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Departure: “Soft-Sleeper to Nanjing”

BEIJING, MONDAY, OCTOBER 27, 1997

“My daughter picked up the train tickets for us; we leave from Beijing Station tomorrow evening at 6:30! Ruan-wo!” Professor Du Fangqin, China’s leading authority on He Shuangqing, reports over the phone in her bright and cheerful voice.

“Ruan-wo!” I repeat, buying time while trying to dredge up just what “Ruan-wo” means. Having been away from China now for six years, I silently curse my awkwardness with the language. Almost quick enough for her not to notice, I remember: “soft sleeper!” Of course! “Wonderful!” I reply in Chinese, “How convenient! We waste no time and save a night’s hotel bill. So when and where shall we meet?”

We agree to meet at my hotel at 4:00 P.M. the next day. I still do not quite believe this trip is about to happen. I have studied Chinese history for thirty years, but mostly in archives and in published books. In the past ten years I have become increasingly intrigued with the case of He Shuangqing, China’s great peasant woman poet. In 1737, the obscure poet and painter Shi Zhenlin described and quoted the poems and song lyrics of a beautiful and talented peasant woman named Shuangqing who he discovered living in rural Jintan County, east and south of Nanjing. A century later, local histories described Shuangqing as having been born in Danyang County, just to the north of Jintan. Until recently, it never even occurred to me to try to explore the world of Shi Zhenlin and Shuangqing by actually “going there.”

The Mystery of Xiaoshan

In the next week, we will do just that: visit the rural counties of Jintan and Danyang where Shi Zhenlin once roamed, and where he claimed to have found the beautiful and talented Shuangqing living in a remote vil-

lage called Xiaoshan. No village with this name appears on any maps or in any local histories from any period of Chinese history. A decade earlier, a friend of mine, Kang Zhengguo, who teaches Chinese at Yale University, went to Jintan County to look for modern traces of the Shuangqing story, but he found no one who knew of Shuangqing, nor any place he could identify as Xiaoshan. He has given me a hand-drawn map of the area and some ideas about where to go and what to ask. Do people in this area know anything about Shuangqing? Have they ever heard of Shi Zhenlin? Can we identify any landmarks from the area that might help us locate this mysterious Xiaoshan?

Professor Du Fangqin

This will be our assignment, and, most auspiciously, my traveling companions are two excellent Chinese scholars: Professor Du Fangqin, from Tianjin Normal University and the prominent feminist author of *Collected Materials on He Shuangqing*, and Professor Zhang Hongsheng, a leading authority on Chinese poetry and chair of the Classical Chinese Literature Program at Nanjing University. Professor Du has come to Beijing for a conference. Tomorrow night she and I will take the overnight train to Nanjing, where Professor Zhang will meet us and let us know what has been arranged for our visit. I have little idea what to expect on this trip, but I am thrilled to be able to make it with such superb scholars.

I will clarify below why some people suspect that He Shuangqing was nothing more than the fictional creation of Shi Zhenlin. Here it is enough to note that I wrote a conference paper on Shuangqing in 1992 raising doubts about her existence, and arguing that since we will never know with certainty whether she lived or not, we should emphasize the fact that she has been a plausible figure to most Chinese critics in the last two centuries. One year later, Du Fangqin published her *Collected Materials*, in which she argued forcefully that Shuangqing was a historical figure with a very distinctive poetic voice that could not have been created out of whole cloth by Shi Zhenlin.

As one of the founders of women's studies in China, Professor Du was a special guest at the 1992 Harvard conference where she had heard my paper on Shuangqing, but I did not meet her formally until February 1997, in unusual circumstances. She was visiting the East Coast and giving lectures at Amherst College and at Harvard. Unfortunately, I could not attend any of her lectures, but thanks to friends who knew of our mutual interests in He Shuangqing, I managed to insinuate myself into

her schedule by serving as her chauffeur. She was speaking in Amherst one afternoon and needed a ride back to Harvard.

