whose grave he visits in the first section, for over a year at the outset of his 1893 journey. His position in Xianju, therefore, could have lasted anywhere from late 1887 to early 1892. It is clear at the outset of the first section, however, that Zhang is no longer destitute: he hires people to accompany him, buys them rice wine, and makes the trip over the Huishan range in a sedan chair.<sup>30</sup> The position in Xianju likely made the difference between his destitute 1886 poetry and ability to travel in comfort in 1893. Though throughout the change, his loneliness remained.

The connection Zhang lacked in the human realm, he found in nature. He possessed an appreciation and aptitude for poetry and admired the talent and passion of his cousin Xuequan, who would "linger all day long" whenever he encountered beautiful scenery, composing poetry and practicing calligraphy in an attempt to capture the moment.<sup>31</sup>

Xuequan taught Zhang the art of poetry composition, which Zhang began practicing at the

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<sup>28</sup> Many, such as Alan Baumler, mistakenly refer to Zhang as part of the governing elite. Zhang was, rather, an educated, landless, apparently degreeless descendant of gentry whose lived experience was closer to the impoverished and indigent than to the governing elite. Again, see Baumler's post at <http://www.froginawell.net/frog/2014/11/shen-fu-vs-zhang-daye/>

<sup>29</sup> To make up for financial losses during the Taiping Rebellion, the Qing government increasingly sold degrees to wealthy gentry instead of requiring them to sit for the difficult, competitive civil service examinations. Cole, 14.

<sup>30</sup> *The World*, 38-41.

<sup>31</sup> *The World*, 118.

age of fourteen. His father, however, had other designs for his studies, instructing him to “pursue what’s useful” and to stop wasting his time “chanting lines about the wind and moon.”<sup>32</sup> He dutifully followed his father’s council, putting away poetry and studying the Confucian classics.

The poems scattered throughout *The World* attest that Zhang never completely abandoned his artistic ambitions. Whenever he encountered a beautiful scene, he mimicked his cousin Xuequan, lingering to give immortality to the moment with his words. He also paid special attention to the poetry of others, being sure to record resonant pieces he came across during his travels. He frequently wrote poems for people who impressed him, such as Mr. Lü, the woodworker in Suzhou. But just as frequent as his poetry were his analyses of poverty, governance, and suffering among the people. Zhang made clear his regrets at not spending more time developing his poetic talents, but consoled himself, writing, “I suppose I will be able to face my father in the underworld one day and tell him that I have not greatly disobeyed him.” In obeisance to the wishes of his father, Zhang Daye ever maintained a mind for utility and a desire to increase the material well being of those around him, even long before his employment with the magistrate of Xianju.

Here we find an important inner tension. Zhang wished to be of service to the world, but also frequently expressed a wish to withdraw into hermitage to practice poetry and be close to nature. The tension between being of use to the nation and withdrawing into the life of a hermit stretches back to antiquity in the writings of Chinese literati. Alan Berkowitz has described this longing as “a nuclear component of the traditional Chinese cultural tableau since time immemorial.”<sup>33</sup> In his 2009 account of interacting with Chinese hermits in the

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<sup>32</sup> *The World*, 120.

<sup>33</sup> Berkowitz, Alan, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Portrayal of Seclusion in Early Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), xi.

1960s and 70s, Bill Porter characterized this tension as an internalized expression of the contrast between Daoists and Confucians.<sup>34</sup> Practitioners of both were searching to live the Way, or Dao. But where Confucians tried to bring the Dao into society for the purpose of governance, Daoists left society in search of the Way through strict self-cultivation. Withdrawal from public office, then, was an act “aimed at those who exercise power.” To withdraw from society and focus on self-cultivation and a life of seclusion in nature was a paradoxically political gesture, showing a resistance against *status quo* by withdrawing from participation. Zhang’s expressions of longing to withdraw into the mountains were both an embodiment of his dissatisfaction with the local political world and an expression of his own weariness with the abundant suffering around him and his own lack of accomplishment.

At the time of writing *The World*, Zhang lamented that he “still live[d] in shameful obscurity,” and supposed that “rather than merely breathing in the world of men and being of no use for my home and country, I might as well seek out the mountain retreat and rest my spirit beyond the cloud vapors.”<sup>35</sup>

Vast are the mountains shrouded in clouds. They have been there from ancient times until the present day. In a mood of leisure and detachment, I shall disappear into them. Who, I wonder, would hold on to me and not let me go?<sup>36</sup>

And yet, despite his yearnings, he remained in the “dusty realm” (*chenshi* 塵世).

Significantly, Zhang Daye's writing shared insights with us about his personality, longings, and inner struggles, enabling readers to see his personal motivations for writing *The World*. Mourning and remembrance were secondary. “My only wish,” he wrote, “is to not completely abandon my ancestors’ enterprise, and that is all.” Born in a propertied, wealthy family, and with a father who was among the governing elite, his ancestral “enterprise” was the art of

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<sup>34</sup> Porter, Bill, *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993), 16-60.

<sup>35</sup> *The World*, 79.

<sup>36</sup> *The World*, 107.



governance. The act of writing *The World* was Zhang Daye's choice in the tension between hermitage and laboring to benefit society.

Calling himself a tiny insect was less an indication of Zhang's humility and more a token of his audacity. Reading *The World* as primarily a book of remembrance fails to see the personality and intent of the "tiny insect." Zhang Daye's intended audience was "those who are bent on changing the ways of the world,"<sup>37</sup> and he was certain that his observations would serve as an offering to better the condition of the people. Zhang was displaced and alienated from the social class of his roots. The person who understood him more than anyone was a lowly woodworker, not the numerous scholars and officials he recounted meeting. In the competitive, populous world of the Jiangnan region in the late nineteenth century, he *was* a tiny insect. But he felt viscerally the failure to carry on the work of his ancestors. Despite never securing a long-term bureaucratic position, he was bold enough to insist that though an insect, what he wrote was important for the dragon emperor himself.

