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The Marvelous Tale of Lady Tan: Between Central and Local in Song-Yuan-Ming China

Introduction

In 1368, when Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 founded the Ming dynasty and became the first Ming emperor, he initiated a number of policies intended to strengthen central polity and weaken local variance (Dreyer 1982; Farmer 1995). County magistrates everywhere embarked on the building of local institutions such as temples and schools that mirrored those at the capital (Schneewind 2006). This process, which I refer to as ‘centralisation’, continued under the fifteenth-century successors of the Ming founder, until it slowly began to give way to a different process: the crumbling of central institutions and the growth of local and regional initiatives that we associate with the cultural flourishing of the late Ming (Mote 1999, 743–775). As Peter Bol has argued, centralisation, followed by a shift towards local initiatives and activism (‘localisation’), is a cyclical pattern in Chinese history, visible in, for example, the centralizing tendencies of the Northern Song followed by the localisation of the Southern Song, or the early Qing establishment of Manchu rule followed by the gradual waning of state control over society that characterises the nineteenth century (Bol 2003, 4).

Bol’s cyclical pattern, in which the impulse repeatedly shifts from central to local and back, does not sit entirely easily with another view of periodisation in later imperial China: Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn, editors of *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History* (2003), argue that the establishment of Qing rule and the activist control of the Qing state over local society follow a period of almost seven

hundred years of passivity on the part of the state. The start of the period named the ‘Song-Yuan-Ming transition’ by Paul Smith and Richard von Glahn is the loss of the north and the establishment of the Southern Song in 1126 (Smith and von Glahn 2003, 6). From the twelfth century onwards, they argue, the centralizing policies of the government gave way to local literati initiatives, and the political, social, and cultural strategies available to members of the elites to maintain and improve their status shifted away from the central towards the realm of the local (Hartwell 1982; Hymes 1986). They see the Song-Yuan-Ming transition ending around 1500, when the social and economic developments usually associated with the late-imperial period gathered pace. Throughout this period, they suggest, the political elites were largely autonomous, and the local was the most important realm of activity (Smith and von Glahn 2003, 6–7, 22).

In both visions, the ‘local’, constructed either in response to temporary impulses from the central government as Bol sees it, or as the default space in the absence of a strong centre, as some of the contributors in the Smith and von Glahn volume see it, forms the central stage on which literati activism is played out.¹ The difference between the two lies in the interpretation of Zhu Yuanzhang’s reign and his impact on local society.² In the context of these discussions, it is worthwhile exploring the meaning of ‘the local’ further, to gain a better understanding of the ways in which literati related to central government and local society during the early Ming. This essay looks at the ways in which different individuals imbued their locality with meaning, and constructed themselves as belonging locally during a time when the Hongwu 洪武 and Yongle 永樂 emperors drew men from Ji’an 吉安 (in Jiangxi province) to the centre. The starting point

for this analysis will be the tale of the marvelous (*chuanqi* 傳奇) by Li Zhen 李禎 (1376-1452) about the bloodstain of Lady Tan 譚, a source that will be read in the context of a range of locally produced materials from Ji'an.

The Tale of Lady Tan

Li Zhen was appointed Hanlin bachelor soon after he passed the *jinsi* examination in 1404. He would go on to serve as one of the compilers of the fifteenth-century encyclopedia *Yongle dadian* 永樂大典. After briefly holding a high post in Guangxi in 1418, he was banished to Fangshan 房山 near Beijing less than a year later, where he served as supervisor of forced labor in (Goodrich and Fang 1976, 805–7; *Mingshi* 明史, *juan* 221; Qiao 2002, 103–111). While he was there, he was given a collection of tales by the Hangzhou poet Qu You 瞿佑 (1341-1427), entitled *Jiandeng xinhua* 剪燈新話.³ In admiration of this collection, Li Zhen wrote a collection of his own, entitled *Jiandeng yuhua* 剪燈餘話 (Li 1962). One of these tales features the recently appointed magistrate of Yongxin 永新 county in Ji'an prefecture, Wu Sidao 烏斯道, who noticed a dark stain in the shape of a woman on the floor between the pillars of the county school. Wu was told the stain had been formed by the blood of Lady Tan of the Southern Song dynasty. She and her infant child had been brutally murdered by Mongol invaders when she had refused to succumb to their attempts to violate her in the school where she and her family

had taken refuge. Her blood had left indelible marks on the school floor, still visible roughly one hundred years later.⁴ Wu was deeply moved. He had the shrine for Chaste Lady Tan restored, and composed a text to commemorate her.

The focus of Li Zhen's story then shifts to Wu's son, Wu Xi 烏熙, a gifted zither player. One night, as he plays his zither, he encounters a girl who identifies herself as Lady Tan's deceased servant. She explains that her mistress has obtained a high rank among the immortals, but is displeased with the way in which she is remembered in Yongxin. The servant asks Wu Xi to place a table next to her mistress' altar so offerings can be made to her too. As she departs, she leaves behind a series of twenty poems, composed by Lady Tan. The next morning, Wu Xi recounts these events to his father, who sets up a place of worship for the servant, next to the one for Chaste Lady Tan, and makes offerings to both women. Gratified, the servant returns to Wu Xi one final time, leaving behind a book of notes, which contain a melody for the zither (Li 1962; Franke 1959, 361-363).

Both the genre of the marvelous tale and the themes that feature in this tale—the chaste woman who died defending her honor, the shrine, even the blood stain—are familiar to readers of Ming literature. More unusual is the combination of sources that transmit this same story: a short narrative of these events appears in *Songshi* 宋史 in the section devoted to exemplary women (*lienü* 列女), and in a commemorative inscription (*ji* 記) by the historical Wu Sidao, a fourteenth-century magistrate who served in Yongxin almost one hundred years after her death. The Yongxin county gazetteer

(*Yongxin xianzhi* 永新縣志, 1874) also contains late Ming and Qing dynasty inscriptions for the shrine, and a series of anonymous poems composed for Lady Tan. The existence of this particular combination of sources for the tale of Lady Tan allows us to explore the ways in which the themes of locality and belonging are played out in different contexts.

