INTRODUCTION

One day I came across a literary piece entitled ‘Of a Guest’s Insolence’ (*Ke ao* 客傲), by the early medieval official, savant, poet and diviner Guo Pu 郭璞 (276-324), and could not make head nor tail of it. Dictionaries were of no avail: not so much the vocabulary as the import of the composition was frustratingly opaque. Here is a passage from it:

Moreover,
Dormant in its cavern spring, [a dragon] does not miss skirling in the clouds;
Bedecked with shimmering ice, [the moon] hardly longs for the light of dawn.
So why, my rays of splendour dulled by dark and dust,
Should I yearn for the Canglang River’s deeps
Or for the brilliance of the autumn sun?

My puzzlement was of the kind that Huang Zongxi describes in the ‘Directions to the Reader’ of his Case Studies of Ming Confucians: ‘if the student fails to grasp the author’s overall purpose, then in reading his work he will be like the ancient explorer Zhang Qian on his arrival in Daxia, in Central Asia, with no clue as to what to make of the Yuezhi who lived there’. How can we find out what Guo Pu, by all accounts a highly sophisticated author, was driving at?

***

Further searching showed me that Guo Pu’s composition does not stand alone. It fits into a tradition of similar pieces that, at least since Liu Xie 劉勰 (d. ca. 520) and his *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons), have been labelled as a minor literary genre in their own right, called ‘responses to questions’ (*duiwen* 對問) or, alternatively, ‘hypothetical discourses’ (*shelun* 設論). Under the latter appellation, the genre is represented in Xiao Tong’s 蕭統 (501-531) great anthology, the *Wenxuan* 文選 or Literary Selections, with its three earliest examples from the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BC–AD 220): ‘Response to a Guest’s Objections’ (*Da ke nan* 答客難) attributed to Dongfang Shuo 東方朔

---

1 Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695), Mingru xue’an 明儒學案, ‘Directions to the Reader’ f. 1a.
(154-93 BC), Yang Xiong’s 楊雄 (53 BC–AD 18) ‘Dissolving Ridicule’ (jie chao 解嘲), and Ban Gu’s 班固 (32-92) Da bin xi 答賓戲 (‘Response to a Guest’s Jest’). Xiao Tong may have taken these from the standard History of the (Former) Han, the Han shu 漢書. Four more texts in the same vein are included in the Book of Later Han (Hou Han shu) and in the Record of the Three States (San guo zhi 三國志). They are Cui Yin’s 楠麟 (ca. 30-92) ‘Stating My Purpose’ (Da zhi 達旨), Zhang Heng’s 張衡 (78-139) ‘Reply to Criticism’ (Ying jian 應問), Cai Yong’s 蔡邕 (133-192) ‘Rejecting Censure’ (Shi hui 釋譏), and Xi Zheng’s 邢正 (d. 278) ‘Rejecting Slander’ (Shi ji 釋譏). For this same period, the Hou Han shu and other sources yield fragments of three more ‘hypothetical discourses’ and passing references to another three titles.

From Guo Pu’s age, the Jin 晉 dynasty (266-420), five shelun are preserved in the imperially sponsored Tang 唐 dynasty compilation that serves as our main source for the history of the period: the Book of Jin (Jin shu 晉書), completed in 648. For the Western Jin (266-316), we have Huangfu Mi’s 黃甫謐 (215-282) ‘Rejecting Advice: An Essay’ (Shiquan lun 釋勸論), Xiahou Zhan’s 夏侯湛 (243-291) ‘Countering Suspicions’ (Di yi 抵疑), and Shu Xi’s 東晉 (ca. 264–ca. 303) ‘Apology for Living in Seclusion’ (Xuanju shi 玄居釋); for the Eastern Jin (317-420), Guo Pu’s ‘Of a Guest’s Insolence’ and Cao Pi’s 曹丕 (fl. ca. 342-383) ‘Riposte to a Scholar’ (Dui ru 對儒). Elsewhere mention is made of one further Jin-dynasty ‘hypothetical discourse’. After the Jin, the shelun genre seems to have died out; no later examples have been found.