Writing *The World* was Zhang's last attempt at making some difference in the world before abandoning his suffering by searching for peace and respite in the mountains. This is not mourning and remembrance. This is powerful, purposeful social commentary.

Recognizing this, however, we cannot overlook the central place the memories of the Taiping era play in Zhang's reflections. They have a specific place and purpose that unfolds itself after we continue to explore what Zhang's opinions were about the poverty Taizhou Prefecture.

### **Tiantai and Xianju**

Taizhou's poverty was the primary concern of Zhang Daye's memoir. His exploration of this poverty is most detailed in the first section as he describes his trip through Tiantai to

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<sup>37</sup> *The World*, 67.

return to Xianju and visit the grave of Yuan Jichuan. The section's organization illustrates the tension it embodies: beginning with enlightened contemplations on the top of Mount Tiantai, and ending with a visit to Xianju, the most impoverished of the prefectures. To understand Zhang's message, then, we must begin by understanding the symbolism of Mount Tiantai.

Mount Tiantai was a place of ethereal beauty. Zhang frequently revisited the striking contrast between the beauty of nature and suffering of its human inhabitants in his writing. He lamented that "the realm of happiness in nature and that of suffering in the human world are as far apart as clouds and ravines." To Zhang, this distance was a result of human aberrations from the goodness imminent in the natural world.<sup>38</sup> Zhang's view affirms Mark Elvin's conclusion about the place of nature in late imperial Chinese literature in his *Environmental History of China*.

...there developed among the elite an artistic and philosophical attitude toward the landscape that saw it as the exemplification of the workings of the deepest forces in the cosmos. As not a momentary, but a perpetually present and accessible revelation. The eye endowed with understanding could see in a landscape the self-realizing patterns of the Way, the ever-renewed cycles of complementary impulses driving the world's changes.<sup>39</sup>

Nature reflected to Zhang the proper Way of things, serving to illustrate the way human society should function. Ascending Mount Tiantai symbolized escape from suffering and entry into "a place that hardly seemed to be of this mortal world,"<sup>40</sup> but a place that the mortal world could become if governed correctly.

Mount Tiantai was long a place of significance for Daoists and local spiritual seekers. Its importance magnified in the eighth century CE when the Guoqing emperor of the Tang

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<sup>38</sup> *The World*, 64.

<sup>39</sup> Elvin, Mark, *The Retreat of the Elephants: an Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 321. See Elvin's complete discussion in chapter 10 for specific late imperial poems and authors who explore this theme more fully.

<sup>40</sup> *The World*, 43

dynasty built a monastery for the Buddhist monk Zhi Yi (whom Zhang refers to as “Master Zhizhe”) to practice meditation and teach the dharma. Zhi Yi was the first Chinese thinker to conduct a systematic analysis of the Pali Buddhist canon. The school of thought took on the name of its mountain home, and its influence was profound throughout East Asia. The Tiantai School impacted the development of other schools of Chinese Buddhism, such as the Huayan, Chan, and Pure Land schools. Japanese Tendai Buddhism was a direct importation of Zhi Yi’s syncretic approach to Buddhist teachings. During Japan’s Heian period, according to Ivan Morris, it “was hardly less impressive than that of the Catholic Church in medieval Europe.”<sup>41</sup> As the home to this important religious tradition, Mount Tiantai took on a symbolic resonance for seekers of enlightenment.

The mountains of southern China were “a traditional symbol of immutability.”<sup>42</sup> The particular importance of Mount Tiantai was reflected in the poetry of the hermit monk Hanshan, who made the “towering cliffs”<sup>43</sup> of Tiantai his home. Calling both himself and Mount Tiantai *hanshan* (“cold mountain,” 寒山), the monk built the term as a metaphor for an enlightened state of equanimity. “I reached Cold Mountain,” Hanshan wrote, “and all cares stopped and no idle thoughts remained in my head.”<sup>44</sup> He reflected that living there by

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<sup>41</sup> Morris, Ivan, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York: Peregrine Books, 1985), 111. Most scholarship on Tiantai Buddhism has been primarily religious and philosophical. The Tiantai School has not received the scholarly attention its influence deserves, and nothing near the attention received by Chan and Pure Land Buddhism. Three sources contain the best recounting of the sect’s history and implications of Zhi Yi’s innovations: Swanson, Paul L, *Foundations of T’ien-T’ai Philosophy: the Flowering of the Two Truths Philosophy in Chinese Buddhism* (Asian Humanities Press, 1989); Ziporyn, Brook, *Evil and/or/as the Good: Omnicentrism, Intersubjectivity, and Value Paradox in Tiantai Buddhist Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Ziporyn, Brook, *Being and Ambiguity: Philosophical Experiments with Tiantai Buddhism* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> Elvin, 333.

<sup>43</sup> Porter, Bill, *The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain* (Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>44</sup> *Collected Songs*, 159.

himself, his mind was “like the autumn moon clear and bright in a pool of jade.”<sup>45</sup> He promised everyone “looking for a refuge” that “Cold Mountain [would] keep [them] safe.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, it seems to have been just such a search for refuge that inspired Zhang’s trip to Guoqing monastery, a place that he later reveals to have long desired to see.

