Vance Swett
Final Project: Diary of a Yuan Dynasty Scholar
Professor Mustafa Tuna
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Introduction

The following are selected diary entries from a midlevel government official in the Yuan Dynasty. He lived from 1292-1362 and worked primarily as a scholar and as an assistance to an influential artist who not only affected the style of calligraphy in imperial China, but also produced numerous protégés who continued to change the artistic landscape for decade to come. He arose from a family that nearly lived in near poverty and was able to drastically change his economic status. He was not overly religious, but studied Taoism and Buddhism throughout his life. He married and bore offspring, the number of which is unknown. His diary entries paint a thorough and encompassing look at life and art during the Yuan dynasty and provide an excellent look at the conditions of the time. The story begins with his first ascent to government office.

March 18th, 1313

I have just received a recommendation by my grandfather to enter into government office. This opportunity was always too farfetched, but it looks as if divine intervention has stepped in. The Mongol leadership has decided that in order to maintain governmental stability yin priviledge will be continued for those who did not directly fight against the Mongols. Yin priviledge allows those in official government positions to recommend a single son or grandson to enter into government service. Until now, I did not know my grandfather held a minor government position during the Song dynasty and the Mongols have declared that he too may pass down yin priviledge to his closest male relative (Endicott-West, 1989). I was also unaware that I was his closest male relative. He did not hold a powerful position, but his recommendation has given me the opportunity to become a government clerk. I will soon become a clerk in the Chiang-che Branch Secretariat working in the Surveillance office and will be tasked with land tax supervision.
I have seen pictures of this province in artwork. There was a certain piece of art in a nearby Buddhist monastery that depicted this very province. It was the painted by Chao Yung and titled *Fisherman-Hermit in Stream and Mountain* (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 229):

The picture depicts rolling hills and the tributaries of the Yangtze River that feed into the province. I currently live much farther north in the steppe and such majestic rolling hills and river basins are unknown to me, but from what I can gather from the pictures I am looking forward to the change.¹ The piece has also called to me because it depicts a local trader slowly traveling down the coastline. This too is new to me. In our small and rural village contact with the outside world is almost negligible. I have always felt a calling to something more sophisticated than agriculture and I have dreamt of a day that I can travel and experience the many wonders the world has to offer.

¹ The location of the river and hills of Chao’s painting are fictionalized for the story. It is unknown as to what areas it actually represents though the artist is from the Chekiang Province (Lee & Ho, 1968).
This honor does not escape me. I have a chance to not only better my life, but of my family as well. I leave them now with the hopes of soon returning and bringing my family out of seeming poverty. The challenges will be great, but I am ecstatic for the opportunity.

February 12, 1319

After nearly six years as a government clerk I unexpectedly received a recommendation from Chao Meng-fu. Unbeknownst to me, he is a distant relative and upon learning of my clerkship he took an interest in me. My fortunes are truly heavenly.

Chao Meng-fu is truly the ideal embodiment of leadership in the Yuan Dynasty. I first came to learn of him from my parent’s teachings and stories, but it wasn’t until I received my first clerkship that I became truly aware of his skill in the “Three Excellences.” His mastery of poetry, calligraphy, and painting are known the dynasty over and no other person possess his expertise among the three areas. As a great scholar he was quickly recognized by Ch’eng Chu-fu who recommended him to the great Kublai Khan himself. With the recommendation he quickly became one of the leading members of the Great Khan’s court (Lee & Ho, 1968).² Chao’s greatest and most notable strength was his calligraphy and his tutelage is nothing short of a dream.

September 27th, 1319

I have spent the last six years working on bureaucratic problems and taxes, but this new opportunity has truly humbled me. However, it is with Master Chao that I have found my true calling. My post does not call for the practice of my own calligraphy and art, but rather to act as an assistant to the great master. I would be remiss though to not take advantage of the opportunity to learn and craft my own artistic style in the presence of greatness. The last seven months have elapsed quicker than I could have imaged and

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² Chao Meng-fu was a real Chinese artist that lived 1254-1322. He did receive a recommendation from Ch’eng Chu-fu and was a master of the “Three Excellences” (Lee & Ho, 1968).
while I have done the bidding of the master’s will, I have also immersed myself in the practice of calligraphy hoping to one day become a true master.