***

Neither Liu Xie nor any other critic I know of lists all of these texts, but even so I am fairly confident that the twelve pieces mentioned above belong together as ‘hypothetical discourses’, and comprise what is left today of the shelun genre (all told, nineteen traceable titles). This is because the duiw en or shelun genre is unequivocally defined as consisting of texts written in imitation of Dongfang Shuo’s seminal ‘Response to a Guest’s Objections’ and Yang Xiong’s paradigmatic ‘Dissolving Ridicule’. Ban Gu is the first known epigone with his ‘Response to a Guest’s Jest’, and the pieces listed above are likewise (as we shall see) unmistakable

---

2 For Shu Xi and his Xuanju shi, see my article ‘The Perils of Orthodoxy: A Western Jin “Hypothetical Discourse”’ (1994).
offshoots from the same root. Indeed, so strongly do they formally resemble each other that one might almost consider them, in Gilbert Highet’s derogatory phrase, ‘plaster-cast imitations’ of Dongfang Shuo’s and Yang Xiong’s model compositions—a term that fails to do justice to their individual modulations, but a feature, nonetheless, that bears on the ‘overall purpose’ of Guo Pu’s Ke ao and other shelun treated in this study. Genre conventions communicate meaning; and where conventions exercise such a firm hold that they produce ‘plaster-cast imitations’ for four centuries running, it seems useful to ask what irreplaceable communicative value made authors willing to accept the chains of convention for so long. Certainly a major reason for my initial perplexity upon reading Guo Pu’s piece was not knowing the literary matrix in which it is inscribed. There was a time when the fixed form of the shelun had at least the virtue of orienting readers towards a certain interpretation of these literary pieces; to remedy my sense of disorientation, it proved indispensable to become more familiar with the limits and possibilities of shelun as a genre. I hope these pages, the result of that learning effort, may fill a small lacuna in Western studies on Chinese literary history.

What is a ‘hypothetical discourse’? To anticipate some major themes that will be treated in what follows, a sure sign of a shelun is that it is cast in the form of a dialogue, between the author (who identifies himself by name) and an imaginary critic whose identity remains vague: he is an unnamed ‘guest’ or ‘retainer’, someone in the author’s entourage, an anonymous colleague. This imaginary critic confronts the author with his lack of success in public life; he holds up a mirror to him, and shows him the promise of a brilliant career sadly unfulfilled, the obscurity in which he languishes—and then asks him point-blank: why? Why not embrace the opportunities that are there for the taking, and gain wealth

---

3 Gilbert Hight, The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature (1964) p. 85.
4 For an introduction in Japanese, see Nakajima Chiaki, Fu no seiritsu to tenkai (1963), with a brief discussion of the shelun genre (up to the Later Han period) on pp. 418-28. After I completed my research for this book, two articles appeared by Taniguchi Hiroshi, “Kakunan” o megutte’ (1991) and ‘Yō Yū no “Kaichō” o megutte—’Setsuron’ no bungaku janru to shite no seijuku to henshusu’ (1992): see bibliography.
and fame? An elaborate reply by the author then follows—in effect, a position statement: the author declares that he is perfectly content with his present life, or he defends his choice of the life of a hermit, far from the trappings of office, rejecting the ambitions his ‘guest’ urges upon him. In any case, the author is ultimately vindicated as a true and upright gentleman while his opponent, the voice of worldly opportunism, is triumphantly reduced to silence.

This dialogue is always cast in rhymed parallel prose with one rhyme-word for each block of lines, changing into another when a new argument is broached; other divisional markers are added, such as supernumerary particles falling outside the metre of rhymed lines, or an occasional plain prose sentence to introduce or emphasize the end of a development. The *shelun* shares these formal characteristics with that far broader category in ancient Chinese literature, the *fu*, where, apart from the ever-present rhyme, the parallelism, and the sectioning devices just mentioned, the dialogue framework is also a common feature, as is prolixity and a tendency towards hyperbolical language. Neither is a marked predilection for historical allusions exclusive to the *shelun*. Why ‘hypothetical discourses’ are nonetheless never classified as *fu* and never have the word *fu* in their title will be discussed in a later chapter.

Suffice it here to say that ‘hypothetical discourses’ are artfully constructed dialogues revolving around one ever-recurring issue: whether the author should devote his energies to securing a position for himself in government (or, if he already has one, whether he should aim higher), or instead stay out of politics and retire to his study or to the countryside.

***

This theme on which all *shelun* hinge is no casual conversational topic. Rather than being fanciful literary exercises on ‘set subjects’, as James R. Hightower once translated the term *shelun*, these texts bear witness to a major preoccupation of educated Chinese in the early medieval period and well beyond. David R. Knechtges’ ren-

---

5 On these characteristics of the *fu*, see e.g. Hans H. Frankel, *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry* (1976) pp. 207-10.

dering ‘hypothetical discourse’ for the word shelun,7 although faithful to what Xiao Tong and others appear to have had in mind in using it, seems similarly out of tune with the seriousness of our texts. One did not ‘hypothesize’ about taking office, nor did one compose schoolroom essays on a subject so weighty in significance. In spite of its generic label, it seems hard to believe that a ‘hypothetical discourse’ could have been a mere trifle for those who wrote them. This assertion requires a sketch, however hazardous to draw, of the mindset of an elite qualified to seek, as it was qualified to eschew, appointment to public office.