And Zhang found that refuge while on the mountain staying at the monastery. His time there epitomized the nature/enlightenment side of *The World’s* driving dichotomy. Zhang recorded having a profound, transcendent experience during his first night in the monastery.

Unable to sleep, I got up, lit the lamp, and peered out the window. The rain had stopped, and the clouds opened up to reveal a bright moon. [...] I went out, and took a stroll on the temple grounds. In a flash, I seemed to see life and death as bubbles on water. As long as one remained ignorant of the wisdom of Buddhism, everything seemed to be fine; but once one grasps it, wouldn’t that person regard somebody like me as one of those people running about wildly like a headless person and, as the Buddha says, deserving nothing but pity?

It is here, amidst this experience atop Mount Tiantai, experiencing a portion of the enlightenment he believed imminent in nature, that Zhang first revealed his syncretic solution for the poverty afflicting his world.

In benefiting oneself and benefiting others, one should always [...] understand that the doctrines of [Confucianism] and [Buddhism] shared the same intent. Taking Confucius’s sagely teachings as the principle of function, but regarding Buddhism as the home to return to: if one could act like this to while away this glorious age, then wouldn’t he be able to enjoy himself wherever he was going? As I pondered in this manner, my spirits were considerably lifted.

Though extremely critical of China’s contemporary governance, Zhang Daye was not a radical. He was an advocate of conservative reform, pining to return to that “original intent” shared by Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Zhang rejected revolutionaries and

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<sup>45</sup> *Collected Songs*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> *Collected Songs*, 39.

secret organizations intending to alter traditional order.<sup>47</sup> He sought the enlightenment offered upon Mount Tiantai, which was an age-old, but powerful wisdom capable of curing the world's most potent ills.

Zhang experienced this power when he came across an old Daoist nun on the mountain who "was accomplished in poetry and painting... a remarkable woman." The woman, who called herself Lady Scribe of the Jade Capital, lived alone with her son. Taizhou's bandits were its greatest export.<sup>48</sup> The question Zhang recorded asking her upon their meeting, then, comes as no surprise. "Since you, madam, live here alone, aren't you afraid of... brutal men of force?" Zhang was "amazed" when she replied, "our humble region does not have brutal men of force." After the meeting, Zhang "marveled at the mother and son for a long time."<sup>49</sup> The power of ancient wisdom was sufficient to create an oasis from the scourge of banditry even at its epicenter.

In such a context, Tiantai County embodies the enlightened quality of its mountain sanctuaries. It was "different from all the other counties" because of the high moral quality of its inhabitants. To Zhang, the problems that did exist, such as the locals' "inclination to drown baby girls," were rooted in poverty. But the area had good soil, and Zhang speculated that if the waterways were put to good use, the area's poverty could be alleviated. Tiantai County demonstrated, however, that virtuous inhabitants were not enough to solve the problems of Taizhou prefecture. The true source of poverty was in a failure of governance, which became clear as Zhang made his way to the southern end of Taizhou prefecture and spent time in Tiantai's symbolic antithesis, Xianju.

Zhang's clearest exposition of poverty is found at the end of the first section where he

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<sup>47</sup> Zhang's feelings towards revolution and overthrow of the Qing Dynasty will be more fully developed in the final section on his views of governance.

<sup>48</sup> Cole, 62.

<sup>49</sup> *The World*, 47.

copied ten poems he had previously written about Xianju County, the most impoverished of the six. Zhang's descriptions are invaluable. James Cole observed, regarding the impoverished masses of late nineteenth century China, "in attempting to reconstruct the life of this silent majority, the historian must deal with bits and snatches, fragmentary but authentic..."<sup>50</sup> Living out his self-determined role as the insect who maneuvers through socioeconomic barriers and classes, Zhang provided more than fragments. He opened the window, allowing us to peer into the lives of this "silent majority." It is unclear whether Zhang put thought into the ordering of the poems. The order, however, is deeply interesting and builds a compelling mirror for Zhang's memoir as a whole. The poems summarize Zhang's entire message about the nature of poverty and proper governance, as well as providing a detailed image of Xianju, where, according to Zhang, "there [were] few talented men but many rocks."<sup>51</sup>

The first of Zhang's ten poems described the area as "desolate," "deplorable," a place where "ghosts cry" and "pestilential vapors...fatten the pythons." Reading Zhang's first verse produces a feeling of pity for the inhabitants of Xianju. Theirs was a "solitary town, overgrown in the wilderness" where any potential sources of wealth "exist[ed] in vain."<sup>52</sup> The discussion of ghosts also alluded to the superstitions of the people, which Zhang elaborated further in poems two, three, and five.

The second poem was a direct contrast to the first. When "misty rain clears in the morning," Zhang wrote, "mountains and groves reveal their natural charm." As in the rest of his world, the tension between the beauty of its natural surroundings and the suffering of its inhabitants revealed not only irony, but potential to develop into something much greater. In a small aside after the second line, Zhang began a series of observations that continued

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<sup>50</sup> Cole, 32.