"If you can take a bus to Worcester," I told her graduate student escort, "I'll happily drive you back to Harvard." This worked, and we first got acquainted while speeding toward Boston on Interstate 90. She speaks little English, and my Chinese was rusty, but we managed to have a delightful conversation as I struggled to maneuver the turnpike traffic and speak Mandarin at the same time. We went to a Chinese restaurant in Cambridge and had fun eating, drinking, and joking about our continuing fascination with the peasant woman poet. A bit apprehensive about how we would handle our contrasting views, I happily discovered that Professor Du loves to laugh, and she easily joked about our differences. She spoke Chinese at about twice the speed my ears could comprehend, but with endless patience, she cheerfully repeated herself at half speed when asked, until I could catch what she was saying.

Because of the Cultural Revolution in China, Professor Du was of necessity a "late bloomer" in the field of scholarship. She was a college student in the turbulent 1960s and spent ten years as a middle school teacher during the 1970s. Only after the reforms of Deng Xiaoping did she have the chance to go to graduate school in classical Chinese literature. When I once asked her how she had liked teaching middle school, she replied with a frown and a terse declaration: "I hated it!" One reason for her distaste, no doubt, was the enforced political conformity and intellectual sterility of the last years of Mao Zedong's rule. The Deng reforms restored higher education and offered intellectuals a new lease on life. In the rebirth of Chinese universities in the 1980s, amid the seductive appeals of wealth and Western influences, only a few people in China received training in classical Chinese literature. And it was even rarer for people to pursue women's studies. In 1985, at the urging of Professor Li Xiaojiang, one of her graduate school classmates, Professor Du began to examine women's status and gender relations as seen in classical Chinese sources. She first made her mark with a truly pioneering book in 1988 called *The Evolution of Concepts of Women* (*Nüxing guannian de yanbian*), in which she traced the development of gender ideology in China from very early times down to the twentieth century. This was a courageous work that outlined women's subordination to men in almost every area of life, including philosophy, politics, society, economics, the family, and especially in the sexual arena.

Despite winning an award in Tianjin for *The Evolution of Concepts of Women*, Professor Du was not promoted in academic rank until her 1993 book on Shuangqing was published. Women scholars pursuing

women's studies were regarded with some suspicion, as academic authorities assumed their topic was either too self-interested or too trivial to be considered worthy of true scholarship. In those years she was working with her colleagues against an ever-sluggish academic bureaucracy to establish an officially recognized Center for Women's Studies at Tianjin Normal University, a goal they finally achieved in 1992. A few months after her Shuangqing book came out, she also oversaw the publication of a contemporary study, *Chinese Women and Development: Status, Health, Employment (Zhongguo funü yu fazhan—diwei, jiankang, jiuye)*. This work makes explicit the commitment that underlies all her work: to understand the subordinate status of women throughout Chinese history, with a view to ending that subordination.

Given Professor Du's status as a pioneering Chinese feminist, and her argument that Shuangqing was a historical person who wrote all the poetry attributed to her, I was a bit apprehensive about how to engage her in a discussion of this issue. As we waited for our order to arrive in a Cambridge restaurant, she put me at ease with her casual and good-humored manner. "I know you have doubts about He Shuangqing," she said, "but her poetry is better than Shi Zhenlin's. I don't think he could have made it up."

"I agree that her poetry is very good, but there are too many things in Shi Zhenlin's memoir that seem to me implausible." Then, trying to backpedal a bit, I added, "My real point in that Harvard paper was that we'll never prove one way or another whether she ever existed or not. We can only hope to establish some range of probabilities. The important thing is that she's a real figure in Chinese culture. She became much more famous than Shi Zhenlin."

"Professor Ropp," she now poured it on, "you are the American Shi Zhenlin, still looking for that beautiful peasant poet and trying to make her name famous!"

I laughed and replied, "She's quite famous on her own, without any help from me."

"But you carry her fame to the West! At that Harvard conference, I still remember you reading Shuangqing's poem in Chinese, 'Look at tiny tiny Shuangqing.' It was so touching I thought, 'I'm going to have to look into her story.'"

"But you put me to shame!" I said with mock indignation. "Here I am five years later still unpublished on Shuangqing, and you wrote a whole book in one year."

"Oh that book was mostly just citations from Shi Zhenlin and others. I just copied down what others have already said," she protested with undue modesty.