***

The robes of office exercised a strong attraction that cannot fully be explained by the accompanying salary, power and prestige. Holding office had the strength of a vocation which the whole body of traditional education would have persuaded its fortunate recipient that he had in him. In an overwhelmingly illiterate society, he was one of the happy few who had direct access to the teachings of the Sages as they stood in the Confucian Classics. His superior understanding of Confucian teachings made him think of himself as a ‘gentleman’ (shi ±), with all the connotations of the word in English and in Chinese. The educated were privy to the Truth, and felt uniquely called upon to position themselves where they could speak out for that Truth and be heard: that is to say, ideally, in public office.

Now what the Classics teach is, in the last analysis, how to uphold a universal standard of right and wrong in a kaleidoscopic variety of situations (‘Through my Way runs a single thread’, said Confucius). Surely we might think of someone determined to pursue the road to public office as particularly liable to sacrifice strict notions of right and wrong somewhere along the way. The Chinese gentleman’s ideal therefore seems to us at first sight impracticable if not downright hypocritical, and there were those in China too who saw personal integrity as incompatible with public life. But although a philosopher like Zhuangzi, in the fourth century BC, might inveigh against the sanctimony of officials doubling as moralists, this did not lead to a parting of ways between mundane politicians and dispassionate moral experts. Such a

specialization of roles, one might add, would scarcely have made the latter any more acceptable in Zhuangzi’s eyes; but it did not happen, and after Confucianism had become the state ideology in the Former Han, no other occupational branch for professional Confucianists could very well develop as this would have intolerably challenged the government’s ideological monopoly. Thus an educated man who hoped to put his hard-won knowledge of the Confucian Classics to practical use had few alternatives other than pursuing a career as a government official.

In spite of this, there is every indication that educated men generally did believe they could act as spokesmen for moral rectitude even in the course of a career in government. This belief need not necessarily have been thrown off balance by an untidy reality, since the reach of government was by no means comparable to what it has become in modern times. With a corps of officials so morally driven, though, it should come as no surprise that every administration claimed to ‘transform’ the very hearts and minds of its subjects. The reality, as Max Weber argues, was that local communities largely governed themselves;8 and apart from levying taxes and conscripting labour, local officials (the bulk of the civil service) may well have spent much of their time on ceremonial or ritual duties that, though no doubt sincerely held to be magically beneficial to the common good, were as little subject to the test of practical utility as the self-assurance of those who officiated at them. Also, and more importantly, one should consider that there was no concept of progress. Gentleman-officials felt no need to search for ways to change society, no need to question the way things had always been done. Why would they, in a pre-modern rural world where to tinker with the fragile recipes for survival was fraught with danger? They had no good reason to hope that the world they saw about them in adult life, with the same deep inequalities (or rather, ineluctable givens) they had known when young, would be any different in their children’s lifetime. This made the aim of government, in theory as well as in practice, consist of maintaining the ‘constant relationships’ of society, with a golden past rather than a dreamt-of future for a guideline: a situation that invited less soul-searching than a changing world would do, and did nothing to undermine the convic-

---

tion that all day-to-day problems could be adjudicated by reference to the moral code laid down in the Classics for all time.

If, certainly in the early medieval period, no social changes within China were radical enough to throw the educated class fundamentally into disarray, neither were there (until modern times) any serious intellectual shocks coming in from outside the country. This means that the cosmological framework of government remained intact. For many centuries, after all, what China knew of its neighbours could only perpetuate the idea that China with its civilization was the privileged centre of the universe, joined with Heaven in a grand solidarity of purpose. On earth, the Emperor and his chosen officials mediated this special relationship with ceremonial splendour, and what was there to shake their faith in the rightness of their self-ordained mission? For educated men, to take part in governing the realm meant to participate in keeping the world on a stable course; and a distinguished career record could confer the one kind of immortality a man of judgement could sensibly hope for, a fame that would live on in the annals of history.