Not long had I begun my practice of calligraphy did the rest of the nation take note of his great mastery and soon it became the norm for books and writings were done in what is becoming known as the “Chao style,”³ which speaks to the mastery and influence he possesses in the court (Lee & Ho, 1968). Included is a depiction of calligraphy to help illustrate the sheer greatness of his work (National Palace Museum: Taipei, 2002):

I will forever claim that my greatest achievement in life was becoming his protégé and allowing his greatness to wash over me and drive me in the direction of greatness.

**February 5th, 1320**

Today, my master Chao recruited another promising protégé, Chu Te-jun (Zhu Derun), from the district of Henan province (Lee & Ho, 1968). He has truly distanced himself from his peers as a painter and

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³ “Chao style” was practiced for generations to come and almost all Yuan books were written in this style (Lee & Ho, 1968).
calligrapher, but he is a free spirit that does not appreciate his elders or authority. He is largely a person that wants privacy and solitude and does not take direction. Master Chao is hopeful that he can turn Chu’s raw talent into something that can truly affect the direction of art.  

**August 13th, 1320**

Chu Te-jun has just left and those who know him best, could not be happier. He is an extremely gifted artist, but he is rather arrogant and does not show the proper respect to the other students of Chao or even Chao himself. He was appointed to the superintendent of Confucian Studies in the Chengtung Province which is nearly a month’s travel away (Lee & Ho, 1968). He was able to complete a few paintings while he was with us here, one which I have included, but I believe there are reasons why my master moved him away from us here in Khanbaliq. I suspect his move to a more remote region of the dynasty while prompt more great works from Chu and his landscape paintings, but I am quite glad he is no longer in our presence.

I have also heard rumors among the court. It would appear that there has been some unrest among some areas of the populace who dislike the Confucian reforms.

**January 8th, 1321**

Upon receiving my new rank of official sub-6, Chao has presented me with a new box as a present (Truong, 2015):

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4 Chu Te-jun was a real person who studied under Chao Meng-fu and lived from 1295-1365 (Lee & Ho, 1968). His lack of respect for authority and immaturity is a fictionalization for the story.

5 Chu Te-jun did leave Chao Meng-fu to become the superintendent of Confucian Studies in the Chengtung Province (Lee & Ho, 1968). His arrogance and lack of respect are fictionalized for the story.
I have never seen anything like it before. It is small, about the size of my hand, but it is carved lacquer and extremely intricate. Chao has told me it is a brand new technique of lacquer carving and will open up a whole new form of artwork.  

While I truly appreciate the notion of the new art form, I am truly humbled by the picture engraved on the front. The picture is one of a scholar with a pupil at his side and a cook preparing rice for the evening meal. This gift truly honors me as I believe that I am no longer his assistant, but I have become his pupil. To be the student of one of the great masters of Chinese art is truly humbling and I believe that only divine intervention could have given me such favor.

**December 29th, 1322**

Rumors are swirling that Chu has left his post as Grand Secretary and Chancellor of the Imperial Academy of Learning. I think he left his position as an act of arrogance which has apparently held over since the days I spent with him. He does not believe he is being honored enough for his work as evidenced by his letter to Chao. One such sentence is particularly damning and reads:

“My abilities of service have not been recognized during the years of service to the two emperors. This shows that the maker would not grant me a chance. I’d rather return home and drink the waters of the three rivers and live on the Shun of Wu-men.” Chu Te-jun (Tsang, 1971)