Li Zhen's 'Yue ye tan qin ji'

Li Zhen's tale, 'Yue ye tan qin ji 月夜彈琴記' (An Account of Playing the *Qin* on a Moonlit Night) is one of only two stories in *Jiandeng yuhua* that are set in Ji'an prefecture. The collection as a whole is not about Ji'an or about 'the local' per se, but the tale of Lady Tan can be read as a story that explores the meaning of the local. We first learn about this particular locality in the story's introduction of Lady Tan, transmitted to the reader in the voice of the man who leads Magistrate Wu past the local sights. This scholar, who remains otherwise invisible in the tale, explains that the stain in the shape of a woman Wu Sidao noticed on the floor had been created by the blood of the chaste wife of Tan when she died there at the end of the Southern Song dynasty. This is how he introduces the political context in which she died:

When the Yuan [forces] came south of the river and annexed this area ,
Chancellor Wen Tianxiang 文天祥 raised an army to defend the [Southern Song]
imperial house. Soon afterwards Liu Pan 劉槃 led the Yuan soldiers in ransacking
the city, where half the people were killed (Li 1962, 147).

We learn right away about the invasion of the Mongol Yuan forces in this area, and the involvement of Wen Tianxiang (1236-1283). Wen, last chancellor of the Song dynasty and famed for his resistance against the Mongols, hailed from Jishui 吉水 county in Ji'an prefecture, to which Yongxin also belonged.⁵ Suddenly we are not talking about a purely local matter—the bloodstain in the shape of a woman on the school floor—but about the events of the 1270s, the Mongol conquest of South China, which shook the entire realm. Wen Tianxiang is the link between the local and the national; he is the man who grew up nearby, and went on to make a significant impact on the national stage.

Li Zhen was deeply impressed by his fellow Ji'an man Wen Tianxiang. In 1436, Li would send a memorial to the emperor, expressing his regret over the lack of regular worship for Wen, and demanding a more illustrious posthumous name for Wen. The memorial expresses his wish that Wen be worshipped on a par with Zhang Xun 張巡 and Xu Yuan 許遠, both Tang dynasty heroes who died in the battle against An Lushan 安祿山. He requests that the Ji'an prefectural government set aside official funds for the provision of offerings and give Wen a posthumous title that reflects his steadfast loyalty (Franke 1959, 345–6). His admiration for Wen is clearly rooted in local pride, but that is not the only factor at work in Li Zhen's mention of Wen in his story. Because of this reference, Yongxin becomes a place where national politics were played out. Moreover, in this story, Li Zhen makes a connection between Lady Tan and Wen: they are both from Ji'an, and both are worthy of recollection and admiration on the national stage.

Li Zhen's tale then returns to the specifically local, and narrates how the entire Tan family had been killed as they were trying to find refuge in the school. Lady Tan's furious words, spoken to her attackers before they kill her, appeal to her local standing in the community:

I am the daughter of noble ancestors (*gui zong* 貴宗) and the wife of a distinguished family (*ming jia* 名家). How can you brutes pair up with me? My brother-in-law has been killed by you; my aunt has also been killed by you. I regret I cannot dismember you, cutting your meat into ten-thousand pieces and feeding them to the kites. But death is all that remains for me, so I can never be a match for you, brutes! (Li 1962, 147)

Her good name and the local reputation of her family stand in stark contrast with the brutality of her attackers, who are likened to dogs and pigs (*quanzhi* 犬彘) in her term of abuse. Her local reputation is at stake here, and she feels fortified by her standing in local society. It is entirely fitting, then, that she made a lasting impression in her locality, her blood leaving an indelible mark in the Confucian temple where she and her child were slain. Moreover, because she was a local heroine who defended her reputation against the invaders, the locals remembered and worshipped her thereafter.

If we examine how she is constructed as a 'local', we find that she never speaks to us directly in Li Zhen's tale; her words come to us via her servant, who transmits the messages of her mistress to Wu Xi. As Bruce Robbins has shown, servants often perform instrumental roles as the 'narrators, observers, informants, and messengers' who move

the plot forwards and resolve the action (Robbins 1986, 41). The servant is the one who first tells Wu Xi that his zither playing affected Lady Tan:

After the honorable gentleman [i.e. Wu Sidao] carried out the restorations [of the shrine], she [i.e. Lady Tan] briefly paid [the shrine] a visit. That night, there was not a sound to be heard and the light of the moon was [bright] like day, and my mistress stole a glance at her old hometown. While the affairs of the people have all changed, the place is still the same. Times change so fast, but this piece of earth still yields firewood and hay [i.e. daily provisions]. She was unable to overcome the same emotions that [Ding] Lingwei 丁令威 [see below] expressed on his memorial column. Then you played your sad song, and she listened to it with tears running down both cheeks (Li 1962, 148).

The servant does more than transmit a message; she investigates the circumstances of her mistress' shrine and cult, and identifies these circumstances as wanting:

[My mistress] lodges temporarily in the shrine for the local earth god in the Confucian temple, a male god of a filthy latrine, which is really not at all suitable. So I wish to request to be placed by the side of the chaste lady, and to be placed in a different location, ..., then I will no longer suffer My ghost will have somewhere to return home to ... If you have pity on me, then please arrange this for me (Li 1962, 148).

She clearly not only objects to the location of her mistress' shrine, next to that of an unsuitable male god, but also wishes to have a shrine of her own, to safeguard her own circumstances. She is the one who performs all the crucial transactions and communications in the tale, slipping back and forth between this world and the immortal

realm. She not only delivers all the important information to Wu Xi, not to mention the annotated poems and musical score but also brings about the desired result for Lady Tan: from now on, due to the servant's interventions, Lady Tan will be appropriately worshipped and shielded from the unwanted male deity's presence.⁶

The servant's communications are couched in exceptionally erudite language. Just in these few lines there are references to lines from Tang poets like Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) and Li He 李賀 (791-817), and to the tale of the legendary Ding Lingwei. Such layered writing is of course part of the genre, and Li Zhen was clearly a master at it. These phrases, constructed from fragments of other poems, express a sense of nostalgia; time has moved on and inevitably the lives of people have all been changed. But perhaps even stronger is the expression of a sense of loss. The place is still there, still providing a livelihood for those who live there, and the scenery remains unchanged, but she has moved on to another world. . This is no longer her space – she has lost her sense of belonging to this place. Her nostalgia is tinged with a sense of loss, and her mention of Ding Lingwei underlines this sentiment; her brief reference to him serves as a kind of shorthand to express these complex emotions.

