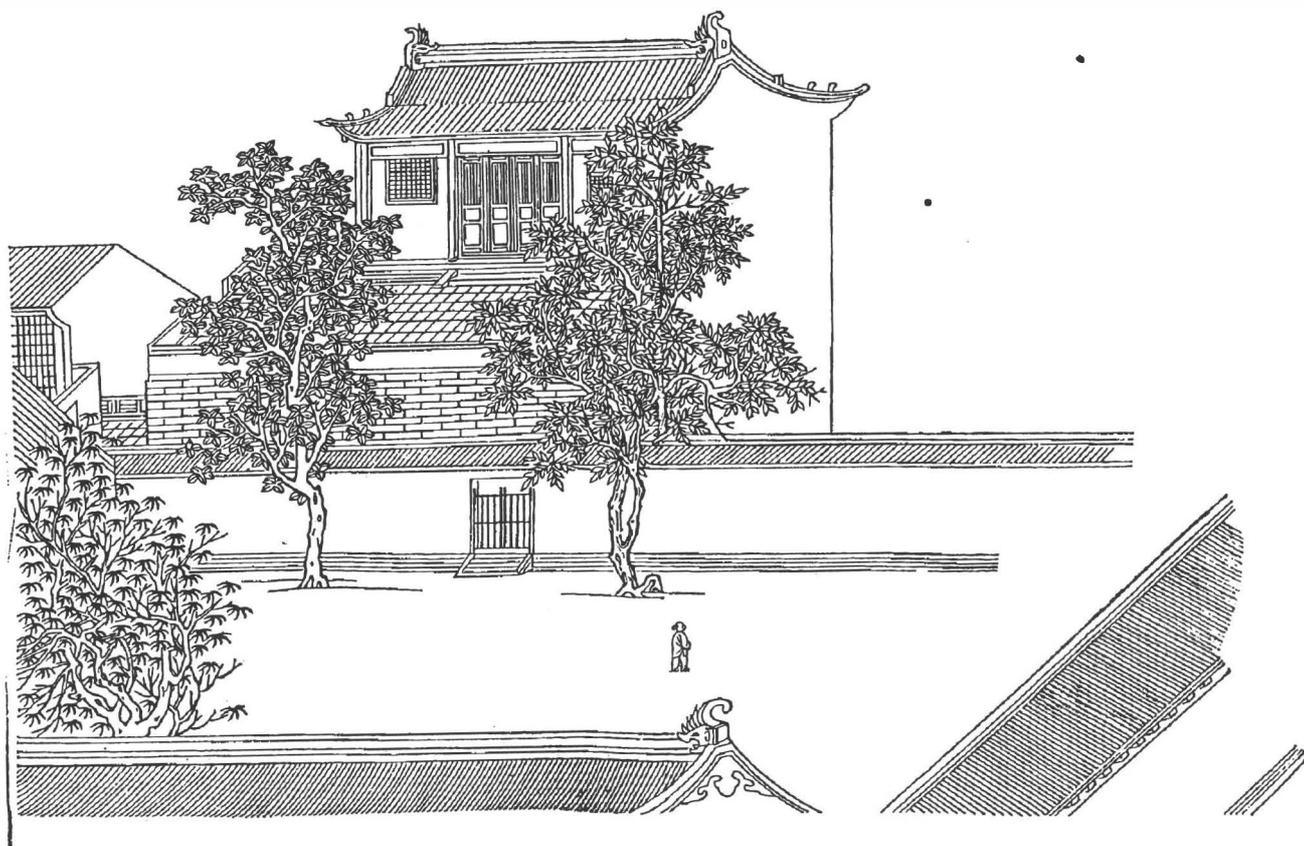


延年玩丹

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Witnessing the Alchemic Orbs at Longevity Hall

