Some places and periods are special. The names Renaissance Italy, Elizabethan England, Genroku Japan, and Weimar Berlin, for example, call to mind vital chapters in the history of civilization. Ming China (1368–1644) surely belongs on the list. The world’s largest, most populous empire of its time, the Ming offers a range of superlatives. Its emperors ranked among China’s most ambitious, despotic, and dissolute. Its unmatched economy turned its cities and country markets into thriving commercial centers, sent porcelain and silk around the world, and drew in the lion’s share of the precious metals taken from the mines of the New World. Age-old Confucian mores and hierarchies underwent criticism to a degree that would never again be seen until the twentieth century. Its book industry, based on cheap woodblock printing and offering texts on all manner of subjects, constituted the globe’s biggest information sector. The arts thrived, be it painting, vernacular literature, or theater, as social groups rarely discussed before now captured the attentions of polite society. Everyone, even historians, likes excitement, and the Ming was exciting.

Excitement, however, is only part of life, and the above portrait, save for the ambitious, despotic monarchs, fits mostly the dynasty’s final century or so, starting with the reign of the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–1566). This epoch, usually called “the late Ming,” has attracted most scholarly attention. Good reasons abound, such as accelerated pace of change, the heady transgression of social and cultural boundaries, and the wealth of historical sources. Put simply, the empire underwent major shifts, leading some historians to label the period as “early modern China.” These changes, though, need qualification. First, these trends affected some regions far more than others. Second, after the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911) took control, China sobered up in many ways and recovered quickly from its “seventeenth-century crisis.” This success derived from political and social structures, economic practices, and cultural attitudes that were present before the late Ming and persisted centuries later.

For a vivid look at basic features of late imperial China, this book turns to Miscellaneous Records from the Bean Garden (Shuyuan zaji) by the official Lu Rong (1436–1494). If Lu did not live in the best of times, neither did he
live in the worst of times. China during his era caught its breath. Its emperors
deserve attention neither for their virtue nor their cupidity or brutality. Natural
disasters aside, China’s economy experienced moderate prosperity, recover-
ing from its fourteenth-century calamities. Cotton and silk production
expanded, as did textile manufacturing, and opportunities for trade increased,
especially in Lu’s home region, the Lower Yangzi or Jiangnan (South of the
River). The state began to commute tax and service levies to silver payments,
easing the commoners’ burden. Intellectual life remained tethered to official
Neo-Confucian doctrine, contemporary verse and prose was undistin-
guished, and the period’s most lasting contribution to Chinese culture was the
“eight-legged” civil service examination essay (baguwen). This complex, rigid
rhetorical exercise, which all males seeking to climb the ladder of official suc-
cess needed to master, became eventually synonymous with late imperial
cultural conformity and mediocrity, but it served its purpose for centuries:
supplying the bureaucracy with learned, disciplined, pliable officials. Models
for women also became more sharply defined, as the cult of widow fidelity
(and martyrdom) reached a new intensity, with local officials and prominent
men constructing shrines to immortalize the sacrifices of these heroines.
Although less exalted groups, such as merchants, courtesans, peasants, bond
servants, and clergy, were not especially docile, neither did they cause the sort
of unease in literati minds that they would later. Pressed for modern analogies
for late fifteenth-century China, one might turn to the 1950s, which appears
stable and quiet when juxtaposed with earlier and later eras.1 The late fifteenth
century set various standards for men and women, which later Chinese chal-
lenged and modified but never overturned until the twentieth century.

Why read Bean Garden? First, this book offers a remarkable panorama of
late imperial Chinese society. Lu’s anecdotes, taken from incidents he wit-
tnessed or heard, encompass a broad range of Chinese characters, including
valiant scholar-officials, generous empresses, backbiting literati, runaway
brides, corrupt Buddhist monks, gullible commoners, fervent Muslims, savvy
farmers, unsavory eunuchs, frontier aborigines, diligent salt workers, and
greedy merchants. Second, the entries open a window onto late imperial
concepts of power, justice, authority, gender, knowledge, political virtue, the
supernatural, the body, sickness and health, and foreigners. Finally, one might
read anecdotes from similar works and cover areas untouched by Lu, but, as
F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “Life is much more successfully looked at from a single
window.” This view rings true especially here. Lu often did not simply relate
the facts; he also frequently voiced his own opinion, expressing a represen-
tative yet distinctive Confucian view of the world. Readers would do well to
adopt a bifocal approach and analyze both the observer and observed. Before taking up the author and his work, however, let us first outline some of the fundamental aspects of Lu Rong’s world.