The bedrock of these convictions was secure. The elitist nature of a narrowly circumscribed, orthodox education; the limited effectiveness of a government wrapped up in itself, at arm’s length from those it claimed to govern; an essentially static society (in which political and military events periodically shuffled the cards, without changing the rules of the game); the lack of outside challenges to sow the seeds of introspection: such factors helped to ensure that the intellectual stratum of Chinese society would by and large have an image of itself, even when in office, as standing dispassionately above the fray, uncompromising in its adherence to the timeless moral standards of the Classics. Needless to say, that sublime detachment was often sorely tried in practice—tried, but not necessarily thrown off balance. Peasant uprisings, trouble with barbarians beyond the borders, civil war, even the overthrow of one dynasty by another could still be made sense of in the traditional conception of right and wrong, good and evil; such disturbances merely turned routine management of the ‘constant relationships’ of society into temporary crisis management—by the same class of rulers, operating under the same assumptions.

Far more threatening to the certainties of educated men was to see one of their very own flout the ethical code they stood for—
especially someone entrusted with office. Indeed, the educated class was at pains to protect the traditional conception of government from the seamier side of politics, the jockeying for position and the power intrigues: these were embarrassing deviations from the ideal, and (notwithstanding the drama such undignified behaviour lent the work of historiographers) upright gentlemen had great difficulty coming to terms with them.⁹ They looked askance even on ambition itself; and when unscrupulous officials betrayed the honour of their office, when promotions did not go to the deserving but to the well-connected, when unworthy favourites had the ear of the Emperor, when (horror of horrors) the Emperor himself seemed to care little about Confucian niceties—it was as if their sacred values were being trampled upon by those who should have been models of morality; it cut the ground from under their feet. This was the sort of conduct that laid officialdom wide open to the charge of sanctimoniousness.

Scandalized by such infringements of the gentlemanly code, righteous men took it upon themselves to accuse and condemn the guilty, enhancing their own credentials in the process. In high-minded memorials to the throne they denounced misdemeanours and abuses, exposed sinners in the rank and file, and when the Emperor seemed to forget the imperatives of his calling, tried to influence him by subtle persuasion. Confucianism, the state ideology, actively encouraged officials to be always on the alert for lapses from the collectively binding code of behaviour. Not that all men were equally zealous, of course. In practice, most will have made their various compromises with reality, attuning their interpretation of orthodox principles to the voice of their ambition; and even the more scrupulous must have been guided by a sane sense of expediency. But as anyone can ascertain from the (often state-sponsored) dynastic histories, the real heroes are the minority who, in varying degrees of intransigence, clung unflinchingly to Confucian principles. At least in theory, to resign from

⁹ See e.g. Lucian Pye, *The Spirit of Chinese Politics* (New ed., 1992) p. 30: ‘Nowhere in Chinese politics do we have a frank acceptance of the fact that men may be crass and self-centred and that it is only prudent in designing public institutions to insist upon checks and balances and to provide objective rather than subjective restraints on the use of power.’ Or John Dardess: ‘The observance or non-observance of professional ethics constituted the principal focus of conflict within the broad ranks of Confucianism’ (*Confucianism and Autocracy* [1983] p. 84).
office altogether was also a legitimate way to signal one’s protest against perceived abuses in government. In theory, the political establishment would acknowledge the protest and take appropriate action; it could not simply disavow its own ideology. Thus one finds that even hermits were credited with a positive role: they were seen as gentlemen who by fleeing the world displayed an extreme distrust of the possibility of preserving their integrity in any public function at all. Their attitude could be explained as a form of puritanism—or as a total condemnation of the regime they lived under. Neither motivation could have been flattering to the established powers of the day, yet state-employed historians describe hermits as exemplary figures: living reminders of rigorous standards, held up to all.

That was the theory—and dynastic histories, in any case, were compiled definitively only after the relevant dynasty had safely vanished, together with its exemplary hermits. In practice, men were impelled by powerful motives to pursue a career in government without taking their role as guardians of Confucian morality to any such extremes. The most pressing of these motives was no doubt economic. Through their education men were drawn towards a career in government service, and this was virtually the only profession that brought with it high social status and rich emoluments. As one modern scholar writes, ‘unlike England or France, where a man could rise to a position of high social status through a career in law, medicine, commerce, the Church, or the military, in China there was only one significant occupational hierarchy: the civil service’.\textsuperscript{10} Substantive rewards aside, rules on the maximum extent of land tenure, for instance, or sumptuary laws or regulations on the number of retainers one could employ, were all drawn up in a permissive spirit towards officials, and in a prohibitive spirit towards commoners; which is tantamount to saying that as soon as one endeavoured to rise above commoner level, one either became an official, or else—for example as a merchant—one clambered up to a twilight social status with little protection against plunging back down. It is therefore understandable that in addition to the pull of his vocation and the inducement of immortal fame, an educated man would have felt strong pressure from his family and clan to enter government, thus show-

ing himself worthy of the education he had received, and raising the whole clan’s stature by his success.