<sup>51</sup> *The World*, 63

<sup>52</sup> *The World*, 69.

throughout the poem of potential sources of wealth in the prefecture. He informed the reader that “in the mountains there are many pines, cedars, and other good trees for timber.” Zhang continued to praise various aspects of beauty he found in Xianju, concluding that it was “truly a suitable dwelling for immortals.”<sup>53</sup>

In the third poem, Zhang described the material world of Xianju’s inhabitants, mentioning that they subsisted mostly on sweet potatoes because they were too poor to afford rice. He noted that the water-propelled rice huller was the main device on which the locals depended for their livelihood, but that their arguments over who could use the waterwheels and when led to contention over irrigation, causing people’s land to go dry and increasing the number of lawsuits. Many families, according to Zhang, were impoverished because of the litigation.<sup>54</sup>

Water rights were “a life-and-death concern”<sup>55</sup> for inhabitants of eastern Zhejiang in the late nineteenth century. Zhang’s note here that litigation over these rights was a major source of poverty forces an expansion of James Cole’s analysis of water rights at the time. While Cole argued that water rights must be viewed through the two dimensions of gentry-official and intra-gentry relationships, Zhang’s informs his audience that, at least in a peripheral region such as Xianju, the common people played a role as an important third variable.<sup>56</sup> Zhang’s poetry showed that common people would argue over water rights, suing each other, and “occasionally people even [lost] their lives.”<sup>57</sup> A people whose lives depended on their access to irrigation water were willing to use whatever means necessary to

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<sup>53</sup> *The World*, 70. This is a play off of the meaning of Xianju’s name. *Xian* (仙) means “immortal” and *ju* (局), “to inhabit.”

<sup>54</sup> *The World*, 71.

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<sup>56</sup> Cole’s analysis was primarily contained to large-scale water projects that necessitated cooperation between officials in different counties

<sup>57</sup> *The World*, 74.

secure their livelihood; when the law failed to protect them, they would turn to violence.<sup>58</sup>

Zhang's writing, however, was not merely descriptive. He asked *why* this tension existed, and his observant, capable mind and extensive knowledge of agriculture and production techniques provided answers. He commented that the favorable soil would be good for cultivating bamboo and "wonderful" for growing tea. A local dearth of knowledge on proper tea cultivation, however, led to many failures in developing tea production. Consequently, "in farm plot after farm plot, poppies bloom in the spring wind."<sup>59</sup> In Zhang's view, poppies were the embodiment of the problems plaguing the prefectures and causing poverty. Instead of growing mulberry, hemp, cotton, catalpa, paulownia, lacquer trees, and other sustainable sources of production, people turned to the high profits drawn in by poppy cultivation. Responding to the profit margins, Zhang argued in an earlier passage that people "little understand that poppies are poisonous, and that, after their juice saturates the soil for a long time, it is no longer possible to plant anything else there." He concluded poignantly that, "this is much like eating arsenic to satisfy hunger."<sup>60</sup>

This earlier discussion of poppy cultivation led Zhang to lament that "the ignorant folk are uninformed and have no foresight," placing the ultimate blame on local officials. This blame is expressed in the progression of his Xianju poems. Following the third poem's description of the people's poverty, the fourth poem described the state of the local officials. Insisting that they feast on "Blue Robe," a culinary delicacy, the local officials "demand[ed] it for their kitchens," which caused the already impoverished locals to "risk their remaining years amid poisonous snakes." Zhang grieved that "grand officials have a fastidious taste for

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<sup>58</sup> James Cole also confirms that disputations over water rights would sometimes end up in "armed struggle." Cole, 21.

<sup>59</sup> *The World*, 74

<sup>60</sup> *The World*, 66.



delicacies; the lives of the poor are thrown away to wind and dust.”<sup>61</sup>

Following the traditional Confucian mode of top-down thinking, Zhang’s fifth poem extended the corruption of the officials, analyzed in the previous poem, to the moral vices of the people. To Zhang, it was the vices of contention, gambling, and superstition that held Xianju back from further development. In a note explaining the poem’s last line, “gongs and drums regularly make an uproar,” Zhang revealed that the locals did not believe in medicine, but instead that sickness was caused by possession, demons, and ghosts that could be scared away by loud noises.<sup>62</sup> Again, this reveals to us something of the world of the “silent majority” referenced by Cole. Theirs was a world of demons, possession, ghosts, and magic, little influenced by the ideals of Confucianism. Zhang’s implication was that if the officials had succeeded in their obligation, the common folk would adopt a more enlightened worldview, which would in turn enable them to rise from their poverty.

In the sixth, seventh, and eighth poems, Zhang discussed more of the moral vices of the people and their origin in the break down of traditional social order. Most notably, Zhang dwelled on the breakdown within and among families. “Man and wife are separated like birds,” while families argued and pursued lawsuits amongst themselves. This produced the abominable state that Zhang mourned so eloquently, “their suffering: a hedgehog hiding its head. Their sadness: a crow that loses its voice.” Directly following this poignant note on the people’s pain, Zhang called on “his highness” (assumedly referring to the emperor), appealed to kinship by calling him the “parent of the folk,” and suggested that he “might want to think of mulberry and hemp for their sake.” A note written to the side of this line demonstrates once again the ways Zhang tried to imagine sources of alleviation for the

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<sup>61</sup> *The World*, 72.

<sup>62</sup> *The World*, 72.

people's suffering:

The soil there is good for growing mulberry and hemp. If the local people could plant and cultivate them and produce silk and hemp cloth, they might be relieved from their poverty somewhat; but somehow no one has considered this option.<sup>63</sup>

The ninth poem, meanwhile, provided the image of an alternative—distant ideals to which current governing powers should have tried to conform. In the far off past, a certain “Magistrate Yu” governed Xianju. His “character and deeds [were] nobler than anything else in all time.” Zhang claimed that the common people still talked of Magistrate Yu and the prosperity they had enjoyed under his administration. They even sacrificed to his spirit twice a year, praying to him “in tears” when they experience injustices. Magistrate Yu could bring prosperity and impact common people to the extent that his memory lasted for generations because “he treated officials and the common folk as one family.”