“I was so excited when Kang Zhengguo sent me your book,” I told her quite truthfully. “Before it arrived in the mail, I didn’t even know about it. And it’s not just ‘copied’ from other sources. There is a lot of very important information in there that I didn’t know before. I admit I was also excited to find myself quoted in your book. I don’t often get to see myself quoted in a Chinese book!”

“I was too embarrassed to send you the book myself, but Kang Zhengguo said he knew you and would send you a copy.”

Professor Kang Zhengguo

“You know,” I reported, “I was very lucky to be able to room with Kang Zhengguo at the Yale conference in 1993. He was scheduled to room with someone else, and he had no idea who I was. Fortunately, I got his attention with the provocative title of my conference paper on images of courtesan culture in late imperial China: ‘Love, Talent, Glamour, Nostalgia, Sex, Bondage, and Shame.’ It paid off in bringing me to Kang Zhengguo’s attention. I think he was particularly intrigued by the ‘sex, bondage, and shame!’ So we roomed together. I had earlier been amazed by the depth of knowledge he displayed in his 1988 book on classical Chinese poetry by and about women. He had written insightfully in that book on Shuangqing, so I gave him my earlier paper on Shuangqing, and he would sit on his bed in our room, pondering the English, and discussing it with me in Chinese as he went along. We talked incessantly every night at that conference, and most of it was about Shuangqing. We joked about being latter-day literati ourselves, still poking around in the eighteenth century and imitating Shi Zhenlin and his literati friends in their obsession with the beautiful peasant woman poet!”

“See, you *are* the American Shi Zhenlin!” she laughed.

“Or maybe Kang Zhengguo is Shi Zhenlin and I’m Flower Lover Duan Yuhan [a close friend of Shi’s and fellow admirer of Shuangqing]. After all Kang Zhengguo even went to Jintan to look for Xiaoshan [where Shuangqing supposedly lived]. Another reason for my skepticism about Shi Zhenlin’s account,” I couldn’t resist adding, “is that Kang Zhengguo found no trace of a place he could identify as Xiaoshan, and most people there had never heard of Shuangqing.”

Proposal: A Search for Xiaoshan

“Oh, he only spent a few days looking for Xiaoshan!” Professor Du shot back. “You can’t hope to succeed in this quest in a few days time. We

should go there together and look for it ourselves, but we would need a few weeks at least! We would need to go to Danyang as well as Jintan.”

Before she said this, I had never thought of such a trip. If Kang Zhengguo could not find anything significant, what chance would I have? But to go with a knowledgeable Shuangqing scholar like Du Fangqin, what could be better? “That would be great fun!” I replied.

“That’s precisely what we *should* do,” she quickly followed up. “When could you go?”

“Well, I have a sabbatical coming up next year. That would be a great time for me. Could you go sometime next fall?”

“Yes I could!” she replied with a quickness that amazed me.

Professor Zhang Hongsheng

As attractive as the idea of a trip to Jintan sounded, I had no idea how to go about organizing such a thing. Fortunately, I had the good sense to mention our discussion to another friend, Kang-i Sun Chang, of Yale University. Along with Ellen Widmer of Wesleyan University, Kang-i had organized the Yale conference of 1993, and she had since invited Kang Zhengguo to Yale to teach Chinese. Within a month of my meeting Du Fangqin, Kang-i called me one day and said, “Paul, I know a Chinese professor from Nanjing who could be very helpful to you in organizing a trip to Jintan. He is Zhang Hongsheng, chairman of the Department of Classical Chinese at Nanjing University. He just happens to be spending the year as a visiting scholar at Harvard this year, and he’s coming to give a talk at Yale. He’s extremely knowledgeable about Chinese poetry, and Nanjing is not far from Jintan and Danyang. He could help you to make local arrangements. Kang Zhengguo and I could bring him up to Worcester to meet you.”

“Kang-i!” I replied, “You’re a saint to think of all this! I didn’t even know anyone from Nanjing was at Harvard this year. By all means, let’s do it.”