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6 The box pictured does represent lacquer carving, but is a picture of a piece of lacquer art made in the 17th century (Truong, 2015). Advanced lacquer carving techniques did originate in China around the time of this diary entry as a box very similar to the one pictured with advanced lacquer carving was found following the excavation of the Jen Family tomb in the Ching-pu district. The death date of the deceased was 1351 (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 66).
Once again, I cannot be a bigger advocate for his intelligence or artistic abilities, but he was only the Grand Secretary and Chancellor for a little over two years. His greatness will eventually be recognized, but I spent nearly seventy two months working as a government clerk in order to receive my first title as government official sub-9 grade and most officials must spend forty years in government to even make sub-5 grade (Lee & Ho, 1968). Becoming impatient after two years shows immaturity and I only hope that he can soon rectify his ways and become as influential and important as his abilities surely show that he can be.

April 12th, 1323

Yesterday was my wedding day. I shout to the heavens with joy. I started this life the son of a farmer in a small rural village with a life of physical labor ahead of me. However, it was as if the heavens opened up for me and presented me with a path. Hard work and the help of relatives unknown to me at the time have presented me with a life of scholarship. I am now married to the daughter of the ta-lu-hua-ch’ih of the city of Urga (Endicott-West, 1989). Her status and her father’s rank should not have been possible for a person born into my life, but I have changed my path. Also, Master Chao has blessed me with a great wedding gift that was far too kind and beyond reproach. He bestowed to me the handscroll *The Nine Songs* by Chang Wu (Wikipedia, 2015) (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 187).

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7 Chu did leave his post after only two years. He wanted to retreat to a life of solitude where he could focus on his craft. It was after he left his governmental post he became a quasi-national hero and interest in his work truly escalated (Lee & Ho, 1968).
The eleven songs depict a call to the divine beings of the Yangtze River. They ask that they come forth and bless a courtship. The songs have existed for nearly 1500 years, but Chang’s depiction of the shamanistic ritual has no river. The handscroll displays flawless calligraphy and a unique depiction of how he envisions the ritual to take place (Lee & Ho, 1968). The poems themselves are often performed during times of joy and happiness, but I am truly unworthy of such a gift although selfishly I will treasure them forever. This masterpiece will forever reside in my home and I ask that the spirits of the river always watch over my wife and I through this life and the next.

March 18th, 1324

My wife gave birth to our first son yesterday. We named him Cao. I now also have a son to which I can extend the Yin privilege (Endicott-West, 1989). The yin privilege has nearly become the singular avenue to which a Chinese man not born of Mongol descent can enter into government office. There are other ways, such as distinguished military service, but with the eliminations of the governmental exams I am quite fortunate that I can give my son an avenue to a better life (Endicott-West, 1989). May his life be forever blessed and may he find true spiritual happiness.

October 21st, 1327
We just embarked on a trip to the Hsiang River. The picture above depicts the tranquil and serene images that the river imbues (Vedger, 2015) (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 37). The reason for the trip has remained a secret from me. I suspect it arises from some of the disputes that have arisen in the area among the literary officials. Due to the secrecy of the meetings I have been allowed to roam the area unconstrained from my duties to Chao.

I chose this picture specifically to mark the landscape of the area, but also because it depicts a local fisherman meeting with people along the river trading his catch of the day. The river is one of the larger tributaries of the Yangtze River and as such it is a great place of trade among the more inland populations. I am consistently amazed by the large scale traders that have become masters of languages. Just today, I ran into a trader that spoke Chinese, Tibetan, Uighur, Tangut, Persian and Mongolian (Anderson, 2014).