The second complication was that to be outspoken could be as risky as it was honourable. This was of course always the case—one did not recklessly lecture one’s superiors—but in this period there was at once greater occasion for criticism of the ruling establishment, and a heightened sensitivity to such criticism on the part of the rulers. It would lead us too far afield to recount here the history of the third and fourth centuries (we shall return to it later), but it is certain that successive regimes of the time all faced doubts about their legitimacy. By the mid-second century, the driving force of the Han seemed to be spent; the increasingly prominent part played by palace eunuchs in politics alienated the intellectual elite and irreparably weakened the prestige of the imperial house, until, by the early third century and after four hundred years of nearly uninterrupted rule, imperial authority became purely nominal and the Han dynasty succumbed to rebellions, attacks from foreign tribes, and the self-serving ambitions of generals dispatched to restore order but carving up the empire among themselves instead. With the final demise of the Han dynasty in 220, the cosmological justification for government was gone as well; the cord between Heaven and Earth had snapped. Was it nobler for a gentleman, after the Han emperors were gone, to engage himself in the service of new rulers, or to lie low until some Heavenly sign endorsed the legitimacy of Han’s successor? But who was Han’s true successor? From rivalling warlords competing for territorial advantage in the last decades of the Han, the Three States emerged, to dispute the claim of legitimacy and divide up the realm; but as the Han dynasty had proudly reigned over ‘all under Heaven’, the fragmentation of a mystically indissoluble China damned every claimant. Could one in conscience serve any one of the three?11 The conquest of one of the Three States, that is, the surrender of ShuHan 蜀漢 to Wei 魏 in 263/264, restored a measure of faith in the universal pretensions of the Wei regime; yet the Wei emperor was already a puppet in the hands of a regent, and what was one to make of this regent from the Sima clan, Sima Zhao 司馬昭 (211-265), whose son Yan 炎 (236-290) would usurp the throne in 266? Had these Sima strongmen not

signally failed in that prime Confucian duty of loyalty to one’s sovereign? Could their new Jin dynasty now rightfully demand loyalty from its own subjects?\(^\text{12}\)

Abstract questions, no doubt, but vital to the educated. Those who embraced the cause of a new ruling house, whether in government at large or at the court (chao), were certainly all ‘gentlemen’ by virtue of their education; and once they had rallied to the side of the new emperor, they were naturally eager to convince themselves as well as gentlemen not in government—those in the provinces, in the ‘field’ (ye)—that there was every moral reason to support the de facto authority achieved first by the Three States, and subsequently by the equally suspect Jin empire. The efforts of officials of the Three States and the Jin to legitimize these regimes (and thus their own position) betray the extent, however, to which public opinion remained divided: to serve or not to serve? Would an active commitment to these regimes win a conscientious man fame in his lifetime and ever after; or would history brand him an opportunist, in which case it was more honourable to remain disengaged? Again we should bear in mind that only a very small minority of gentlemen would have carried such high-minded scruples so far as to repudiate a government career (a decision facilitated in many cases, one suspects, by their being independently wealthy); but these exceptional people served as the conscience of the nation. Taking no office, they stayed at home, and retreated either literally or (probably more often) symbolically from the society of office-seekers to the pristine seclusion of mountains and woods. The result was a stand-off between committed officials at one extreme and conscientious objectors at the other, while the majority of the educated class in the middle may have wavered, watched and waited, but resolved in the end to embark upon public careers, tolerably resigned to having the role of Solomon in their various jurisdictions, thus obtaining the honours and rewards they craved. Let us content ourselves with this generalized portrait of the majority, and concentrate now on those who said ‘no’ to a government they considered to be corrupt beyond repair or illegitimate in its foundations.

For a government itself anxious to live up to Confucian doctrine, forcibly silencing such models of moral integrity was a danger-

ous course: it could explode the government’s professed aim of ruling by humaneness and virtue, and might alienate more educated men than it could afford to lose. Yet leaving these principled recluses in peace was tantamount to admitting failure. Conformity strengthened the government’s claims to legitimacy, while exceptions undermined them; but the only sure way to eliminate such exceptions was when, by an act of disobedience or subversion against the state, those who had opted out of officialdom became liable to criminal charges of disrespect or insubordination, thereby forfeiting their untouchable aura of being ‘saintly’, exemplary figures. Therefore, gentlemen who rendered themselves conspicuous by not pursuing an official career had to be highly cautious. To hint that the Emperor had no right to his throne was suicidal; to suggest that office-holders were opportunists merely bent on self-advantage was a condemnation that should be neither too sweeping nor too focused, lest it take too far the tradition of auto-discipline among educated equals. At all times prudence was called for, so as not to invite retribution for a nonconformism that was in itself an indictment of the established powers. Recluses were not easily disposed of; the problem was that they professed to follow Confucianism more strictly than those in power, whose own moral authority was rooted in Confucian teachings. This made conscientious objectors an awkward presence, and office-holders keen to discredit them, making their position at once exalted and perilous.