We set the date, and within three weeks, Kang-i and Kang Zhengguo arrived in Worcester with Professor Zhang on a chilly March weekend. We had a party with our dozen Worcester China friends (scholars and spouses), and for breakfast, in honor of Shuangqing, I took our guests to the Miss Worcester Diner, the most famous diner in a city known for its high-cholesterol blue-collar diners (see figure 1). I was delighted to discover that Zhang Hongsheng was, as Kang-i said, extremely knowledgeable about Chinese history and culture, especially for one so young. By young, I mean in his early forties, which is young to those of

us in our fifties. “This peasant woman poet, He Shuangqing, is certainly a fascinating case, whether she existed or not,” he said to me early on in our visit. “I think we should be able to shed some light on the issue if we plan our trip carefully. We can arrange meetings with local scholars and officials in Jintan, look for some of the landmarks described by Shi Zhenlin, and see if any popular stories survive there today. Just give me a couple months advance warning before the trip.”

Though he had written his doctoral dissertation on late Song dynasty poetry (twelfth–thirteenth centuries), Prof. Zhang was just then turning his attention to Qing-dynasty song lyrics (the genre for which Shuangqing is famous). Even with his new interest in Qing song lyrics, he seemed extraordinarily generous to offer his help to Du Fangqin and me in this way. “He’ll make an ideal traveling companion,” I correctly predicted to myself. Before he left for China at the end of August (1997), we had set the date for our trip, and his arrangements surpassed anything I could have imagined. Happily, he is a scholar of uncommon curiosity, and he seemed intrigued, if also bemused, by my interest in this peasant woman poet. He would be an invaluable asset on this trip, a disinterested but not uninterested third party, and a good honest broker between my skepticism and Du’s belief. Professors Zhang and Du had never met, and I was gratified to serve as a go-between for two well-established Chinese scholars.

BEIJING, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 1997

Preparing for Departure

It’s a cool and cloudy day in Beijing. At 4:00 P.M. I return to the hotel from an afternoon of book shopping, get out of my cab, and discover Professor Du just walking up to the front door. We laugh and agree it’s an auspicious beginning that we’ve arrived at the exact same time. I fetch my bags and together we board a cab. Du tells the driver our destination and immediately starts quizzing me: “Did you bring some good materials along?” She knows that the Harvard library, where I do my research, has one of the best Chinese collections in the world, and she rightly suspects that I have access to some materials there that are not even available in China.

“Yes, I brought a bundle of things.” I pull a thick folder out of the side pocket of my suitcase to show her. I’m rather amazed to find ourselves discussing Shuangqing materials before we get three blocks from the hotel. She is so energetic, and so focused on our business, I realize, that

this trip is guaranteed to be productive. Even if we find nothing of use to us, I will have a week or ten days of conversation with the world's most knowledgeable Shuangqing scholar.

At the bustling Beijing train station, we wheel our suitcases—Why did I bring so much stuff?—over to the office for long-distance phone calls, to call Professor Zhang and let him know our time of arrival. Train stations are invariably crowded and noisy places in China, and I was wondering what we would do for the nearly two hours before our departure. Luckily, the soft-sleeper class has its own waiting room, which is spacious, uncrowded, and surprisingly quiet. So we wheel our suitcases in, find a bench to ourselves, and proceed to pore over the materials I have brought along and to talk about the upcoming trip. Such is the abundance of Harvard-Yenching Library that I have photocopies of materials Du has never seen before. She is naturally excited by the things I've brought along: maps, bits of information from Jintan and Danyang local histories, two pages from a geographical dictionary, and several articles on Shi Zhenlin and He Shuangqing. The time passes quickly as I show her what I have, and we discuss the material, one piece at a time.

Soft-Sleeper to Nanjing

At 6:00 P.M., we board the train, locate our bunks, and discover we are in adjacent compartments; I am with three other men, and Du is in a mixed compartment with two men and another woman. When she asks naively, "How can there be men and women in the same compartment?" a weary traveler with a bemused look on his face replies, "Bufen," meaning "no distinction" [by gender in these compartments]. Professor Du takes this news matter-of-factly, and we sensibly head for the dining car as soon as we've deposited our suitcases in our compartments.