Ding Lingwei was a man from Liaodong who lived during the Han dynasty. He studied Daoist practices at Lingxu 靈虛 Mountain, and when he had become an immortal, he was transformed into a crane. Flying home to Liaodong one thousand years after he had left, he perched on top of a high column. When a youth attempted to shoot him with his bow and arrow, Lingwei flew up into the sky and spoke these words:

There is a bird, a bird named Ding Lingwei; having been away from home for a thousand years he only returns now. The city and its outskirts are as before, but the people have all changed. The grave tombs keep piling up; why not study to be an immortal?⁷

Like Lady Tan, Ding Lingwei has moved to another world, and now no longer belongs in this world. This place is no longer his home.

While the message of these words reaches us readers directly enough, the layered nature of the language creates a distance between the woman, whose emotions they convey, and the reader. The communications between Wu Xi and Lady Tan all happen via the servant, who draws attention to that distance by serving as a go-between and embodying the social hierarchies that govern these communications -- where Lady Tan delegates all communication to her maid (Robbins 1986, 16). The distance is enhanced by the indirect process in which the poems are transmitted:

My mistress said to me: ‘You are humiliated by being placed among ghosts. I am unable to comfort you, but you can at least fetch me a brush and paper’. I did as she said, and she moistened her brush to compose twenty new-style *centos* (*jiguju* 集古句) of seven characters per line. After she gave them to me, she threw down her brush, rose into the sky and disappeared. Jizhi 缉之 [i.e. Wu Xi] said: ‘Where are the poems?’ The servant said: ‘I have treasured the [poems] as if they were precious jade objects. I cannot give you the original, and even if I could give them to you, immortals write in the seal script of the clouds, and you would not

understand them. But I can recite them, and you can then write them down' (Li 1962, 148).

By the time we read the poems, therefore, we are told that they have first been noted down in one script, then recited, and then written down once more in another script. The transmission of literary compositions by residents of the immortal realm to the world of the living is a fascinating topic in itself, to which several scholars have already devoted attention (Zeitlin 1998; Ropp 2001; Jordan and Overmyer 1986). However, what I wish to emphasise here is that the complexity of the process of transmission serves to increase the distance between ourselves and the woman who composed the poems in the story. It may even do more than that. The sense of distance created by the process of transmission mirrors the distance that Lady Tan senses between herself and the place she once knew and loved. The same way we are prevented from having direct access to what happens in the realm of immortals, immortals are excluded from actively participating in the mortal realm.

The poems

These twenty eight-line 'centos' of seven characters per line, left behind by the servant when she first takes her leave of Wu Xi poems also dwell on the themes of nostalgia and loss.⁸ I shall highlight two examples here. The following poem appears as the third in the sequence:

The autumnal cricket chirps, the trees are verdant green,
At the tall tower on the city wall, I encounter the vast wilderness.
At midnight the drips of the water clock urge on the arrows of dawn,

The bright lights of the city streets make me long for home.

In the courtyard filled with poetic scenery, red leaves fall.

The sad winds of this place unsettle the poplars.

The sleeves of the dancers and the curved bows are totally forgotten,

This world is nothing but desolation and frustration (Li 1962, 149).

Each of these eight poetic lines is taken from another poem.⁹ Examining them in their original contexts reveals the way in which each conveys its own resonances and associations. The second line, for example, is from a famous poem by Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元. It graphically depicts the poet's sense of exile and his gloom over having been sent to a place where 'not even letters keep us in touch with home'. Time passes slowly in the poem; the drips of the water clock, the falling leaves, the sad winds rustling in the poplars all enhance the sense of time at a near standstill. The focus is the sense of desolation and frustration at having been forgotten.

The following example is the sixth in the sequence of poems.

My home is by a cold pond; its door is just leaning to,

Its refinement and tranquility is so rare in life.

I use no make-up to stain my face,

I regret only the black dust that soils my white clothes.

My longing eyes follow the returning geese until they disappear,

My separated soul chases the cuckoo in flight.

The eastern wind blows my tears against the falling flowers,

Full of anguish, this beautiful face will never be home again (Li 1962, 150).

This poem is a pastiche of lines from the Tang and Song poems of Liu Changqing 劉長卿 (c. 710-787), Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772-842), Du Fu (712-770), Chen Yuyi 陳與義 (1090-1139), Liu Zongyuan, Wei Zhuang 韋莊 (c. 836-910), Zhao Gu 趙嘏 (9th century) and Song Yong 宋邕 (also given as 雍, dates unknown). The overall effect of the combination of these lines from diverse origins, stitched together to form a single, new, coherent poem, is powerful. The central (fifth) line is from a famous poem by Liu Zongyuan, which expresses the anguish of exile and separation.¹⁰ Although each line expresses a sense of desolation, the reader is aware of there being no single author. The fragmentation caused by the constant references to different titles and authors creates a sense of void, and the disembodied voice conveys a feeling of homelessness, paradoxically evoked by the use of the word ‘home’. ‘Home’ is the key word in the poem, both in the sense of one’s family and social foundation (jia 家) as well as the place to which one returns (*gui* 歸). The idea of ‘home’ opens the poem in the first line and closes the poem in the last, but both are denied: the ‘home’ in the first line is a cold and lonely place, the ‘home’ in the last line is the place to which one can never return and from which one remains forever excluded. Overall, the poem illustrates the sense of dislocation and exclusion felt by Lady Tan. Home is a place she once knew, but she no longer belongs there. Lady Tan’s emotions, her feelings of exclusion and loss of belonging, are attributed to her by Li Zhen, speaking to his readers in a female voice. In

fact, one way of reading this version of Lady Tan's tale is as an expression of sadness over the loss of one's home.