**Order and Empire**

Politics and government dominated the lives of Lu Rong, his cohort, and his readers. Empowered by their literacy and command of the Confucian classics, they took their calling as ordering the world, preferably as officials commissioned by the dynasty. Brilliant scholarship or exceptional verse could win one an admirable reputation, but the overwhelming majority of elite, educated men craved to make a lasting name through their effective, moral use of power. Joining the ranks of the bureaucracy meant untold hours spent studying the Confucian canon and then demonstrating one’s learning in the civil service examination system. Competition on these tests was fearsome; gaining the coveted *jinshi* (advanced scholar) degree meant passing examinations successively at the county, provincial, and then nationwide levels. Only a privileged few succeeded; in Lu Rong’s time, barely one hundred men annually earned a *jinshi* degree, which placed them in the elite ranks of the bureaucracy, numbering about twenty thousand men and ruling an empire of about 120 million subjects. Small wonder that writers such as Lu often referred to prominent peers by their official titles; they were badges of extraordinary singularity.

Once appointed to office, these literati entered a world of innumerable regulations and assessments, as well as ceaseless uncertainty and struggle. On the one hand, the Ming inherited centuries-old, proven Chinese structures of government. Positions were divided into county, prefectural, provincial, and capital levels. Official duties included tax collection, law enforcement and adjudication, water conservancy, and ritual performance at local shrines. Officials, forbidden to serve in their home regions, rotated generally every three years, with performance reviews determining promotions, demotions, or lateral transfers. At the bureaucracy’s apex were six ministries, dealing with personnel, rites, justice, revenue, war, and public works, but accomplished men usually worked in a variety of specializations over their careers. In addition, many new agencies had appeared over the centuries to enhance the coordination of different functions and levels of government. Staffed often by elite personnel, these organs took up, among other things, the matters of grain transportation, tax collection, frontier defense, and surveillance of bureaucratic performance. Complicating this transparency and meritocracy, however, were ambition, cupidity, and favoritism. Factionalism, founded on kinship
ties, native-place ties, patron-client relations, or policy approaches, was a major part of Chinese political life, and professional competition could turn very bitter and sometimes lethal.

In name, this apparatus devoted its efforts to the will of the emperor. His family possessed the Mandate of Heaven (tianming) and was charged with undisputable, near-infallible authority. His mere presence on the throne granted him the title of sage, regardless of his performance, and placed him in a line of monarchs extending to high antiquity. Confucian ideology tempered this power, prescribing that the ruling family treat the people with kindness; heed the advice of cultivated, well-intentioned, ethical advisors; and carry out the proper religious rituals in the approved fashion. Failure would lead to revocation of this mandate and dynastic collapse, and the bestowal of the divine charge on new, more deserving leaders. The emperor then played a vital ritual role, linking and ideally harmonizing heaven, earth, and humanity. For literati, the imperial presence was inescapable; they owed their position to his rule and even needed him to tell the time, dating events according to the years elapsed since a given monarch acceded to the throne, such as the “fifteenth year of the Hongwu reign.”

In practice, though, politics meant more than emperor and bureaucracy. Three other groups, whose writings and perspectives unfortunately are lost to history, bear mention. First, beside the civil bureaucracy, tens of thousands of military officials directed an army composed of several million men. Their nominal prestige did not match that of their civilian counterparts, but dynasties relied on their expertise to ward off foreign invasion, domestic rebellions, and palace coups d’état.

Second, emperors had kin. The royal clan encompassed thousands of people, related by blood and marriage, and the funds allocated to the imperial household writ large might consume a colossal part of the total state budget. Close relatives, such as empresses, empress dowagers, consorts, brothers, and uncles exerted on occasion key and even decisive influence in political matters, especially in questions of succession.

Third, staffing the imperial household were eunuchs, castrated men whose mutilation granted them access to the palace and its members. Their job descriptions were ambiguous and their education lacking, at least from a Confucian perspective. Some monarchs, however, found their administrative talents very useful. Their organization gave the emperor a parallel government, answerable only to him and free from the age-old stipulations, restrictions, and norms that bound the formal civil and military bureaucracies. By Lu Rong’s time, eunuchs numbered more than ten thousand men and truly constituted
a state within a state, composed of no fewer than twenty-four agencies. Assertive eunuchs could use their proximity to the emperor, whom they might have known since his youth, to gain positions of unsanctioned but fearsome power. In fact, starting in the early fifteenth century, Ming emperors, owing to a freakish turn of fate, usually came to the throne at very young ages, which unquestionably enabled the growth of the eunuchs’ clout. These men proved adept at manipulating the flow of information, determining what memorials and reports the emperor would or would not see. They helped shape policy deliberation and implementation, in the provinces as well as at the capital, especially over financial and military matters. Their most notorious contribution to Ming history, though, was their secret police, the Eastern Depot (Dongchang), which spied on, jailed, tortured, and sometimes killed their foes among the civilian bureaucracy. Scholar-officials regarded eunuchs as anathema, but the latter never would have achieved such power without the collaboration and incompetence of the literati.