One may ask why recluses should have wanted to attract notice at all, rather than following the dictates of their conscience without publicizing it. But to escape notice was hardly possible. There was one’s family, a pressure already noted; to disappoint their expectations by not pursuing a career was bound to cause a stir. Then there was the local Magistrate, one of whose duties was to recommend men of talent to the central authorities. Since a man professing not to care about a public career intimated that he was motivated by loftier moral principles than most, this ironically made

---

13 Lu Xun (1881-1936) drew attention to this with respect to Xi Kang (223-262) and Ruan Ji (210-263), vilified in official historiography for their notoriously unconventional behaviour (which brought them into conflict with the authorities, resulting in death by execution in Xi Kang’s case). The opprobrium they earned, Lu Xun argues, was not for opposing Confucian orthodoxy but for taking its tenets too literally. See his ‘Wei Jin fengdu ji wenzhang yu yao ji jiu zhi guanxi’, in *Lu Xun quanji* Vol. 5 pp. 501-17, at pp. 513-14.
him seem eminently suitable for public office, and highly likely to be recommended by the Magistrate. To persistently decline such recommendations put the 'recluse' ever more in the public eye, and attracted other gentlemen very interested to know what superior grasp of the Classics, what superior virtue had led him to his decision; thus the recluse acquired fame, a circle of devotees and, inevitably, even more attention from the authorities. Someone who honestly felt he could not serve under an odious regime might conceivably abscond into the wilds before his reputation spread, but it is doubtful that this ever happened. Assuming the perfectly invisible recluse existed, we would obviously never know about him;¹⁴ but such a hypothetical individual would be out of character, since the whole point of a recluse’s stand was to make a statement, to do the honourable thing; and honour was a worldly commodity that only his fellow gentlemen could bestow on him. Not paradise but fame was the reward of righteousness, earned either through a distinguished career in government or through behaviour visibly in protest of it. Hence the tension between gentlemen at court and gentlemen in the field: there was much more to bind than to divide them. Both groups drew upon Confucian orthodoxy to justify their behaviour, and this prevented the one from openly attacking the other—officials because to vilify models of orthodox morality would weaken the regime’s doctrinal bearings, recluses because they might at any moment transgress the ill-defined borderline between loyal criticism and criminal subversion.

To summarize: what we may call the central preoccupation of educated men was to weigh up whether, in the political reality they lived under, they could honourably do what their upbringing, their family and the state all urged them to do—to participate in governing the realm—and still be gentlemen. The decision depended on what a shi considered to be right by the Classics as he subjectively interpreted them. As a decision more public than private, saying no to a government career put a gentleman at odds with others who insisted that their own government careers were similarly justified by Confucian doctrine; and as the Confucian ideology shared alike by all gentlemen had no place for pluralism, to adopt

¹⁴ A point satirically belaboured by Lu Xun in his article ‘Yinshi’ (‘Recluses’), in Lu Xun quanji Vol. 6 pp. 223-25.
a dissenting stance was dangerous. What sanctioned it nonetheless was the modulating influence of fame, that is, of public opinion among the educated; if a gentleman’s peers awarded him fame for the high principles behind his refusal of a public career, he was in some measure protected against the levelling impulses of the government—and officials could earn fame, too, if (as they were well-nigh forced to do) they took heed of public opinion and affected to tolerate conscientious objectors. The price the latter paid for this relative security was having to act their part of moral exemplar to the point of unimpeachability. This made them in one sense prisoners of their convictions; in another sense, their ambiguous *modus vivendi* with the regime had something of a compact with the enemy. Nor was this the only ambiguity inherent in the situation. For instance, if scepticism about the government’s moral right to rule caused an increase in the number of conspicuous recluses, what better course could the regime take towards these irksome nonconformists than not only to tolerate them, but actually to congratulate them for their uprightness? The regime could thus officially countenance a recluse as living testimony to its claim that the ruling dynasty held gentlemen of lofty moral standards in the highest esteem. This in turn created scope for fraud: a man might set out to make a reputation as a high-principled recluse, ultimately to let himself be reeled in by the authorities in triumph and offered an official position he might not otherwise have attained. But these ambiguities do not detract from the genuine dilemma facing gentlemen whose identity and self-esteem depended on their skill in delivering moral judgements; nor does the occasional impostor signify that to reject a career in government was at all an easy choice to make—for the more consistent and principled a gentleman’s behaviour, the greater was his chance of coming into conflict with the authorities.