Soft-sleeper is the most comfortable train ride in China, four people in a closed compartment, two beds on top and two on the bottom. The bottom beds double as soft seats for everybody in the daytime. It's clean, comfortable, uncramped, and quiet. "Hard-sleeper" is cheaper, but includes three levels of bunks and no private compartments. The trip to Nanjing takes thirteen hours. We should be there by seven-thirty tomorrow morning.

The trip is uneventful except for two dramatic stops in the first ten minutes. We are sitting in the dining car waiting for service, just as we begin to pick up speed, when there is a loud *Screech!* of wheels sliding on rails and we slam to a sudden stop. I feel my chest thrown against the

table. A bowl of soup goes flying through the air, bounces off the unfortunate man who had ordered it, and lands with a loud crash on the floor. Two or three wontons scoot across the floor following in the wake of the bowl. I am surprised that the heavy bowl doesn't break, but that is no consolation to the poor customer, whose dark blue jacket is drenched with chicken broth. Visibly distressed by being soaked, he stares unbelievably at his jacket, but doesn't appear to have suffered any burns.

Everyone in the car watches the accident victim as a waiter and waitress quickly bring towels and try to help him by wiping his jacket and cleaning up the table and floor around him. I am suddenly relieved not to have been served yet, and to be sitting toward the back of the car facing the direction in which we still have hopes of traveling. Had we already been served, Professor Du, sitting opposite me, would have been splattered with our dinner. There is a general shared sense of consternation in the car, as we all wonder what could have necessitated such a sudden stop, and whether or not we have hit something. I privately retract my impatience about the slow service on this car.

In a few minutes we start up again, only to come to an even more violently sudden and screeching halt five minutes later. This time I am more alarmed. We *must* have hit someone or something, I think. Otherwise, I don't see how we could have stopped so fast. Rationally I know that trains go from Beijing to Nanjing every day without anyone getting killed, or even scalded by their soup, but all the same, I can't help feeling apprehensive. Perhaps we should have taken a plane to Nanjing, but of course it's too late for alternatives. Within five minutes we are on our way again. Despite my heightened anxieties, we proceed to eat our meal without incident: two large dishes—beef and broccoli, beancurd and vegetables—with a big bowl of wonton soup and two large bowls of rice. The food is passable, and I am stuffed by the time we return to Du's compartment, where we sit together for a couple more hours and continue our discussions of my material and our upcoming explorations.

By 10:00 P.M. my mind is exhausted from the nonstop effort of speaking and hearing Chinese for the last six hours. We retire to our bunks. It is comfortable enough, and my compartment mates are all asleep. I am dead tired, and expect that the steady clackety-clack rumble of the train will soon put me to sleep. But the excitement of the trip, the relatively hot air in our compartment, and the snoring of my roommates all conspire to rob me of sleep.

NANJING, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29, 1997

Just as I seem to have arrived in a state of peaceful slumber, at 6:00 A.M., a loudspeaker in our compartment blares out with music, the morning news, and information on arrival times. "Damn Communist country!" I think to myself, feeling somehow that my right to sleep, or at least my convenience, has been violated by being awakened so early with news and weather reports I can barely understand.

I get up around six-thirty to discover Professor Du already up and in line for the sink in the washroom. By seven, after dousing my face in cold water and brushing my teeth, I feel awake and ready for our arrival in Nanjing. We help two elderly women off the train with their bags, walk them to the depot waiting room, and immediately see a smiling Professor Zhang, who hails a cab and takes us to Nanjing University. We can't go to Jintan until tomorrow, he explains, so we agree to spend the morning in the university library, after first having a delicious Chinese breakfast in the faculty dining room. I've seldom eaten purely Chinese-style breakfasts in the past, but in the next few days I will quickly grow accustomed to the local breakfast fare: meat dumplings, steamed buns, pickled vegetables, occasionally corn bread or a sweet bun filled with bean paste, and always with a bowl of thin rice gruel and a glass of hot sweetened milk. I miss my coffee and orange juice and could probably ask for coffee, but I'm determined to "go Chinese" on this trip. The breakfast is tasty, filling, nutritious, and very cheap, about \$1.20.