The picture Zhang painted of Xianju was one of deep stratification. A class of powerful elites took complete advantage of impoverished peasants, who in turn argued and bickered amongst themselves. The situation was so bleak that Zhang mused, “I almost suspect that this is their inborn nature rather than something induced by circumstances.” However, his strong Confucian predilections outweighed these thoughts as he countered, “and yet, this is an impoverished county. How could any magistrate, as a parent to the common folk, remain indifferent to this? If the right kind of crop were planted there, then some agricultural profit could still be reaped.”<sup>64</sup>

Cultivating familial connections between those in power and the common folk, however, was not his ultimate solution. Zhang's hope was that this connection would spur those in power to investigate new methods of development. When discussing Tiantai County,

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<sup>63</sup> *The World*, 73.

<sup>64</sup> *The World*, 63.

for example, he concluded, “it is the nature of water to flow ceaselessly, and it is up to human planning and strategizing to guide its course and make it twist and turn.”<sup>65</sup> Governing officials had to cultivate familial relationships while pursuing knowledge, “planning and strategizing” if they wished to alleviate the poverty of their locale.

The central thesis of Mary Rankin’s *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China* was that the failure of the bureaucracy that Zhang observed was part of a broader process of decentralization and renegotiation of power that weakened the power of the Qing central government, contributing greatly to its ultimate demise.<sup>66</sup> Zhang was not alone in advocating for impoverished people. Other powerful gentry and elites were taking actions to alleviate the suffering of the poor on their own, extending the grasp of their own power and weakening that of the Qing government in the process. What Zhang observed as a failure of governing powers was really a symptom and portent of their transformation as power moved from the hands of the civil service to those of local elites.<sup>67</sup>

Zhang’s concentration on poverty was part of a growing social dialogue. Janet Chen suggested that impoverished people became a distinct social category in the 1890s.<sup>68</sup> In his tenth and final poem on Xianju, Zhang identified with the impoverished of Xianju, admitting, “I, too, am a commoner in hard straits.” The prosperity that had evaded the people of Xianju had evaded him, too. “The fair one is on the other side of the autumn river. Fragrant plants are equally distant in my dreams.” Zhang’s life was a manifestation of the erosion of traditional social distinctions in China. As the dialogue on poverty grew in the first decades

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<sup>65</sup> *The World*, 64.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin Elman argues that this process began much earlier and that its roots were in the commercialization of the late Ming dynasty. Elman, Benjamin, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China 1550-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 9-16.

<sup>67</sup> Cole also documents this change, emphasizing the role of lineage organizations in providing means of education and welfare for their members. Cole, 12-30.

<sup>68</sup> Janet Chen, *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900-1953* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 10-32

of the twentieth century and Chinese intellectuals became increasingly influenced by the Western sociological theories, Zhang's argument that poverty was caused by the corruption and failure of officials would be increasingly ignored. Instead, as Chen documented, Zhang's perception of the parasitic nature of bureaucrats would be switched, and the poor would increasingly be seen as the parasites. Instead of functioning on the compassion that Zhang advocated, the institutions developed in the twentieth century would adopt a punitive approach, trying to both punish and reform those found "guilty of indigence."<sup>69</sup>

Zhang's profound compassion was one of the most distinctive qualities of his writing, and he was disappointed when he failed to see similar compassion in the decisions and lives of those who governed. To accomplish his aims, then, he had to do something more than simply describe poverty. He had to find a way to inspire his audience to come closer to those they governed. "The key," he wrote, "is to stay close to human feelings." In order to alleviate poverty and properly govern the world, Zhang argued, "that we must get to the roots of human nature."<sup>70</sup>

### **Returning to the Roots of Human Nature**

When Zhang arrived in Tiantai during the 1893 expedition detailed in his first section, one of his sedan carriers wandered off from the main group and was accosted by a soldier who was stationed there "to defend against mountain bandits." The sedan carrier accidentally frightened off a pheasant the soldier was attempting to shoot. "The soldier flew into a rage, took out his saber, and threatened to stab [the sedan carrier]. At that, everyone present was stirred to indignation." Zhang dismounted the sedan chair and intervened, but the soldier still forced the man to "kneel down and kowtow to [him]." Zhang pondered the

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<sup>69</sup> See Chen, 32-179 for her full discussion, which is far more nuanced and developed than I have space here to represent.

<sup>70</sup> *The World*, 67.

occurrence, concluding that the soldier's unkindness was because he was not connected to human feeling.

Even bandits might be moved by human feeling; how can these soldiers be so impervious to courtesy? The people of Taizhou are often seized by soldiers for some trifle and then beheaded as "bandits"—just as in this case, I suppose. When those who are malevolent carry the weapons of destruction, and, moreover, possess power and authority, nobody cares for the destitute and miserable common folk, even if they have done nothing wrong to deserve the way they are treated. Isn't it extremely foolish for these poor folks to try to reason with them?

To Zhang, unkindness simply could not be reasoned with. "Those who [were] malevolent" would continue on in their malevolence because they refused to connect with human feeling, and so to understand the way to change the world, we must begin by understanding ourselves. The second section of his memoir is Zhang's attempt to understand himself and to explore human nature. It is no surprise, then, the level of self-reflection we find at the beginning of the second section.

I have already turned forty, the age of "having no doubts," but I still live in shameful obscurity. Rather than merely breathing in the world of men and being of no use for my home and country, I might as well seek out the mountain retreat and rest my spirit beyond the cloud vapors.<sup>71</sup>

Zhang cast his mind back to his early years when he lived through the horrors of civil war. The stories he told and observations he made in the process continually came back to the question of human nature and its application in understanding chaos and peace. In Zhang's view, human nature "is such that it becomes good when accustomed to good, and turns evil when accustomed to evil," and the way to prevent turning towards the evil is to "stay close to human emotion," specifically kinship, which "touches one's deepest feelings, whether one is in the world of darkness or the world of light."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Zhang is alluding to Confucius' declaration that by the age of forty, he no longer had any doubts. *The World*, 79- 80.