Lady Tan as moral tale?

Clearly, the Lady Tan story is not exclusively about local belonging; the story is rich enough to allow a variety of different readings. One can also read it as a moralistic piece, manifesting Li Zhen's Confucian values, particularly Confucian views of the ideal woman, since the glory goes to the woman who chooses to be killed to preserve her chastity. Because her honour is preserved, the blood that stains the floor remains forever visible as a reminder of the brutal act that led to the end of her life. Moreover, it not only reminds the visitor of the superior virtue of one local woman, but also of the national event: the demise of the Song at the hands of the brutal Yuan invaders. Lady Tan is positioned at the heart of a local community, drawing strength from her local position, and also drawing the community together by setting a moral example. Her memory, and the shrine where that memory is preserved, become, in Li Zhen's vision of that local community, a site for the celebration of that community. In remembering her, the community remembers all that is good about the area: its cohesion and the moral exemplars of its women, symbolised by her sacrifice. In that sense, this is a story about moral values and state loyalty. It is a familiar story, as Beverly Bossler (2004), Katherine Carlitz (1994) and others have pointed out. Stories abound in the Ming of women sacrificing themselves to preserve the morals of their husbands' families, especially at the hands of non-Han invaders. Their private acts can be read as very public acts of loyalty to Han identity and Confucian values, especially in the early Ming, when women's bodies

are still ‘powerful emblem[s] of loyalty’, and not yet the ‘object[s] of connoisseurship’, that they become in the late Ming (Carlitz 1994, 104).

It may well not be unusual for a Confucian like Li Zhen to use a woman’s sacrificial act as a symbol of loyalty to the state. It is, however, an interesting choice to focus on blood as the medium that transmits this sentiment to later generations. On the one hand, stories circulated throughout the Ming, as they had in previous eras, of exemplary young men and women who fed their parents with a bloody soup made from parts of their own bodies. On the other hand, blood sacrifice was frowned upon in official religious rituals. Although the practice of sacrificing animals and offering meat at the shrines of popular gods continued, not only Confucians but also Daoists had long rejected the practice (von Glahn 2004, 64–5, 145). Li Zhen’s narrative of the deaths of Lady Tan and her child can be read as a didactic tale of loyalty and chastity, but the image of the sacrifice of her body in the Confucian temple, and the stain made by her blood as a perennial reminder of this single moment, form a striking contrast to that narrative. At a time when civil worship had long distanced itself from the bloody sacrifices of popular worship, it seems odd to find Li Zhen discussing the way in which a bloody stain commemorates state and Confucian morals. There are other signs of underlying tensions, as well. As we saw above, Lady Tan, by becoming an immortal, has lost her place within the community, and the poems express her grief (and that of her servant) over her loss of place within that community. There is a tension between the idealised sense she has of the place—where she was a daughter of noble birth and the wife in a distinguished family—and the reality of that place: the site she was brutally murdered, and where alien invaders took control. A further tension manifests itself in the role of Wu Sidao, the

Yongxin magistrate who begins the narrative by noting the sad state of disrepair into which the shrine has fallen:

Mr. Wu asked where the [Lady Tan] shrine (*ci*) was, and He Zhongshan 賀仲善 led him to it, but Wu observed that mice had dug through the broken walls and mosses had formed patterns on the empty steps. Everything had changed, and he felt saddened by the fact that her chaste soul was already so remote. [...] The gentleman sighed: ‘This falls under my responsibilities as magistrate’. So he began to raise funds and rebuilt a hall by the ceremonial pond. He had a likeness of her carved into reverse side of a stone tablet, and personally composed a text [for the front]. He had that placed at the entrance of the hallway, and whoever read it was so deeply moved that tears ran down both cheeks. Henceforth the name of the chaste women gained great prominence (Li 1962, 147–8).

Magistrate Wu orders the refurbishment of the shrine because he is moved by the contradiction between this community’s proud memory of this brave woman, and its neglect of her shrine. The responsibility for restoring the shrine falls, in Li Zhen’s text, to an outsider (Wu Sidao), and it is the text his inscription that moves those who visit the shrine.

Reading the story as a straightforward moral tale is made more difficult in light of such underlying tensions. The tensions are not only internal to the story, but also external, in that there was controversy over how the stories should be read. Ye Sheng 葉盛 (1420-1474) noted that after Li Zhen’s death, Censor Han Yong 韓雍 (1422-1478) requested the inclusion of Li Zhen in the Temple of Former Worthies (*xian xian ci* 先賢祠), a request

that was declined. 'Li was refused merely because he had once written *Jiandeng yuhua*' (Ye 1980, 142). Lu Rong 陸容 (1436-1498) described this sad state of affairs in more detail:

When Han Yong was inspector in Jiangxi, he once visited Luling 廬陵, where since the beginning of the Ming the names of various famous gentlemen have been entered in the Temple of Former Worthies. Master Li had the reputation of being plain, upright and incorrupt, but precisely because he wrote this book, he was snubbed (Lu 1985, 159).

Although there was support among Li Zhen's contemporaries, who praised his talents and poetic skills, they were also aware that there were elements in Li Zhen's collection of stories that were considered unacceptable and incompatible with Confucian orthodoxy. Of course the mere fact that he wrote a type of literature intended to entertain rather than educate could be construed as objectionable, but more likely specific themes in the collection incurred the wrath of those who had judged Han Yong's application for Li Zhen's enshrinement. We can only speculate which themes were found to be objectionable; most likely they were the erotic themes of a number of the stories. Could the bloody 'sacrifice' of Lady Tan in the Confucian temple also have been a source of outrage for the members of the Confucian establishment?