Ming Specifics

Three Ming emperors in particular shaped Lu Rong’s world. The first was the Ming dynasty’s founder, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), usually known as Ming Taizu or the Hongwu emperor, in reference to his reign (1368–1398). Taizu assumed power after two full decades of bloody civil war that overthrew the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1260–1368). Once on the throne, he sought to remake the Chinese polity and society, which he found miserably lawless and corrupt after foreign rule. Taizu strove to restore China to an imagined simpler, homespun utopia of self-sufficient rural communities, which meant ridding the countryside of government clerks and turning over tax collection and adjudication duties to the local people. Villagers were to be organized into units of 110 households, with the ten richest households, rotating each year, conscripted to carry out these tasks. While this structure, known as the lijia system, rid rural China of many sorts of official corruption, it also imposed heavy, uneven burdens on commoners. Furthermore, in previous dynasties, as China had become more commercialized, the state had drawn most of its revenues from commercial taxes and the salt monopoly, but Taizu saw land as the only true source of wealth and taxes. Accordingly, the Hongwu regime carried out the most effective, comprehensive census and land registration survey in Chinese dynastic history. The state also exerted greater control over religious practice, banning the worship of most local gods and severely restricting Buddhism and Daoism’s institutional presences. Finally, the emperor commissioned a new law code and, dissatisfied with the results, revised it personally.
Taizu frequently found himself dissatisfied, and the Chinese people paid a terrifying price. Powerful ministers became a target of suspicion, supposed malfeasance and conspiracies were revealed, and the guilty parties were tried, convicted, and executed. Over the 1380s and 1390s, the circle of alleged accomplices and incompetent officials widened, and Taizu abolished several offices and became his own prime minister. Most of the guilty parties came from the Lower Yangzi, which by the twelfth century had become the most urbanized, richest, and best-educated part of the country. In the early Ming, its wealthy families bore the brunt of the state’s new emphasis on land taxes. Scores of families, due to political or economic missteps, saw their property confiscated and were deported. Historians estimate the victims of Taizu’s remarkable energy and paranoia to number over forty thousand people, with countless more dispossessed. This reign of terror set back China’s economy and left its literati elite traumatized for decades. That said, Taizu had created the Ming world, and later writers referred to him as “the Lofty (or Loftiest) Emperor” or “the August Patriarch.”

Upon Taizu’s passing, scholar-officials hoped for a measure of calm and a return to the ritual order governing the relations of sovereign and official. It was not to be. Taizu’s grandson and successor, the Jianwen emperor (r. 1399–1402), soon fell prey to his uncle, the Prince of Yan, usually known as the Yongle emperor (r. 1403–1424), who usurped the throne after another civil war. Yongle demanded the support of prominent scholar-officials, but many defied him, leading to their own deaths and that of hundreds of their relatives. Their slaughter completed the intimidation of the educated strata. The new emperor proved as ambitious as his father, conducting personally five costly military campaigns north of the Great Wall against the Mongols. They scored some successes but failed to secure long-term security, as did a prolonged quest to bring Vietnam into the Ming empire. Other notable projects included the sponsorship of naval fleets of unprecedented size on expeditions to South and Southeast Asia. These armadas, under the eunuch Zheng He (1371–ca. 1435), did not aim to explore new lands or expand trade but to demonstrate Ming glory. For the cowed literati, Yongle underwrote massive bibliographic projects, revived the civil service examination system, and promoted the Confucian orthodoxy of the philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Finally, he moved the dynasty’s main capital from the Yangzi metropolis Nanjing to the Mongol capital, Dadu, or present-day Beijing. This colossal enterprise took fifteen years and enlisted the labor of hundreds of thousands. Supplying the new metropolis required another extraordinary public work, the extension of the Grand Canal
from south China. Despite these ordeals, later generations commonly referred to this monarch as “Grand Ancestor” or Taizong.