June 3rd, 1329

Today is my birthday and I am turning thirty four years old. Over my lifetime I have ascribed to the ways of Taoism and have focused myself on calligraphy and art as a method to my self-discovery of the way. Focused strokes of the hand and constant dedication to my craft have allowed me to meditate and reflect on the virtues of life and my path. I have also discovered that sheer isolation in nature is another way that appeals to me as a way to meditate. I have long since studied the works of Sheng Mou and his paintings on silk as an example of the connection between body, mind, spirit and nature. His works

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8 The name of the painting is *Scenes of the Hsiao and Hsiang River Country* by Tung Yuan (Lee & Ho, 1968).
9 The location that the painting depicts derived from the title of the painting.
oftentimes focus on soaring mountain ranges that seem to become one with the sky connecting earth and the heavens.\textsuperscript{10} It has long since been my dream to travel to one mountain range in particular in the Chekiang Province. His piece entitled

\textit{Pleasant Summer in a Mountain Retreat}

depicts this range and has inspired me to travel there and refocus on my path (Kaikodo, 2015) (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 230).

At the base of this range is a very small retreat tucked away and isolated.\textsuperscript{11} I have been given two months leave to travel to this retreat and collect myself. This has long been a dream that my place as a high government official has finally allowed me to go to.

\textsuperscript{10} Sheng Mou focused largely on landscapes and layering techniques in artwork (Lee & Ho, 1968).
\textsuperscript{11} This piece does not reference any mountain range or retreat in particular. However, the artist was from the Chekiang Province (Lee & Ho, 1968). The writer of the diary’s desire to travel to specific range is fictionalized.
August 5th, 1329

This is my first diary entry since leaving the mountains and I do feel refreshed. The stress of the competitive political environment that I left nearly two months ago has since been washed away. I have also been greeted by a familiar face as I left my mediation (Sotheby's, 2012) (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 18):

The statue is located just inside the Chu-yung-kuan gate on the northern side of Peking. I have walked past this statue numerous times on my way into the city, but it was at this moment that it truly captivated my attention. I am not a practicing Buddhist, but like with the three religions in China share a place in Chinese culture. This sculpture of Shakyamuni Buddha references his fast under the Bodhi tree until he reached enlightenment and the nature of existence (Lee & Ho, 1968). The sculpture’s sheer size is breathtaking, but his tranquil pose has given me happiness as I return from my own mediation.12 During my travels across the

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12 The sculpture is entitled Sakyamuni as an Ascetic and was made in the early 14th century. It is unusually large at a little over 17 inches tall and made entirely of bronze (Lee & Ho, 1968). The location of the statue is fictionalized, but the Chu-yung-kuan gate did exist and numerous carvings were etched into it (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 6).
dynasty, traveling back to this statute will always be met with a reflection on the progress I have made in the last two months. It will forever mark one of my landmarks on my spiritual journey.

**July 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1333**

Chao, a few other students and I were recently invited up to the Fu-ch’un Mountains by the artist Huang Kung. It is here that Huang has spent his summers living in the remote area in an effort to meditate and create one of his greatest masterpieces, the *Dwelling in the Fu-ch’un Mountains* (China Online Museum, 2015) (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 55):

This great masterpiece stretches nearly 20 feet across and has taken him three years to complete. While the picture is not realistic in form, Huang has crafted a piece rich, vibrant, and extremely intricate in detail (Lee & Ho, 1968). The picture captures the true essence of his village and will be viewed at longingly for decades to come.
For us, the picture represented a retreat that was truly necessary from the wilds and stress of Khanbaliq. Chao has begun experimenting with the ideology and practice of Taoism during his last few years on this plane. Huang is a Taoist\textsuperscript{13} and the combination of both art and religion, along with the peaceful surroundings, his retreat has presented Chao more than enough reason for the trip.\textsuperscript{14} For me, it allowed me to return to my practice of calligraphy. While I have spent decades with a master in the art of calligraphy, my duties as his assistant have not allowed me to indulge in the art as much as I would like to. However, the cool, crisp, mountain air and a vast decrease in my duties to Chao has allowed me to refocus my efforts.

\textbf{January 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1334}

It is truly a sad day. Master Chao Meng-fu has passed away.\textsuperscript{15} The world may never again be blessed with a person so dedicated to his craft. He has truly influenced the world and he has been a personal mentor that has guided my life towards a divine truth. A painting was commissioned by the emerging artist Wang Fu who grew up in the same province as Master Chao.\textsuperscript{16} He painted a masterpiece entitled \textit{A Scholar’s Retreat Amidst Autumn Trees} (Dorland, 2015) (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 266).