Reading the stories as straightforward moral tales is complicated by the presence of 'unorthodox elements', which are alluded to in contemporary prefaces to the work (Li 1962, 123). I would like to suggest that these elements help us to read Li Zhen's version of Lady Tan's story as an exploration of the meaning of local belonging. (In the last

sentence I was trying to connect your ‘unorthodox elements’ with this exploration, but I’m not sure how they are connected; also not sure what the unorthodox elements are; should you say what they are?) To explore this possibility, we need to look more closely at the circumstances under which Li Zhen wrote this story, which he describes in his own preface to the collection. The ways in which Li Zhen rewrote the sources he had to hand in writing this story, and the wider context of Ji’an literati writings also play a role here.

Li Zhen’s preface to the collection

The last of the prefaces added to the collection is the one by Li Zhen. Strictly speaking, it is a postface, composed in 1420:

Several years ago I was in charge of corvee labor at Changgan Temple. I happened upon *Rourouzhuàn* 柔柔傳, written by Gui Heng 桂衡 I wanted to imitate the style of its writing, so I wrote *Huanhunji* 還魂記. Seven years later, I was again [in charge of] corvee labor at Fangshan. I had a guest who gave Master Qu 瞿氏 from Qiantang’s 錢塘 *Jiandeng xinhua* to me. I loved it even more, and I really wanted to imitate it. . . . When I had some free time, I would write down stories I had heard, and so I wrote twenty stories, which I called *Jiandeng yuhua*, and I put *Huanhunji* at the end. I completed [the collection] while I was traveling. I worked from memory, without access to books for verification, and so, concerned that there would be too many errors, I did not dare show the collection to anyone (Li 1962, 129).

Li wrote this when he was banished from a post for the second time in his career. He had been appointed commissioner for Guangxi in 1418, but an otherwise unspecified affair led to his banishment to Fangshan, to the southwest of Beijing, where he was in charge of corvee labor. Li Zhen thus wrote the stories not only while he was posted away from his native home, but also in the difficult position of having been banished and demoted from his post. Longing for home must have taken on even greater significance under those circumstances. Li Zhen is quite explicit about his state of mind while he was writing these stories:

Twice now I have gone through hard times, with few days when I had enough to eat. ... How could I have opened up my innermost feelings and expressed my deep dejection if it had not been for paper, ink, and reciting poems? Even though I know that [what I have written] comes very close to mere amusement, on which little sympathy has to be expended, how else might I have avoided the inevitability of my suffering leading to groans and moans? (Li 1962, 129; Franke 159, 355).

According to Li Zhen's own representation of his circumstances, he wrote these stories as ways of dealing with his hardship, and ways of expressing his sentiments without resorting to complaint. He was truly a man not only away from his home but also deprived of a livelihood, a position in society, and a place to which he could belong.

Other versions of the tale of Lady Tan

As his preface makes clear, Li Zhen also wrote the stories 'without access to books for verification' (Li 1962, 129). It is hard to know whether we should take this entirely at

face value. The prefaces suggest that the stories were all completed in 1419 and 1420, and although the collection probably was not printed until 1433, there seems to be no mention of any extensive rewriting. We can probably assume that they were more or less in their complete form by 1420 (Franke 1959, 356). Since the story of Lady Tan and the bloodstain were included both in the *Songshi* and in the *Xin Yuanshi* 新元史, it seems very likely, although we have no explicit evidence for this, that Li Zhen would have taken note of one or both versions during his studies.

In the *Songshi*, Lady Tan's biography appears in the section devoted to women who died defending their honor. It narrates the events of 1277, when Mongol forces approached the town of Yongxin. In a desperate attempt to prevent the soldiers from entering, the residents had closed the gates. The Mongol soldiers, undeterred, smashed their way in, after which the following events took place:

Ms Zhao, [wife of Tan], clasping her child, followed her husband's parents, and together they sought refuge in the village school. The brutal soldiers got hold of them, and killed her parents-in-law. Grabbing Ms Zhao, [the soldiers] were about to rape her, but failed. Approaching her with a knife, they said: 'If you obey us, you will live. If you refuse, you will die'. Ms Zhao scolded them: 'My father-in-law was killed by you; my mother-in-law was killed by you. If I give in to you, I live but am unrighteous. I would rather follow my parents-in-law in death'. Hence she was killed, together with her infant. Her blood made a stain in the ritual hall between two pillars, and on the bricks it took the form of a woman and her child. Even after a long time it still looked as if [the stain] was fresh. Some thought it was fake, but even rubbing it with sandstone did not diminish [the stain] (or make

it go away). They then burnt it with glowing charcoal, but that only rendered the shape even more vivid (*Songshi*, 460.13490-91).

There are more details in this version, but the story is also more matter-of-fact. No references are included to Lady Tan's 'noble ancestors' and 'distinguished family', which would situate her in the local moral fabric. There are only references to moral universalities. To this account, if Li Zhen did indeed read it, he added the local elements that gave it character as a local tale.

If we are unsure whether Li Zhen read the *Songshi* biography, we have even less evidence of whether Li Zhen was aware of the other document available: the temple inscription composed by Wu Sidao after his visit to the shrine of Lady Tan. Nevertheless, reading the two texts together is revealing. Concerning the inscription, its author, the historical Wu Sidao, served as magistrate in Yongxin between 1376 and 1380. The text of the inscription, which he composed for the Yongxin shrine of Chaste Lady Tan, has been preserved in his literary collection, *Chuncaozhai ji* 春草齋集, as well as in the Yongxin county gazetteer (*Chuncaozhai ji* 14th century, 1.12b–14a; *Yongxin xianzhi* 永新縣志 1874/1989, 5.22a–23a).¹¹ The text begins with some historical facts: the dates of the recent restoration of the shrine for Lady Tan, and the precise location of the shrine. Wu introduces Lady Tan to his readers as follows:

This lady's surname was Zhao, her given name was lost and is now unknown. She hailed from Yongxin in Luling. She was born in Shuzhi 淑質. She married the son of the Tan family from the same village (*tongli* 同里). When she was 27, in the

13th year of Zhiyuan of the Yuan dynasty [1276], the area south of the river was annexed (*Yongxin xianzhi* 1874/1989, 5.22a–b).