*Professor Zhang Hongsheng: Connections in Jintan
and Danyang*

Zhang Hongsheng is from Shandong Province, the home of Confucius, near the cradle of early Chinese civilization. He is tallish and handsome, with the high cheekbones I somehow associate with Shandong. He always seems easygoing and cheerful, but I can't help worrying that this trip is a bit of an imposition on him. His major research is on an earlier period, and it is only because of me and my Yale friends that he has gotten interested in Shuangqing. He is also clearly busy as a department chair in the middle of the fall semester. Over breakfast he explains that we are very fortunate because one particular student at Nanjing University is from a prominent family in Jintan and has made arrangements with the city government of Jintan for our visit. Tomorrow, in fact, this student is sending a car and driver to pick us up and take us to Jintan. We will spend three or four days in Jintan and then go to Danyang, where an old classmate of Hongsheng's works in the city government.

So we appear to be blessed with good *guanxi*, connections, in reference to the all-important network of personal relationships in Chinese society. Nothing is accomplished in China without good connections.

Whole books have been written about the importance of face-to-face social networks in Chinese society. This trip is itself a tribute to the power of *guanxi*: Through my Yale professor friend, Kang-i Sun Chang, I was able to room with Kang Zhengguo at the Yale conference in 1993. Through Kang Zhengguo I received Du Fangqin's book. Through Kang-i and another mutual friend, I was alerted to Du's visit to New England in early 1997 during which we first discussed a trip to Jintan in search of the village of Xiaoshan. And once again, through Kang-i, I was able to meet Zhang Hongsheng, who has now used his connections with a Nanjing University student and with a former classmate to set up our visit to Jintan and Danyang. Subtract any one of these people from the network and the trip might not have happened.

The three of us spend the morning in the Nanjing University Library, where we find a few local histories with references to Shuangqing, but nothing I hadn't seen before. In the afternoon, Hongsheng has meetings to attend to, so Du and I wander through the tree-lined streets of Nanjing and browse in bookstores. After sharing a large meal at a popular family restaurant, we return to the campus and retire early to be fresh for tomorrow's adventure.

JINTAN, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30, 1997

By 9:00 A.M., we meet our chauffeur at the main gate of Nanjing University and are off to Jintan in a relatively new Dodge Caravan. Once we are ready to go, our escort, Mr. Huang, calls Jintan on his cellular phone to let our host there know we are on our way. Does anyone in China *not* have a cellular phone? Mr. Huang and his companion, our driver, are friendly and curious to hear what we three professors are up to. They are also curious to hear what professors get paid in America. I give them a range of salaries but hasten to add the average costs of a car, house mortgage, weekly food bills, utilities, et cetera, all to try to demystify "the good life" in the USA. In addition to their curiosity about America, they find our trio very quaint in our quixotic quest for information about an eighteenth-century poet they've never heard of.

Wan Lijun: Our Local Contact in Jintan City

The brand-new Huning Expressway, which runs from Nanjing through Danyang to Shanghai, is very impressive, and the traffic is so light it

hardly seems like we're in China. We exit the expressway at Danyang, to take a local two-lane highway to Jintan, and I am impressed by the large characters for Danyang atop the four-lane toll booth at our exit. This is definitely not how I envisioned my first glimpse of Danyang on a trip back to the eighteenth century. Within an hour and a half, we are in the attractive small city of Jintan, looking for the company where our local contact, the Nanjing University student, works. We stop, make a phone call, and in five minutes, to my surprise, an attractive young woman walks up to our party, extends her hand to Zhang and says, "Zhang Laoshi?" They have never met before, and she identifies him only because he is the Chinese male in our party of three. Since Professor Zhang had not mentioned the gender of our local contact, we had just assumed the student to be a man. Are we both sexists to have assumed this? We shake hands all around, and she introduces herself as Wan Lijun. She is attractive and thin, with a square face and bright flashing eyes. In her blue jeans, sneakers, and bright red windbreaker, she looks like she would be at home on any campus in North America.