\textsuperscript{13} Huang was a practicing Taoist (Lee & Ho, 1968).
\textsuperscript{14} In this text, Chao Meng-fu’s love of solitude and religious beliefs are fictionalized for the narrative.
\textsuperscript{15} Chao Meng-fu actually passed away much earlier in 1322 (Lee & Ho, 1968).
\textsuperscript{16} This is fictionalized. Chao was born in the Zhejiang province and not in Kiangsu Province and this piece was not commissioned for Chao Meng-fu (Lee & Ho, 1968).
The poetry reads:

“A fine evening visits the green mountains after a light
autumn rain.
Trees are washed and amidst spare ranches, the cool air
rises.
Remember still those nights in the bygone days, alone in my
study,
With a window of flickering lamplight as the only companion
to the sound of my reading”

Wang Fu (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 266)

Wang was able to capture the childhood home of Master Chao which resided along the river bank in the Kiangsu Province. Chao longed to find solitude in order to become introspective and live his life according to the Four Noble Truths. This retreat freed him from distractions and allowed to focus solely on his craft. He was not able to get back to his childhood home as often as he would have liked, but it is truly a place his soul could find peace.¹⁷

September 2nd, 1344

My first son just left to begin his journey as a bureaucrat for the Yuan dynasty. He does not share my passion for the “Three Excellences,” but he does have an astute mind for engineering and military tactics. He is leaving to serve under A-lao-wa-ting. A-lao-wa-ting gained his notoriety for his artillery prowess and cunning tactics in battle. Most notably, A-lao wa- ting greatly advanced the use of catapults. He began as a lowly foot soldier, but due to his engineering savvy he quickly rose through the ranks until he became a prominent tactician in the Mongol army (Endicott-West, 1989). Once again, I

¹⁷ This is a fictionalized narrative of Chao Meng-fu.
write that my family is truly blessed and our paths to self-discovery and fulfillment are seemingly laid out by the divine.

August 16th, 1350

It has been many years since I last spoke with Chu Te-jun and I truly miss our long talks. It has been longer still since his youthful days of arrogance and pride and in their place he has mastered calligraphy, poetry and painting. He has truly reshaped art in the Chengtung Province (Korea) and it is now becoming apparent that his students are truly shaping and developing a style uniquely their own (Lee & Ho, 1968). His mastery of landscape has always been apparent, however, it is his poetry that now accompanies his art is what truly moves the soul. One of his latest pieces that I have just had the privilege of seeing is title Primordial Chaos (Wikipedia, 2015).

While I don’t know if Chu promotes war or a change of leadership, but his poem does have an incantation that reads:

“People were not born villains. The oppressive government coerced them into crimes” Chu Te-jun (Lee & Ho, 1968)
Chu has been away from the mainland for a long time and it is becoming apparent that disillusion and uneasiness have begun to affect to more rural regions of the dynasty.¹⁸ I know that famine has hit his region especially hard over the last few years and maybe he too is becoming unsatisfied with the established governance. I am planning a trip to meet Chu in the next month. In his solitude he has established quite a following that may rise into something more if his recent work is any indication of his intentions.

If this is hearsay and he is not calling for a revolution, I am still gleeful at the idea of experiencing his calligraphy and art firsthand. Since his move to isolation he has become even more influential and his work is affecting scholars across the nation. We share a common mentor and I am looking forward to a thoughtful discussion and an examination of a master truly at work.