<sup>72</sup> *The World*, 95.

Good and evil were most clearly personified in two forms in Zhang's memories: the evil of the "shorthaired bandits," and the good of those who selflessly sacrificed themselves to save Zhang and his family. As a mark of their rebellion, the Taipings cut the distinctive Manchu queues and grew out their hair, and so were called the "longhairs," while those who opposed the Taiping forces kept their hair in the Manchu style, hence the appellation "shorthairs."<sup>73</sup> The shorthair forces, though nominally allied with the government forces, opportunistically turned to banditry and exploitation. They thrived on the chaos, and in Zhang's view were worse than the Taipings, who at least "wanted peace."<sup>74</sup> It is in Zhang's descriptions of hiding from the shorthair bandits that the reader first witnesses the horrors Zhang experienced.

Fleeing from the mountains to escape the bandits, Zhang and people from the village where he had been seeking refuge "ate acorns by day, and hid among brambles at night." One man, a Mr. Meng, brings his wife and child with him to hide from the bandits.

One day, as we were hiding together, it rained, and the boy started to cry. An old woman holding prayer beads and reciting the Buddha's name detested the boy, for she was convinced that his cries would lead the bandits to us. She kept muttering about it while reciting the Buddha's name. Thereupon, Mr. Meng tore the boy apart and killed him with his own hands.<sup>75</sup>

Two lessons can be learned from this horrific scene: the first is a reaffirmation of Zhang's perspective on human nature, that people can become habituated to either good or evil. The second is to demonstrate the collapse in kinship relationships that happen during times of chaos. The utter disgust with which Zhang wrote of Mr. Meng and the old woman reveals the value he placed on family relationships, a motif that continues throughout *The*

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<sup>73</sup> Tobey Meyer-Fong and others have discussed the importance of hair-length as a marker of allegiance during the Taiping era at great length. Meyer-Fong, Tobey, *What Remains: Coming to Terms With Civil War in 19<sup>th</sup> Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 10, 95-96.

<sup>74</sup> *The World*, 106.

<sup>75</sup> *The World*, 83.

*World's* second section.

In the scenes that followed the boy's death, Zhang established family-like ties with people outside of his strict family connections. Of Sanyi, who was unrelated by blood, but who ultimately sacrificed himself for Zhang, he wrote, "you, my brother, have left for the world of shadows forever. Thinking back on the brotherly love we shared, how could I ever dispel this sadness over your loss!" In recounting his memories, Zhang developed a view of family as something that could be destroyed between people with blood relation and created between those without it.

These constructed kinship ties recounted by Zhang bore similar material responsibilities as traditional family connections. After writing about the extent to which Ah Zhang aided Zhang and his family's survival, he reported hearing that "Ah Zhang had died of poverty and starvation."<sup>76</sup> Zhang then lamented that they "[relied] on him in a time of famine and abandon[ed] him in years of peace," concluding, "truly I do not see how Ah Zhang could ever forgive me." Zhang's implication here was that he and his family had material obligations to aid Ah Zhang in his poverty and somehow make his situation better because of the family-like ties built during the Taiping era.

The kinship motif was sealed in the final paragraphs, where Zhang recounted his reunification with his father, who "held [him] in his arms and wept."<sup>77</sup> It was his connection through his father and to his progenitors that inspired him to continue forward in the face of adversity following the end of the Taiping civil war. "My only wish is not to completely abandon my ancestors' enterprise, and that is all."<sup>78</sup> In the end, it is this feeling of familial obligation that kept him from retreating into the seclusion of the mountains. It was also this

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<sup>76</sup> *The World*, 92.

<sup>77</sup> *The World*, 106.

<sup>78</sup> *The World*, 107.

awareness of familial duty that Zhang argued should be the core of societal cohesion and the cure for chaos.

The shorthair bandits embodied the antithesis of Zhang's Confucian ideal. Even the Taiping rebels were not as bad as the shorthairs—Zhang admired their leadership and organization. The shorthairs, on the other hand, “would kill the Taiping rebels when they ran into Taiping rebels, and kill civilians when they ran into civilians, when they ran into the government's troops, they became the ‘righteous army.’” It was precisely the lack of a sense of relational obligations that Zhang found so abhorrent about the shorthair rebels. Throughout his reflections on the Taiping era, Zhang continued the pattern of contrasting the beauty of the physical world with the horrors happening around him, providing an entire section dedicated simply to the beautiful places he visited during the wanderings necessitated by the war.<sup>79</sup> “Even though it was a time of great chaos, I thought my life was like that of gods. Every spring, every rock, has a numinous charm.”<sup>80</sup> In the face of such startling natural beauty, it was incredible to Zhang that people were able to continue on in their barbaric ways:

And yet, human beings continue to dream their great dream, and none wakes up from it. From past to present they have always been... harming and murdering one another. What ignorance! I turn around and see the mountain flowers in bright red blossoms as if they were smiling; the realm of happiness in nature and that of suffering in the human world are as far apart as clouds and ravines. As I look up at the blue sky, the white sun is shining forth with a dazzling light. It is all very sad.