***

Back to the *shelun*. In their unvarying theme—should the author aim at a government position, or bow out of public life?—the ‘hypothetical discourses’ highlight a vital concern of early medieval Chinese gentlemen. *Shi* judged their peers by how they matched action to Confucian principle, with a public career constituting action *par excellence*. But when the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty was suspect, action was suspect as well; and purity of
principle alone became the yardstick for measuring a shi’s claim to be a shi. This in turn had two strangely complementary consequences. The more principled he declared himself to be, the more a shi set himself on a collision course with the government, the necessary foil for his declarations of moral independence. And the more he insisted on his moral independence, the greater became a shi’s prestige among his peers, and consequently the more he was driven back into the arms of a government that rewarded virtue with official employment. A shelun author trod dangerous ground in describing the government as being morally wanting, and congratulating himself on staying aloof from it; but the risk he took conferred a quite ‘bankable’ prestige that could lead to a position with the government. We shall see how individual authors handled this ambiguous, always risky game; but one answer can already be ventured to the question raised earlier, as to why ‘hypothetical discourses’ are so stereotyped in form. For if the generic form of the shelun had once proved to be a safe vehicle for this type of message, besides cloaking it with the mantle of accepted literary tradition, then these were compelling reasons to stick to the form and not to increase the odds of being misunderstood by trying to be original. As Paul Valéry remarks about metric conventions, ‘people who fear the uncertainty in exchanges between author and reader assuredly find in the fixity of the number of syllables and in the more or less forced symmetries of ancient verse-forms the advantage of limiting this risk in a quite simple, or shall we say crude, manner’. So also with the formal characteristics of ‘hypothetical discourses’; and what is true of their form is true also of their content. Only by referring time and again to the same, unexceptionable high ground of Confucian orthodoxy could successive shelun authors safely set forth their views on the sensitive dilemma of whether or not to aim for a government career. Hence we find stock arguments, standard quotations, and a general dogmatic air in all ‘hypothetical discourses’. We shall come back to these broad pronouncements in the course of the following chapters. But it follows from the background just sketched that texts touching on the issue whether to serve or not to serve under regimes of doubtful legitimacy are likely to be rather stereotyped.  

The form and content of ‘hypothetical discourses’ may be relatively stereotyped, but the situation that gave rise to these dialogues was uniquely individual. The dilemma they touch on goes to the heart of what a gentleman believed in, and what is more, the subject was so politically charged that one can assume an author would commit his thoughts to paper only if he felt strongly that he could not do otherwise. There is nothing gratuitous about ‘hypothetical discourses’. And yet, isolated from their context, they may at first seem to be mere derivative exercises in literary composition; worse, the repetitiveness of their arguments may incongruously lead one to suppose that shelun authors are insincere and their voices unauthentic. They belie a modern Western preconception about what literature should be: an author’s highly individual feelings expressed in a highly individual manner. Much the reverse is true of shelun, since what is most individual in their motivation is hidden in their execution. Any text-immanent approach to ‘hypothetical discourses’ has to be complemented, therefore, with external, biographical information to show what prompted their composition. Without some knowledge of the authors’ motives, we lack the key to unlock our texts and divine the private passion underlying the conventional phraseology.

This key we fortunately have: it is provided by the biographies of the authors in the Han shu, Hou Han shu, Sanguo zhi and Jin shu, where the twelve fully preserved examples of the shelun genre are to be found. As has often been observed, such biographies were meant to show how men of note had shaped or been shaped by the political realities of their age, how they had responded to its opportunities and challenges. Readers found insights here to guide their own response to the times they lived in. ‘Hypothetical discourses’ fit the same didactic aim and expectation. They formulated the author’s response to his times in a way that captured the imagination, and afforded instruction just as did the exemplary lives in which they are embedded. In fact there are several instances where the literary text dominates the biography of its author, or where the author would probably not have been honoured with a biography at all, were it not for his shelun. In each case, however, the biographical elements presented are sufficient to enable us to discover when the text was written, and to
some extent why. Thus one is able to trace the intertwining of the text with the specific historical and biographical circumstances that prompted it, and thus the necessary imaginative sympathy is evoked that allows one to sense the authentic, real-life issues behind the measured literary formulas.