In accordance with the conventions of the genre of inscriptions for shrines and temples, Wu Sidao is not writing a literary text, but providing factual data. He knows a great deal of detail about Lady Tan. His main source may well have been her biography in the *Songshi*, but he added her age and the exact place she was born. As his complete works testify, women were important to him, and he must have felt that these details mattered and gone out of his way to find them (*Chuncaozhai ji* 14th century, 2.15b–17a; 2.17b–19a; 2.20b–21b).

Having provided some of the background, Wu then goes on to tell a more political story: the events surrounding the Mongol invasion of Yongxin.

One year [after the annexation], in 1277, Wen Tianxiang, chancellor of the Song dynasty, intended to restore [power to the imperial Song throne]. He sent a letter to arrange for his brother-in-law [in Yongxin], Peng Zhenlong 彭震龍, to take up arms (*cf.* Brown 1986, 141). On the 19th day of the 7th month of that year soldiers gathered from within and without. [Peng] Zhenlong had already joined forces with his fellow townsmen from Yongxin... They fought with Jiangxi Transport Commissioner Liu Pan and General Xiao Ming 蕭明 in battle at Yongxin.

However, the soldiers sent by of Wen Tianxiang did not arrive, so they were defeated and suffered at the hands of the enemy. The northern army suddenly entered the city. There was great chaos in the city, as the people all grabbed their belongings and fled. The woman held the child she was nursing and together with

her parents-in-law ran quickly to the Hall of the Sages at the County School. Soldiers arrived there *en masse*, killing and raping people. This chaste woman was not afraid to resist the soldiers who wanted to rape her. The woman spoke angrily: 'My parents-in-law have been killed by you. I will guard my body with my life, and will not allow you [to do this]. How could I let my body be defiled because of my desire to live?' As she did not give in, the soldiers became angry, and they killed her and her child. At the time in the Hall of the Sages there was a butcher who was hiding in the courtyard in front of the Hall of Sages on the beams. He witnessed the killing of the woman, and he passed on the story in detail (*Yongxin xianzhi* 1874/1989, 22b).

Wu Sidao's account is much more fleshed out than the terse narrative of Lady Tan's biography. Apart from the intriguing detail about the butcher providing an eyewitness account from his hiding place, lending a certain authority to the text, which perhaps also emphasises the association between meat and sacrifice, the main difference is the level of detail about the circumstances of the Mongol invasion. The complex political circumstances surrounding the battle at Yongxin are highly significant. Lady Tan's fellow Yongxin residents were involved in the battle, called to duty by the famous Wen Tianxiang himself. In Wu Sidao's version of the events, Wen is responsible for drawing Lady Tan's close associates and into the battle, and indirectly for the killing of her relatives in the school. It is the absence of Wen's troops that makes the battle at Yongxin so painful for those involved, fighting as they were against Liu Pan, a Song deserter, who had served in Jiangxi on the orders of the Song emperor, but then defected to the Mongols. Wen's failure to arrive in time turns this into a political tale. Lady Tan's

steadfast loyalty represents loyalty to the Song, and Wen is little better than the deserter Liu Pan. In Wu's telling, these local events are meaningful because of their close connection to events on the national stage. They are the local manifestation of the circumstances occurring in the central state, Wu uses the tale of Lady Tan to negotiate his position between these two poles.

Wu Sidao ends his brief text with an explanation of his own role in restoring the shrine and commemorating her life:

Normally, the vitality of such a life is transmitted on metal or stone so that it will not be extinguished. Especially since [Lady Tan] died in the hall of the sage, it is even more important that the spirit of the sages [which she exemplifies] is brought out and made manifest. It is therefore appropriate that worship is carried out at her shrine at regular times in the year. I shall register this shrine with the prefectural government, and transmit [its story] to the authorities. This will support the community's recognition of this extraordinary event, motivate the bestowal of an honorary title, and ensure that [local] customs will be further encouraged
(*Yongxin xianzhi* 1874/1989, 23a).

Wu Sidao is in full magisterial flow here. He hopes to be able to affect local customs by improving the shrine, and establishing it as a central place for local worship. Wu Sidao wishes her moral example to be remembered locally and brought to the attention of the emperor via the proper bureaucratic channels. That the shrine was still visible in 1461, when the *Ming yitongzhi* 明一統志 was compiled suggests he had some success (*Ming yitongzhi* 1461, 56.21b). For Wu Sidao, Lady Tan's shrine and the story behind the bloodstain provided him with an opportunity to inscribe the site with a shared identity,

and to construct a role for himself within that local community. Of course this was nothing new: magistrates always looked for ways of enhancing their own reputation through restoration projects within the local community. The redaction of the story in different versions, however, highlights the difference between the responses of the two men: one (Li Zhen) a local who has lost his place within the community, the other (Wu Sidao) an outsider who seeks to enhance his local standing by inscribing this shrine with his version of its history. In both, the story of Lady Tan presents itself as focal point and a site for negotiation over the sense of local belonging.

Locality and belonging in Song-Yuan-Ming Ji'an

This reading of Lady Tan as a figure representing a loss of belonging to a locality for Li Zhen, and as a focus for the inscription of local community for Wu Sidao needs to be situated in the wider context of Ming Ji'an. As extant literary collections testify, literati in Southern Song and Yuan Ji'an presented themselves as active participants in local communities. They wrote inscriptions for local institutions—schools, academies, but mostly temples—and filled them with suggestions about the improvement of local morals. Locally-based scholars like Ouyang Shoudao 歐陽守道 (1208-1273) or Liu Chenweng 劉辰翁 (1232-1297) frequented the temples in Ji'an, often disapproving of the practices of worshippers, and wrote crisp texts establishing the 'proper' history of the institutions and the appropriate behavior of visitors. In so doing, they sought to position themselves within the communities that revolved around such institutions and to profile themselves as active local participants.¹²