Names: Xiaowan, Du Laoshi, Hongsheng, and Paul

Names are interesting windows on cultural interaction. We quickly learn to call Ms. Wan "Xiaowan," meaning Little Wan, *little* being a friendly rubric that often gets applied to the younger people in any group in China. With Du and Zhang I develop two different systems. Zhang has spent a year in the states, and he well understands our American informality with names. So he calls me Paul and I call him Hongsheng, though I sense that it would be strange for his Chinese colleagues to call him that. With Du it is more complicated. She starts calling me Paul soon enough, in part because Hongsheng comments on the American habit of informality with names, but I can't really call a Chinese female professor by her given name. So following Hongsheng's lead, I settle on Du Laoshi. *Laoshi* is more informal and affectionate than *Jiaoshou* (Professor), and it feels nothing like the terribly stiff sounding "Venerable Old Teacher" of its literal translation. Just as younger people in China are often identified by a *xiao* (little) before their name, so are older ones identified with a *lao* (old) before their name. A year after this trip, Kang Zhengguo explained to me that Du Fangqin enjoys being called simply Lao Du (Old Du) because that was how China's greatest poet, Du Fu (712-770) of the Tang dynasty, is often identified. To be addressed as Lao Du is a nice reminder that she shares the same surname as this great cultural hero.

First Taste of Jintan Hospitality

Xiaowan takes us to the Jinsha (Jinsha is another name for Jintan) Guest House, the number one hostel of the Jintan Municipal Government, which will be our base for the next five days. We have comfortable rooms with private showers and Panda TVs on which we see President Jiang Zemin's arrival at the White House in Washington. We go to lunch in a private dining room at the city government hostel and are joined by two young men from the city government and a young woman, Miss Cao, who is a personal friend of Xiaowan's. (We seem to run into personal friends of Xiaowan's everywhere we go in Jintan.) One of our hosts works in the Jintan County History Editorial Office, one works for the mayor, and Miss Cao works in the secret document section of the government, a department that sounds sinister in English but seems to carry no stigma in Chinese.

We have such an embarrassingly large lunch that I am inspired to write down the dishes. Early in the meal someone asks if I've ever eaten dog meat, and I confess that I haven't. "Would you if it were offered?"

Assuming the question to be purely hypothetical, I answer without much thought, "Yes, I suppose so. I will try anything once." A dangerous boast to make in China, I realize, but I continue, as if daring my hosts to shock me. "I grew up on a farm where we raised a variety of animals and regularly butchered our own pigs, cows, and chickens. So unlike city-bred folks, I know exactly where meat comes from and I'm not sentimental about it. I know it doesn't just grow in cellophane-wrapped cartons." Within ten minutes a large bowl of reddish stew arrives, *xiang rou*, "fragrant meat," the euphemism for dog meat. The host quickly fills the small bowl in front of me, and I dig in immediately lest I seem a complete hypocrite. The meat is tender, and frankly, quite tasty, seasoned with just enough red pepper to give it a little bite (pardon the expression). I can see why it's a popular winter dish. I finish my bowl but am careful to stave off having it refilled, which requires some considerable effort, with an assertive tone of voice and vigorous hand gestures. I don't want to overdo it.

Just as intimidating as the dog stew is the duck's blood soup—though it too is tasty—and the *bie*, or soft-shelled turtle. Not knowing that *bie* means *soft-shelled* turtle, but seeing quite clearly a turtle, perhaps eight inches in diameter, in a large bowl of broth, I am startled when our host stabs the back of the turtle with his chopsticks, breaks the shell into several hefty pieces, and plops one down on my plate. I know the Chinese consider turtle to be a delicacy, but I didn't know they eat the shell.

Around the edges, the shell is so soft it practically melts in my mouth, and I'm relieved to see others leave the hard parts of the shell on the table uneaten. The legs and feet are also a bit intimidating (no head sighted, I'm relieved to discover), but attached to the claws, bones and joints are tender bits of fatty meat. I watch others and follow along, put a claw in my mouth, separate the tender flesh and spit out the claw onto my plate. It's efficient and, given the tenderness of the turtle meat, easy.

With more than a dozen dishes, with beer and *baijiu* (a strong-tasting high-octane distilled clear liquor made from any of several grains), and with mandatory toasts with each of our hosts, we are ready for a nap before the afternoon's explorations begin. And today, after a short postlunch nap, I am amazed to suffer no ill effects whatsoever from going without coffee. Adrenaline, I decide, is a great substitute for caffeine.