**September 3rd, 1351**

Chu and I have decided that we truly let what could have been a truly special friendship between us slip away over the last few decades. We have decided to take advantage of the years we have left as friends

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¹⁸ This is a fictionalized narrative to depict the unrest that was arising during this period of the Yuan Dynasty (Lee & Ho, 1968). The quote does come from Chu, but his political views were largely undocumented.
to experience life and find inner peace together. We are soon travelling to the Buddhist Monastery in
the Anhui Province.\textsuperscript{19} It is located in the Dabie Mountain range which looks down on the Yangtze River
basin. The area is more populated than I remember in the past, but the monastery is still tucked far
away into the mountains and offers quiet seclusion and reflection as you can see in this painting\textsuperscript{20} by Li

\begin{quote}
The monastery is located at the base of the mountain on the Agno River.\textsuperscript{21} I have always found myself
drawn to the teachings of Taoism, but as the years drag on I am becoming more inclined to pull pieces
from the three religions. Chu has long remained a faithful follower of Buddhism and our renewed
friendship has once again reshaped my religious views.\textsuperscript{22} I am still skeptical to the Buddhist ideals of
Samsara, Karma, and Rebirth. However, I find myself meditating more and more on the Four Noble
Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. I can think of no greater place to truly focus myself on these ideals
than in this place.

I am quickly beginning to near retirement and I am thankful for the opportunity to travel across the
dynasty and absorb all that it has to offer. As I grow older I can only feel thankful for all of the
experiences that are available to us in this new age under the Mongols. Recently, there has been some
famine and discord between the elite and the people, but they have brought new people, trade and
ideas to this land (Endicott-West, 1989). I do not believe that we will ever be isolated from the rest of
the world again.

\textsuperscript{19} This is fictionalized for the narrative.
\textsuperscript{20} The painting is titled \textit{Buddha’s Conversion of the Five Bhisku} by Li Sheng (Lee & Ho, 1968).
\textsuperscript{21} The monastery, location, mountain range, and name of the river are all fictionalized.
\textsuperscript{22} Chu’s religious views are fictionalized for the sake of the story.
September 1st, 1355

Since my last meeting with Chu we have become steadfast friends. I am now sixty years old and I have lived a long and fulfilled life. Chu and I have become such steadfast friends that we have decided to retire on the same shore together. My wife and I along with Chu and his relatives will spend our remaining years along the banks of the Chin-Ming pond. It is a modest home among some truly magnificent displays of architecture. My home is on the right in the following picture (National Palace Museum, 2015) (Lee & Ho, 1968, p. 201):

![Picture of Dragon Boat Regatta in the Chin-ming Pond]

There is an annual regatta of dragon boats around the pond in which I have taken part in over the last decade or so. I have never been a sailor and many of those in the regatta have either spent a lifetime in the navy or a lifetime aboard a trade ship, but my sons and I are able to hold our own. I suspect it is largely due to the fact it is more of a festival and most of the retired sailors have engorged themselves on huangjiu and rice wine (Endicott-West, 1989). I am looking forward to retirement and to being able to focus solely on my children and grandchildren as they become members of society.

May 18th, 1360

23 The piece of art is title *Dragon Boat Regatta in the Chin-ming Pond* by Wang Chen-p’eng (Lee & Ho, 1968). The piece depicts the “Festival of a Thousand Springs” which was in honor of the birthday of future emperor Jen-Tsung. Dragon boat racing has been a Chinese tradition for over 2500 years and was very common at festivals such as this (Lee & Ho, 1968).
Seemingly widespread corruption and scandal have begun to plague the dynasty. In the past, governmental examinations and reviews were able to promote able scholars and eliminate those unworthy or incapable of handling bureaucratic tasks. However, since the rise of the Yuan Dynasty those examinations ceased and yin priviledge has become largely corrupted (Endicott-West, 1989). During my time as a government official I have seen more and more officers who should have no more responsibility than that of a cart driver. There are many more underlying issues, but my belief is that the dynasty might be crumbling from the inside. I hope that if future generations ever reflect on this diary, let it be known that my last wish is that those generations know the importance of scholarship and the evil of greed and corruption. Thank you and I hope this work may offer a better understanding of life in the Yuan Dynasty.
Works Cited