In the fifty-sixth year of Ch'ien-lung, the year *bsin-hai* [1791], on the fourteenth day of the third month, I, Lin-ch'ing, was born in the Prefect's official mansion in Nan-yang Prefecture of Honan Province, where my grandfather, Sire Hsiao-yen 曉巖, was the local Prefect. Five years later, in the first year of the Reign of Chia-ch'ing, the year *ping-chen* [1796], at the age of five, I was taught to read by my grandfather. He also taught me our mother tongue, the Manchu language.²² Then in the next year, *ting-ssu* [1797], my grandfather was promoted to be Grain and Salt Circuit Intendant, and at the age of eight, I accompanied him to the Provincial Capital.²³ I lived in the quarters attached to the Intendant's official mansion. At the rear of my apartment there was a large garden with a two-storeyed building three bays wide, above the entrance to which there hung an inscription, "Longevity Hall," in the "Ancient Script."²⁴ Legend had it that Immortals had once lodged there, so the place was kept carefully locked, except on the first and fifteenth days of the month, when sacrificial offerings were made. In the eastern corner, on the ground floor of this building, was the family school, under the instruction of Ts'ao Hsu-chai 曹蕃齋.²⁵

Whenever I attended school, I would walk past the building. One evening I left school late and the moon was shining as bright as day, when suddenly I saw an Orb of the Alchemic Elixir²⁶ fly into the sky above the roof, round as a pearl, red as fire, riding on the wind and rivalling the moon in brightness. Other Orbs came bobbing up one after another, flickering into the night sky. One soared into the clouds and descended again, glowing with all the colours of the rainbow. Another had meanwhile risen from below, and when these two encountered each other, they exploded into a myriad Orbs, hanging in mid-air like so many strings of precious stones. I was gazing intently at this extraordinary spectacle, when one of these Orbs came flying down towards me and alighted on my shoulder. No sooner had I cried out in terror, than it disappeared altogether.

In the fifth year of the Reign of Tao-kuang [1826], I was promoted from Prefect of Ying-chou in Anhui Province to River Conservancy Circuit Intendant at K'ai-feng and Kuei-te in Honan Province. The day I arrived in the Provincial Capital, the first thing I did was to visit my old school-room. I wrote a poem about it:

Where once I played in boyhood days,
I now return in robes of state.
Before I take up my official seal,
I first pay homage to my "kindly nurse."
May I not sully the glory of my ancestors,²⁷
Though I can ne'er repay my Sovereign's grace!
How little I know how to govern the people,
Much less to manage the Yellow River!

All of this happened exactly as I have told it.

²² (YTH) *Kuo-yu* 國語 was the official nomenclature for the Manchu language. In the last days of Kuang-hsu, when the modified and improved 'Mandarin' speech was made the *lingua franca* of the land, this old meaning of the term was allowed to continue to exist without any alteration, and this caused some confusion. But only for a short time: less than ten years later, when the Ch'ing dynasty came to an end, it became naturally defunct, and experienced an unnoticed demise. (Ed) Mary Wright points out, in her book *The last stand of Chinese conservatism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p.53, that by the time of the Tung-chih Restoration (1862-74), i.e. only a decade or so after the death of Lin-ch'ing, "the use of Manchu even as a secondary official language, had almost disappeared—the Manchus themselves no longer knew it." And yet Yang Chung-hsi's (see above, Editor's Remarks, n.7) great-grandfather, who served at the court of Ch'ien-lung, was 'demoted' from Manchu to Chinese Bannerman (*Han chün* 漢軍) for failing to reply to the Emperor promptly in the Manchu language.

²³ (Ed) K'ai-feng.

²⁴ (YTH) Vulgarly referred to as the 'Seal Script'.

²⁵ Ts'ao Ts'ui 曹萃, a Tribute Student from Tai-hu in Anhui Province.

²⁶ (YTH) *Tan* 丹 is a venerably ancient word in the Chinese language, and first appeared on a Bronze vessel of the early Chou dynasty. (This vessel is still in existence, and the inscription was published by Kuo Mo-jo and Liu T'i-chih.) The word simply refers to the mineral 'cinnabar', but here it means the alchemical 'article' produced by the Taoists. Hence my translation.

²⁷ (YTH) This reminds us of lines in the *Book of Odes*. For example, in the "Greater Elegantiae," Ode No. 235, "King Wen," we have the line "Ever think of your ancestor!," which is a rhetorical exhortation; in the "Lesser Elegantiae," Ode No. 196, we have the line "Do not disgrace those who gave you birth!," in the imperative mood.