***

To conclude: ‘hypothetical discourses’ are literary texts that, owing to the political risks posed by the specific problem situation they address, are neither transparent nor artistically autonomous enough to be done full justice by the analytical methods of Western literary criticism; they are too much the product of their historical and biographical context. This study therefore devotes considerable space to the background to these literary texts, and this emphasis necessarily limits its scope. To fully circumstantiate all surviving shelun would require extensive forays into at least five centuries of Chinese history; the smaller set of six extant post-Han (Three States and Jin) examples of the genre examined here date from the third and fourth centuries, thus representing a slightly more manageable challenge.

Still, and indispensably, in Chapter One I give a translation and interpretation of the Han shelun prototype, Dongfang Shuo’s ‘Response to a Guest’s Objections’, as well as of Yang Xiong’s ‘Dissolving Ridicule’. This has been done before, but it would not suffice simply to refer the reader to these earlier publications whose aims, in any case, were not the same as those pursued here. The second chapter deals with the boundaries of the shelun genre; it includes a very brief account of the Later Han ‘hypothetical discourse’.

Chapters Three to Eight form the core of the book, and are an attempt to read ‘hypothetical discourses’ in conjunction with the nonliterary background that can be adduced to give these compositions context and lifeblood. Xi Zheng (Three States), Huangfu Mi, Xiahou Zhan (Western Jin), Guo Pu and Cao Pi (Eastern Jin) are discussed in turn; Shu Xi I have dealt with elsewhere. Chapter Four provides a general overview of the political history of the period and of its impact on a gentleman’s career prospects, and includes a translation of Wang Chen’s (third century) ‘Explanation of the Times’ (Shishi lun 釋時論), which,
though not a *shelun*, offers a vivid comment on the environment that prompted the writing of ‘hypothetical discourses’. Finally, there is an Appendix, on the mythological, legendary and historical figures whose names appear in ‘hypothetical discourses’ at every turn and who, I believe, meant too much to contemporary authors for them to be stowed away in small-type footnotes.

Since, as I have argued, a biographical approach is essential for an understanding of these texts, it is prudent to add a brief comment on my main source, the *Jin shu*. Among dynastic histories, the *Jin shu* has been acclaimed for its literary style, but criticized for its unreliability. This, combined with the late date of its compilation, may seem to make it an unsatisfactory reference for reconstructing the biographical background of the *shelun*. But in fact, as many examples in the course of this study show, the drawbacks of the *Jin shu* are often hidden strengths. The *Jin shu* was hastily compiled by an imperial commission in the early seventh century to satisfy the curiosity of the first Tang emperor, who took a great interest in the Jin dynasty because after the division of China under the Three States, it had reunified the country (as the Tang emperor intended to keep it), and also because it had so spectacularly failed to consolidate its gains: here were important lessons to be learnt. As they were pressed for time, however—the *Jin shu* was completed in a mere three years—the editorial commission did little more than to graft a medley of existing material onto an earlier Book of Jin written in the fourth century by Wang Yin 王穎, which they used as the blueprint for the *Jin shu* that we have today. They polished up the narrative, but did not entirely recast the material, nor did they always manage to reconcile internal contradictions. As we shall see, the present *Jin shu* can surprisingly often be matched up with existing fragments of the original sources used by the Tang editors, so that a considerable portion of our biographical data in fact demonstrably derive from near-contemporary works.

***

Bewilderment and incomprehension lay at the origins of my research; these pages have no other aim than to increase our understanding of a puzzling group of texts. Once upon a time ‘hypothetical discourses’ must have spoken to their intended
readership with an immediacy and a relevance they no longer have. Can something of their original voice and impact still be restored to them, over the divides of time and place? The texts on which this study concentrates are wrapped in a heavy cloak of literary convention; this may be one reason why modern historians of early medieval China have largely ignored them. They have not fared any better with connoisseurs of Chinese literature: Xiao Tong’s choice of the three earliest known Han dynasty *shelun* for inclusion in his great anthology has long been viewed as adequately illustrating and implicitly judging everything worth knowing about this minor mode of literary expression. Regarded by literary scholars as mere exercises in composition, by historians as unwieldy source material, these elegant compositions have fallen by the wayside. But at the junction of literary and political history, the little-remarked ‘hypothetical discourses’ reveal a range of responses to a question of grave importance to Chinese gentlemen, drawn up within constraints of speech and style characteristic of their age. If the heartbeat of these texts can ever so faintly be made palpable again, this study will have attained its goal.