While Southern Song and Yuan Ji'an literati on the whole remained in Ji'an, large numbers of early Ming Ji'an men served at the imperial court. Their success at gaining access to high positions at court has been discussed in detail by John Dardess for Taihe 泰和 (Dardess 1996). As in other parts of China, the establishment of Ming rule in Ji'an led to a sharp increase in rebuilding local institutions (Schneewind 2006; Gerritsen 2007). Throughout Ji'an, both the fabric and the administrative structures of local institutions were reconstructed on a vast scale. It was magistrates appointed by the centre to serve in the area that took the leading role within that process, rather than the locally based literati. Early Ming literary collections written by Ji'an authors conjure up an image of an active community of scholars from Ji'an who shared and celebrated their Ji'an connection not within Ji'an, but at the capital. There they continued to write about local institutions, but their perspective on the local community had become distant. Rather than seeking to transform the day-to-day behavior of temple worshippers, and writing from within the local community, early Ming authors stressed their location at the capital and their ignorance of local detail. 'Long ago I was told about this monastery in Longquan 龍泉, but I have never been there' (*Longquan xianzhi* 龍泉縣志 1873/1989, 16.34b). The author of those words not only refused to write an inscription for Longyin Monastery 龍吟觀 in Longquan, but also stressed that he was a Hanlin Compiler at the capital and had only recently learnt the details of its restoration. 'The monk Huanfei 環肫 did not consider hundreds of miles too far to grace me with a visit at the Nanjing Censorate',

wrote another early Ming official from Ji'an at the start of an inscription for Huanfei's abbey in Luling county, stressing his distance from Ji'an (*Luling xianzhi* 廬陵 1873/1989, 45.41a). In contrast to writers from Song and Yuan Ji'an, early Ming literati observed their home locality from a distant perch at the capital.

Li Zhen was equally removed from his native Ji'an. Having passed the *jinshi* examinations in 1404, he was part of what would turn out to be the biggest crop of successful *jinshi* examination candidates from his area. A total of 37 Ji'an men were successful in that year, and many went on to serve in high office at court.¹³ Li's circle was full of men who, like Li Zhen, had left Ji'an and served in high positions elsewhere. Zeng Qi 曾啟 (1372-1432), for example, author of the first preface for *Jiandeng yuhua* and also from Ji'an, gained highest honors in Li Zhen's examination year (Liu 1995, 195–8), and served in posts away from Ji'an for the duration of his career. Fourteenth-century Xie Duan 謝短, a Luling man, never returned to Luling after he passed the *jinshi* examination. Ji'an men like Chen Mo 陳謨 (1305–ca. 1389), Liu Song 劉崧 (1321–81) and Xie Jin 解縉 (1369–1415) all served during Hongwu; Liang Qian 梁潛 (1366–1418), Yang Shiqi 楊士奇 (1364–1444), Wang Zhi 王直 (1379–1462), Xiao Zi 蕭鎡 (d. 1464), Chen Xun 陳循 (1385–1462) and Chen Cheng 陳誠 (1365-1457) were among the large cohort of high officials under Yongle. Of Yongle's seven grand secretaries, three hailed from Ji'an. Such men wrote about local institutions with a distant fondness. Ji'an had

once been their home, but had become significant only as the bond they shared away from home (Dardess 1996; Gerritsen 2007).

The different versions of the Lady Tan story offer a unique insight into some of the personal responses to this early Ming process of centralisation and distancing from Ji'an. They allow us to explore what 'locality' meant to Wu Sidao and Li Zhen. Lady Tan was included in the *Songshi* for her brave resistance of the Mongol invaders. The text composed by Yongxin magistrate Wu Sidao stresses the tragic events in Yongxin, where the traitor Liu Pan was responsible for the death of so many local men. In his version these events are implicitly expressed as the responsibility of Wen Tianxiang, who failed to arrive. For Wu, the significance lies in the shrine itself, where the morals of the local area can be displayed, and where he can take credit for improving them. The role of activists in the local community fell to the magistrate, the outsider appointed by Zhu Yuanzhang. Li Zhen turns Lady Tan's tale into a specifically local event: she calls upon her local reputation, situating herself among the highest families of the area. In Li's version, she refers to local heroes of the resistance, implicitly ranking her own resistance on a par with their heroic actions. The Lady Tan whom Li Zhen creates is nostalgic for the home she once had but has now lost. She returns, ostensibly to make sure her shrine is cared for and her servant is given a proper place next to her, but her real intention is to be like Ding Lingwei: to return home and see if the old feelings of belonging are still there, but to find them sadly gone.

For both men, the local is situated with an empire-wide context: Wu Sidao is keen to have his locally transformative role known at court, whereas Li Zhen uses his writing to draw the attention of a far-flung audience to his locality. At the same time, both men

also position themselves as local men, Wu Sidao in his attempts to transform the local community, and Li Zhen in his explorations of the themes of home and belonging. Li Zhen's explorations of the latter theme, in relation to his home, suggest that he felt he had lost the sense of belonging to Ji'an Prefecture, and he mourned that loss. Wu Sidao's local activism suggests a similar desire to belong locally, albeit expressed in a very different way. In both cases, their identities as local men and as servants of the empire are far from straightforward, and do not give them a clear identity, a place to belong. Belonging had to be negotiated, and writing offered that opportunity. Locality takes meaning in such writings only where it is constantly reconstructed and repositioned between individual, community, and state. The broad brushstrokes of periodisation that represent either a long period when a strong central state is absent, throughout the Song-Yuan-Ming transition, or a repeating pattern of centralisation and localisation, easily paint over the small-scale complexities that give meaning to locality and negotiate belonging within local communities, such as that which is visible in the tale of Lady Tan. In Ji'an, the centralizing policies of the Hongwu and Yongle emperors were felt at the local level, and had an impact on the way in which literati positioned themselves between the central government and the local community, between state and society.

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¹ Smith and von Glahn 2003, 34. *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition* does not provide a unified view on the issue; John Dardess's contribution to the volume argues that both Yuan and Ming dynasties displayed activist characteristics.

