CHAPTER TWO

RECLUSION AND PARTICIPATION

After his second failure at the provincial examination Chen and his good friend Wang Heng went on an excursion. Chen wrote of the trip that:

In 1585, after coming back from the examination we travelled to Hangzhou. There we lodged with some monks. The hills around were empty and the moon was bright, tigers roared outside the door. We drank, and toyed with difficult rhymes that we turned into song. The rules of the game were that if the wine was cold by the time your song ended then you had to pay a penalty. Time and again we would be searching for rhymes as if in the wind and rain, putting our brushes to paper just as falcons and rabbits chase and pull away from each other…

There is no hint of Chen’s dramatic withdrawal or his coming reclusion in this trip, but a second excursion soon took place, and this time it was directly related to Chen’s adoption of reclusion.

In the spring of 1586 Chen went on an excursion to Little Mount Kun, close to Huating, with Wang Shizhen and Xu Yisun. Xu, like Chen, was from Huating and had also gained the first degree. He was already active in the publishing world having edited the *Zhou Shuye xiansheng ji* [Collected Works of Zhou Shuye], by their townsman Zhou Sijian 周思兼 (1519–1565),

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1 Chen Jiru, “Foreword to the Collected Works of Wang Heng” in *QJ*, 6:12b. Wang Heng left a poem describing the same trip, see Xu Shuofang, *Chronological Biographies of Late-Ming Dramatists*, vol. 1, p. 364.
2 Little Mount Kun rises to a height of several hundred feet above the surrounding rice paddies and is the southernmost tip of the range of hills that run down from Mount Kun. I walked up it late in 1997. The base of the hillock was surrounded by a wall. A small pavilion on the summit affords a fine view across the fields back toward Huating. Unsurprisingly, no traces remain of Chen or his property. The base of the mound has become a place for tractor drivers to wait for business, and the ‘office’, where you buy a ticket to gain entrance to the hill, is dank and shabby but alive with tea, cigarette smoke, and the sound of cards slapping the table.
3 In addition to joining Chen at Little Mount Kun, Xu had also burnt his robes. Detailed information on Xu’s life is not plentiful, even the year in which he burnt his robes remains unknown. These matters are addressed in Appendix Two.
and was known in local literary circles. Wang Shizhen recorded that
the three of them spent a pleasant day amid beautiful scenery. He also
noted that Chen and Xu were keen to purchase land at Little Mount
Kun, especially after finding that a site on the hillock, which they later
named the Field for Suppliants with Flowers [Qihua chang 乞花場], had
previously belonged to the third century poet Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303). As
it happened, they bought this property for thirty ounces of silver.¹

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE RECLUSE**

It was at Little Mount Kun that Chen’s invention of a public persona
of himself as a recluse began. He later recalled that:

> The Field for Suppliants with Flowers was on Little Mount Kun, where the
Lu brothers had once studied. I had nothing to venerate them with and
so collected rare flowers in place of duckweed and beech wormwood.⁵

Chen also dedicated a small shrine to the Lu brothers, with the occasion
celebrated in verse by his friend Wang Heng.⁶ To further the connec-
tion with reclusive figures from the Wei-Jin period (220–420), the name
of the well, the Well for Watering Flowers [Jiaohua jing 潧花井], also
on the property, was a direct borrowing from Pan Yue 潘岳 (247–300)
who had a place of the same name on his property.⁷

These few comments make Chen’s reclusion seem familiar, yet it
would become strikingly different to the styles of his predecessors, even
of those but a generation or two before him. There were three factors
operating on Chen’s adopted form of reclusion (and it was the third that
would finally exert the greatest influence and give rise to controversies
over his reclusion that continue to this day). The first factor was the
many traditional forms of reclusion that Chen could choose to adopt,
the second was the aggressive attitude against the practice taken by

² Chen Jiru, Clear Words from a Peaceful World, 1:3a.
⁴ Li Bin 李斌, “Chen Meigong zhushu weimu kao” 陳眉公著述偽書考 “An Examination of Works Spuriously Attributed to Chen Meigong” Xueshu jiaoliu 學術交流, 134:5, p. 149.