It must be remembered that this compelling section was written after Zhang's lifetime of reflection and contemplation. It reflected not only the horrors of China's civil war, but also the profound frustrations Zhang felt about the state of the prefectures through which he wandered in 1893. This self-reflexive narrative structure of first recounting horrors and then describing the beauty of nature that surrounds those horrors is reminiscent of the first and

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<sup>79</sup> *The World*, 100-103.

<sup>80</sup> *The World*, 103.



second poems Zhang wrote about Xianju in the first section. That “desolate, deplorable” place also contained a “natural charm.”<sup>81</sup> It was “quiet, empty, distant from the dusty world: truly a suitable dwelling for immortals.”

To Zhang, the answer to suffering was surrounding him in the beauty of the natural world, which taught the correct way of living. It was when the “spiritual energy of mountains and rivers” could be “expressed through human beings” that society would prosper; otherwise, the “ethereal numinousness of the human heart [would] be clogged,”<sup>82</sup> and society would crumble. The horrible manifestations of Mr. Meng killing his own son and the shorthair bandits causing chaos were aberrations from the way of nature, and thus produced great suffering.

From Zhang’s memories of the Taiping rebellion, we learn that human nature is malleable, and that human feeling is based in family ties. The chaos of war serves to emphasize the importance of proper governance. In the third section, Zhang asked a pivotal question of his memories, “how sad! Soldiers, bandits—they were all just farmers’ sons in the beginning. Who had sown the seeds of discord and caused them to hate one another?”<sup>83</sup>

This question, however, was not simply retrospective. Zhang’s memories of the Taiping period were so important because they resonated with his continued experience. The defeat of the Taiping in 1864 was not the end of banditry in the Jiangnan region. Throughout Zhang’s life, banditry and violence continued to be an issue for those in positions of power.

*The World* began with Zhang noticing that a few men traveling close to him spoke with Hunanese accents, marking them as potential bandits,<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *The World*, 69.

<sup>82</sup> *The World*, 64-65.

<sup>83</sup> *The World*, 121.

<sup>84</sup> Accent was an important marker of allegiances and danger during the Taiping Period; given Zhang’s descriptions here, it remained an important identifier of danger throughout the late nineteenth century. See Meyer-Fong, 66-83.

and the first few pages described the great lengths he went through to avoid them. Her interpretation of *The World* as being primarily focused on the Taiping era led Xiaofei Tian to conclude that Zhang was likely overreacting because of his childhood experiences. Zhang was not just reacting to memories, however; he was reacting to current conditions. The memories he recounted in the second section were much more than “mourning and remembrance.” They were an exercise in introspection that demonstrated human nature was malleable. Because of this, it was requisite to stay close to human feeling rooted in kinship relationships in order to connect with the numinous way of nature and avoid chaos and destruction.

### **The Way of Governing the World**

Banditry and poverty, to Zhang, created a vicious cycle. Poverty led men to banditry, and banditry further impoverished. But neither was the root of the problem. In one of the most poignant lines of his writing, Zhang spelled out the problem simply and clearly: “Alas! All these ‘bandits’ are but the little children of Our Imperial Majesty!”<sup>85</sup> Zhang portrayed incredible compassion for bandits—even the Taiping rebels who caused the uprising that scarred his childhood. The problems rested squarely with the governing officials, who were “as fierce as fighting cocks and indulge[d] in their wrath to destroy the lives of the common folk.”<sup>86</sup> In the third section, Zhang recounted witnessing gross exploitations by tax collectors and other officials, who exacerbated the poverty of the people by taking far more than was just. For example, the common people “hate[d] the ‘traveling merchant tax’ much more than they hate[d] the bandits.”<sup>87</sup> Oftentimes, however, the officials would even collude

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Rankin also reports that disbanded Hunanese soldiers settled in eastern Zhejiang in the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion: Rankin, 58

<sup>85</sup> *The World*, 174.

<sup>86</sup> *The World*, 174.

<sup>87</sup> *The World*, 170.

with bandits to take advantage of the common people. After asking a village elder in Xianju why people did not report to the officials after being pressured to join the bandits, Zhang was informed that “half the bailiffs side with the bandits.”<sup>88</sup>

Zhang felt he lived in a “declining age,” when “the ruler does not act like a ruler, a minister does not act like a minister, a father does not act like a father, and a son does not act like a son—not to mention husband and wife, brothers and friends.”

When one tries to trace the root cause of the problem, one finds but one word: greed. So I say that the fall of a country is brought about by the greed of officials. The greedier the superiors are, the more stricken the common folk are. When the common folk are stricken, then cunning and deception arise, and public morals are more and more corrupted every day... the orders from superiors are increasingly urgent and strict, and the common folk are increasingly ill at ease and perturbed, until the situation finally becomes uncontainable.<sup>89</sup>

Greed was the very opposite of kinship, and so the greed of the officials was their failing to “stay close to human emotion.” Because human nature, to Zhang, was such that it became easily habituated to evil, the decline in governance led to habits and trends that were difficult to reverse. Essentially, Zhang was telling those in governing positions that if they desired to understand the root causes of banditry and poverty, they should gaze in the mirror and become acquainted with their own greed.

Zhang’s observations of east Zhejiang society in the 1880s and 90s bear striking resemblance to the metaphorical critique of Chinese society written by fellow Shaoxing native, Lu Xun, who would have been twelve or thirteen years old while Zhang was busy recording his thoughts in *The World of a Tiny Insect*. It would be another twenty-five years until he published *A Madman’s Diary*, in which a purportedly insane man realizes that his entire village is trying to cannibalize him. Based on Zhang’s descriptions, it is not difficult to

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<sup>88</sup> *The World*, 173.