Jintan County History Office

With the entirely enjoyable preliminaries out of the way and refreshed by our short nap, we proceed to the Jintan County History Editorial Office to meet with Mr. Zhu Fulin, the deputy director of the office and of the Jintan Cultural Center. Mr. Zhu knows about Shi Zhenlin's memoir, *Random Notes from Xiqing*, but he says they have no copy in Jintan and had to go to Shanghai to borrow one. He had not heard of scholar Shi's other surviving work, *Scattered Drafts from Huayang*, so we promise to send him a copy. He notes that they include a biography of Shi Zhenlin in the Jintan County Gazetteer, but not He Shuangqing, because they "could not clarify her situation." An admirably responsible and scholarly approach, I think to myself. Mr. Zhu is quite surprised when we tell him that scholars in Canada, Hong Kong, Holland, Taiwan, and the United States are all interested in the life and poetry of Shuangqing and are now debating the significance of her poetry and arguing about whether she is a fictional or a historical figure.

Looking for Xiaoshan

Much of our discussion focuses on the possible location of the village Shi Zhenlin described as Shuangqing's: Xiaoshan li, or Xiao Mountain Village. Mr. Zhu has never heard of this village nor seen any reference to it apart from Shi Zhenlin. But from other descriptions in Shi's memoir, Xiaoshan has to be near Mao Shan (a famous range of mountains just to the northwest of Jintan County) and Fang Shan (Square Moun-

tain) on the western edge of the county. Apart from Taiwanese scholar Dr. Zhou Wanyao's assertion that Xiaoshan is in the vicinity of Fang Shan, there is another reason to think that Fang Shan is where we should be looking. A second name for Fang Shan is Siping Shan, and Shi Zhenlin says that Xiaoshan Village is at the foot of a Siping Shan. The only trouble is that the *ping* in Fang Shan's secondary name is the character meaning "flat or level," while the *ping* Shi Zhenlin uses means "guard or shield." Both *pings* have the same (second, or rising) tone, so if Shi was simply changing a few names "to protect the innocent" or to add a fictional touch to a real story, he could have deliberately chosen a same-sound-different-meaning character for Siping Shan.

Xiaowan's Belief in Shuangqing

The most interesting part of the day comes after we return to our rooms in the late afternoon. Today is the first time Xiaowan has heard any details about the peasant woman poet Shuangqing and our quest for information about her. She had glanced through Du Laoshi's book this afternoon, read through some of her poems, and quickly skimmed Du's argument for the historical existence of Shuangqing. She now tells us that she has a very strong intuitive sense that Shuangqing was an actual historical figure. She is particularly impressed that Shuangqing was married to, and remained faithful to, an illiterate peasant who treated her very badly. Citing the contemporary Chinese equivalent of what we in America call "the battered wife syndrome," she argues that Shi Zhenlin's account described something very similar. She concludes with surprising confidence, "As a privileged male scholar, Shi Zhenlin could not have invented such a realistic account of female psychology without a real model as his basis!"

I am quite taken aback, but also very touched, by Xiaowan's fire and passion (as well as the breakneck speed of her speech) in discussing an issue that has always been for me primarily an intellectual exercise. She is so quick to jump to conclusions, I can't help thinking, but she is also throwing herself into our investigation with a sense of commitment that I find breathtaking. At the end of our discussions, Xiaowan gives each of us a copy of her own book of poetry, *Meili de liulang* (Beautiful wandering), published in 1996 when she was twenty-four years old (see figure 25). She has worked in her family's business throughout her youth and has not yet graduated from college, but she is already a published poet! Du Laoshi boasts: "In Xiaowan we have a modern-day Shuangqing, and in Professor Ropp we have a modern day Shi Zhenlin!"

I am flattered by the comparison, but confident that Xiaowan is a closer match for Shuangqing's talent than I am for Shi Zhenlin's. Yet, I can't let the analogy pass without comment. "Well, Xiaowan, if you find me sometime outside your window tearfully chanting your poetry, don't pay me any attention! I'm just a crazy old man like Shi Zhenlin!" (Shi Zhenlin and his friends used to loiter around Shuangqing's house and chant her poetry to express their profound sympathy for her.) We all have a good laugh and disband for the night. This is going to be an interesting week!