² For a general discussion of interpretations of Zhu Yuanzhang's impact on local society, see Schneewind 2006, especially 6–8. Examples of scholars who stress the ability of Zhu

Yuanzhang to affect local society include Brook 1997, 167; Brook 1998, 27; Dardess 1996, 174, ter Haar 1992, 123–130. Schneewind has argued Zhu Yuanzhang’s role was far less consistent and far-reaching than generally assumed (Schneewind 2006, 8–32). Paul Smith has documented how brief the period was during which Zhu Yuanzhang had an impact locally (Smith 2003, 86).

³ In the preface to *Jiandeng yuhua*, Li Zhen writes: ‘Seven years later, when I was staying at Fangshan, I had a guest who gave Master Qu 瞿 from Qiantang’s 錢塘 *Jiandeng xinhua* to me’ (Li 1962, 129). Qu You’s dates are also given as 1347–1433. See Goodrich and Fang 1976, 405. Qu You wrote a preface for *Jiandeng xinhua* in 1378. There is some doubt about Qu’s authorship of all the stories in the collection (Nienhauser 1986, 275–6. Herbert Franke provides brief synopses of the *Jiandeng xinhua* stories (1958, 338–382). For a brief study of the two texts, see Lin 1996, 64–7.

⁴ The idea of blood staining the ground and leaving indelible marks is a trope in Chinese history. When Zhu Di 朱棣, the later Yongle emperor, cut out scholar-official Lian Zining’s 練子寧 (d. 1402) tongue, Lian used his own blood to write: ‘Where is King Cheng 成王’ on the floor. According to legend, these words could not be scrubbed away. The moral exemplar expressed in the markings on the floor remains, as a constant message to later generations (Mote 1999, 588).

⁵ There is some dispute over Wen’s actual birthplace, and some claim he was born in the county bordering Jishui: Luling. Wen Tianxiang became a *jinshi* in 1256. He raised an

army in support of the Song court in 1275, but was taken prisoner by the Mongols. He was executed in 1283 by Khubilai Khan (Franke 1976, 1187–1201; Brown 1986).

⁶ Compare the discussion of the role of servants as facilitators and explicators in *Honglougong* in Wagner 1985.

⁷ The middle line is captured nicely by Giles as follows: ‘City and suburb as of old, but hearts that loved us long since cold’ (Giles 1898, 736). The tale is transmitted in *Soushen houji* 搜神後記, attributed to Tao Qian 陶潛. The crane as literary trope is often associated with Ding Lingwei, always holding the possibility that Ding Lingwei has returned. See also the discussion in Spring 1991.

⁸ The term *cento* is used and explained by Franke. It is usually used for Roman poems that are ‘stitched together’, weaving together fragments of other poems and texts. The practice goes back to Fu Xian 傅鹹 (239-294), and was apparently embraced enthusiastically by Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-1086) (Franke 1959, 363).

⁹ The term *hanqiong* 寒蛩 (autumnal cricket) in the first line is from a poem by the Tang poet Wei Yingwu 韋應物 (737-791?), entitled ‘Nigu shi 擬古詩’. The line as a whole is from Li She 李涉, a Tang poet from Luoyang lived for a time as a hermit in Jiangxi. The second line is from a poem by Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819), entitled ‘From the city-tower of Liuzhou, to my four fellow-officials at Zhang, Ting, Feng and Lian Districts 登柳州城樓寄漳汀封連四州刺史’. Liu Zongyuan spent a great deal of his life banished to

remote places. Between 806 and 815 he stayed in Yongzhou, now in Southern Hunan Province, and from 815 until his death, he was in Liuzhou, present day Guangxi, where he died. The third line stems from a famous poem by the Tang poet Du Fu, entitled ‘Feng he Jia Zhi sheren zao chao Da ming gong 奉和賈至舍人早朝大明宮’. Wen Tianxiang also used the line in his ‘Hujia shibapai 胡笳十八拍’. The fourth line is attributed to Zhang Mi 張泌. The term ‘*liu jie*’ 六街, literally ‘six streets’ refers to the central streets of the capital. The term ‘*qiu guang*’ 秋光, literally ‘autumn rays’, refers to a longing for home. The fifth line is from Yong Tao 雍陶 (805-?), the sixth from Li Bai 李白 (701-62). The final line is from the poet and historian Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072). The last expression, *shu tuo chang* 鼠拖腸, originates in the Period of Division, and implies being forgotten by society.

¹⁰ The line is from the poem entitled ‘Zai shou Lianzhou zhi Hengyang chou Liuzhou zeng bie’ 再授連州至衡陽酬柳柳州贈別.

¹¹ The text is also included in Qing collectanea. See Chong 1994, 1657–8. Apart from the story by Li Zhen, which dates from just before 1419, we know that a shrine for Chaste Lady Tan existed in 1461, when the *Da Ming yitongzhi* 大明一統志 was compiled, which includes a reference to the Yongxin shrine for Lady Tan (*Da Ming yitongzhi* 1461, 56.21b).

¹² An example of such a text by Ouyang Shoudao 歐陽守道 is his inscription for the Kang Wang 康王 Temple in Jishui 吉水 (*Xunzhai wenji* 巽齋文集, 13th century, 16.2b).

An example by Liu Chenweng 劉辰翁 is his inscription for Nengren 能仁 Temple (*Xuxiji* 須溪集, 13th century, 1.14b). Southern Song and Yuan literati writings from Ji'an and their attempts to create local identities for themselves is discussed more fully in Gerritsen 2007, 65–112.

¹³ As Ho Ping-ti already pointed out in his classic study of Ming and Qing social mobility, Jiangxi Province produced the highest number of *jinshi* degree holders during the period 1371 to 1439, and Ji'an Prefecture was more prolific in producing *jinshi* degree holders than any other prefecture (Ho 1962, 226–7). The years 1400 and 1404 were outstandingly successful for Ji'an: the three highest ranked candidates in both years all hailed from Ji'an. No other prefecture ever managed to do this (Ho 1962, 248; Li 1997; Liu 1995).