<sup>89</sup> *The World*, 144.

imagine Xianju County as the setting for Lu Xun's story. Lu Xun saw Confucianism and traditional value systems as the root of China's degeneration; in the preceding century, Zhang Daye saw Confucianism as the solution to social crisis.

The insufficiency of the officials at Xianju, according to Zhang, was that they had embarked on their careers by studying *the Classics*, but that they had either not understood their meaning, or upon entering office, they forgot deeper messages of Confucianism and stopped studying. "A noble man," Zhang wrote, "studies the Way and loves the people."<sup>90</sup> But Confucianism alone was not enough. Zhang also lamented at the sight of common people chanting the name of the Buddha at a temple for Daoist gods.<sup>91</sup> He emphasized the importance of proper education in all three systems of thought for the successful governing of the world.

When the country is in good order, the Buddhists roam beyond the heavenly realm, the Daoists roam beyond the human realm, and the world is managed by the Confucians. At a time when Buddhists and Daoists hide their traces, the Confucians grow old and die at home, the common folk become increasingly impoverished and try to swindle one another, famines occur in succession, and brutal strongmen are ready to pounce on the weak, invasions and attacks from the enemy states are not far behind.<sup>92</sup>

Zhang's record of interactions with Buddhist monks, Daoist recluses, and Confucian scholars offer meaningful insights into developments within these traditions. While such analysis is outside the scope of this paper, *The World of a Tiny Insect* may hold important insights for those engaging in a study of intellectual and religious history in the latter years of the Qing Dynasty. These prescriptions for change were an affirmation of China's traditional system of governance. Zhang's syncretic approach emphasized the importance of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism working together to imbue the human world with

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<sup>90</sup> *The World*, 62.

<sup>91</sup> *The World*, 131.

<sup>92</sup> *The World*, 65.

the same beauty and order of the natural world. The spiritual energy of nature desired to manifest itself in the human world, but “if they do not cultivate their virtue and engage in studies, the ethereal numinousness of the human heart will be clogged, and it will be impossible to gradually draw out its pure concerns. If the Way of the Great Three is cut off, then the myriad principles will fall into disarray and the world will become lawless.”<sup>93</sup>

Zhang walked a fine line, clearly blaming those in power for failing to study, cultivate themselves, and govern properly. Yet he maintained his support for the system itself. In one episode in the third section, Zhang encountered “the Restoration Society,” which sought for the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty. He criticized them for “interfere[ing] in state affairs” while “never accomplish[ing] anything...”<sup>94</sup> He saw no utility in revolutionary efforts, but advocated tirelessly for change. A summary of his advice for those in government served as the final paragraph of the third section.

The problems described above are all due to the fact that the foundation has not been established at the outset. Once the foundation is established, everything will be on track, and governance is not so difficult after all. What, then, is the foundation? I say; it is to be public-minded and sincere; it is to avoid being greedy, hypocritical, eager for instant success, or fearful of getting in trouble; it is to treat people gently and generously, so that the common folk will come to you; it is to be astute and discerning so that the common folk will trust you.<sup>95</sup>

The sentence with which Zhang closes *The World of a Tiny Insect* is most indicative of how he felt of those undertaking governance during his life.

Is there in the world any worthy parent to the common folk who might be so inclined? Alas, how sad! Alas, how sad!

## Conclusion

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<sup>93</sup> *The World*, 64.

<sup>94</sup> *The World*, 124

<sup>95</sup> *The World*, 176.

In the introduction to his second section, Zhang revisited that familiar motif of trying to decide whether to stay in the world or retire to the mountains. He confided in the reader that upon returning to Ningbo, after the travel through Tiantai down to Xianju to visit the grave of his friend Yuan Jichuan that made up the first section of the book, he began making arrangements to purchase a small house in Tiantai. He looked forward to retiring there, spending his time discussing poetry and classics with the young and chatting about farming with peasants.

Not to mention there would be Daoist adepts and Buddhist monks who could entertain me; cranes in the autumn and gibbons in the spring to befriend me and quell my mundane thoughts. I would love to ride on the clouds and roam Heavenly Pillar Mountain.<sup>96</sup>

Nonetheless, before retiring away from the world, Zhang had to do his duty to his father and ancestors by contributing something to the world. Zhang's writing is much more than a reflection on the Taiping civil war. The act of writing *The World of a Tiny Insect* was Zhang's decision in that tension of whether to abandon this world by finding peace and respite in mountain seclusion, or to stay in the "dusty realm," doing what he could to help alleviate the suffering of the people. In writing *The World*, Zhang was deciding to make one last attempt at carrying on the work of his ancestors. *The World* was written for the sake of the future, and not for the sake of the past. *The World of a Tiny Insect* should be read first as a prelude to 1911, and not as a postlude to 1864. *The World* is most useful for seeing the poverty, corruption, banditry, and subtle changes in the nature of local power that exaggerated the tensions culminating in the downfall of the Qing Dynasty.

Zhang opened his preface audaciously, claiming that his tiny cry revealed something about the vast world. He wrote stunning critiques of local governing elites and expressed profound compassion for the common people, and even bandits. He opened his heart,

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<sup>96</sup> *The World*, 80.

expressing incredible loneliness and disappointment. He relayed his memories of tragedy and horror. But we must also remember Zhang Daye as a man who was capable of seeing great beauty. His memoir deserves to be known for what he intended it to be—not a work of mourning and remembrance, but an investigation into the nature of poverty and a powerful argument for the human capacity to capture the beauty of nature in building prosperous societies. Carefully examining *The World*, we hopefully come at least slightly closer to Mr. Lü the woodworker in our appreciation for that wild fellow, Zhang Daye.

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