TIME MANAGEMENT AND SELF-CONTROL:
SELF-HELP GUIDES IN YUAN

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When we think of “self-fashioning,” we often think of an active process, a formulation and representation of self-image, a creation of a certain fluid space of constituted bodies—both personal and social—to create an imagined identity. This identity may be quite real for the person who is fashioning the self; but for the most part audiences, intended and unintended, concentrate on how literary texts produce this “self,” ascribing to it, consciously or unconsciously, a set of values that run the gamut from an authentic ethical exercise to complete fictionality. It can range from the created community of literati formed around the ideal of “our culture” (siwen 斯文), or the mantra of “poetry speaks of intent” (shi yan zhi 詩言志) to the “playboy” (fengliu 風流) of Guan Hanqing’s 關漢卿 (ca. 1250–1325) sanqu 散曲 suites. Whatever the particular value we assign to the act we all recognize it as a fundamentally performative gesture, an expression of propositional language that comes to rest in a distinctly formed identity. The focus of self-fashioning in the West is clearly on the issue of creating an autonomous subject, but in China I believe it is much more of a case of building a sodality of culture.

This paper will attempt to demonstrate that the social and cultural prestige that normally accrued to the ethical meritocracy, the literati, came under duress during the late Song and Yuan eras. The flood of relatively cheap printed editions allowed people on the periphery a means to master the mechanical aspects of preparation for the examinations and to work alone outside of the master-student teaching relationship. Like the modern “cram schools” (buxi ban 補習班), these texts held out hope that diligence and hard work would offer the key to social success, by covering a clearly defined amount of material at a manageable rate of progress, the corollary to this being that one must guard against the excesses of pleasure and control one’s time. This trend, which hinged on the affordability of print, created problems for
the literati world order by threatening their hold on the examination culture and on the cultural and social capital to be gained by success therein.

There is such a long tradition of written literature in China, much of which is produced on the theoretical basis that it reflects interiority, the union of the interior and a cosmic morality, or the cosmos itself, that the act of self-fashioning becomes in a real sense as much a rehearsal of previously performed roles as the creation of new ones. With the rise of a meritocracy in the late Tang era, one might suppose that the desire to create such new roles increased, since one was no longer born as a ruling aristocracy into “our culture,” but had to earn one’s right to enter it. The resultant textual production, so amply represented in Peter Bol’s work, is often strident and contentious in making its claim to moral authority.¹

This claim also extended to editing and preserving manuscripts. Prior to the explosion of print culture in the Southern Song, these tasks were largely in the hands of this very small elite, who had a stake in perpetuating the community of “our culture” since it represented significant social and political capital. The new culture of print, however, loosened their control over the world of texts, partially in terms of editing, but most importantly in the kind and amount of materials published. Now, no longer did the collected writings of literati and the canonical works of the tradition account for the bulk of printing. New forms of literature—colloquial tales, dramas, “everyday encyclopedia,” collections of popular songs, lists of mundane regional items, etc.—were published and spread over the whole of the empire. The center of this compass rose was clearly located in the southeastern part of China, the area of modern Zhejiang and Fujian.

One everyday encyclopedia (riyong leishu 日用類書), as such books have been named by the Japanese scholar Sakai Tadao 酒井忠夫, became an important staple of the publishing industry of Hangzhou and Jianyang: the Shilin guangji 事林廣記 (A Widely Comprehensive Record of a Forest of Affairs), by an obscure Southern Song-Yuan writer named Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚, whom we can date with some reliability to the middle part of the thirteenth century. Chen is better known for his annuary of customs, the Suishi guangji 歲時廣記 (Expansion of the