A final key emperor, Yingzong (r. 1436–1449, 1457–1464), cut a very different figure from these two autocratic, immensely able, relentless, even Stalinesque predecessors. Unlike Hongwu and Yongle, this sovereign came to the throne as a child, only eight years old, and was dominated by his female relatives and later court eunuchs, especially Wang Zhen (?–1449). The latter’s influence proved disastrous. When the Oirat Mongol confederation again threatened the northern frontier in 1449, Wang persuaded Yingzong to emulate Yongle and take his place among the troops defending the realm. Botched planning and crack Mongol cavalry led to a crushing defeat at Tumu, perilously close to Beijing. Wang was killed, and Yingzong was taken prisoner. Ming officialdom, however, led by Yu Qian (1398–1457), mobilized the capital’s defenses and made Yingzong’s half-brother Jingtai the new emperor (r. 1450–1456). Eventually, the Mongols chose not to press the issue and in fact returned Yingzong in 1450.

The Tumu catastrophe hardened antiforeign sentiment among the elite, and its effects would be felt for centuries. In the short term, though, the next six unusual, uneasy years saw Beijing with two Sons of Heaven. In 1456, Yingzong’s supporters staged a coup d’état against the ill Jingtai emperor and restored Yingzong to power. There followed a wholesale purge of officials who had served in Jingtai’s administration, involving demotions, punishments in exile, imprisonments, and executions. Eventually, even the coup masterminds overstepped and met a similar grim fate. Yingzong’s reigns began a pattern that lasted throughout the dynasty, which saw weak, capricious emperors, only occasionally interested in government, and the levers of state falling into the hands of powerful eunuchs and domineering scholar-officials. A life in office promised professional and perhaps financial rewards but also instability and risk.

CLASSICS AND HISTORY

Lu Rong and his readers grounded their worldview in the Confucian classics. This canon, first called the Five Classics, comprised The Book of Changes (Yijing or Zhouyi), The Book of Songs (Shijing), The Book of Rites (Liji), The Book of Documents (Shangshu), and The Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu). Their contents and commentaries dealt with cosmology, divination, poetry, ritual theory and practice, and ancient history. Composed over centuries, they portrayed China’s golden age, which meant primarily the Western Zhou
dynasty (c. 1045–771 BCE), and had received the Han state’s imprimatur in 121 BCE. Over time, literati wrote countless commentaries, seeking the true meaning of the classics. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the canon’s importance grew, as the Song dynasty (960–1279) made classical learning and examination success necessary for official appointment. Scholars probed and elaborated its texts with unprecedented intensity.

By 1200, a forceful, highly articulate, and self-conscious school of Confucian thought, eventually called the Learning of Principle (lixue, also known today as neo-Confucianism), had emerged, spearheaded by Zhu Xi. Zhu reconfigured the Confucian curriculum, assigning the Five Classics a secondary role and focusing on four shorter texts. This quartet, known as the Four Books (Sishu), included The Analects (attributed to Confucius), Mengzi (attributed to his famous disciple, Mencius), and two short chapters from The Book of Rites, Great Learning (Daxue) and The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong). In later centuries, the Four Books and Zhu’s commentaries on them became state orthodoxy, to be mastered by all seeking an official career. These works defined, explicated, and displayed what was correct and what was perverse, how the cosmos worked, how governments ought to wield power, and how men and women ought to behave. This explicitly moral, didactic approach extolled the virtues of benevolence (ren), right conduct (yi), ritual propriety (li), sincerity (cheng), and unconditional devotion to one’s parents and ancestors, usually labeled filial piety (xiao). The canon lay at the core of Confucian literati identity and provided the framework by which educated men would carry out the central task of transforming the world through education (jiaohua).

Much of the canon concerned history, which exercised an abiding hold on the educated imagination. Writing history was part of the state’s functions as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Unofficial historians abounded; the past offered countless admirable exempla and deplorable incidents and people. Writers such as Lu Rong sought to clarify these affairs, as substantial disagreements about their significance and fine points sometimes persisted for centuries. In relating the past to the present, literati generally proposed two trajectories. The first one proposed progress, finding the present dynasty to have surpassed earlier eras (with the exception of the Western Zhou), often because of its line of sage, benevolent monarchs. The second one, found in many genres, took history as a tale of tragic decline, as the sage-kings grew ever more distant in time. This deterioration at times looked unceasing, as even worthy cases from the recent Song dynasty could put fifteenth-century contemporaries to shame. Most of Lu’s historical notes, though, took up Ming
matters and sought to record events that official annals might overlook but that posterity, in Lu’s view, needed to know and would enjoy reading about.

WORK AND FAMILY

Only a fraction of Lu Rong’s contemporaries, however, could read. The lives of most Ming people were taken up not with political life and classical study but with making a living and maintaining a household. The overwhelming majority of fifteenth-century Chinese were farmers, preoccupied with cultivating the land, marketing its produce, and paying rents, debts, and taxes. While tenure conditions differed widely across the empire, most farmers were not bound to the land. Since the eleventh century, the economy had become much more specialized and commercialized, leading to nationwide markets in many commodities and sophisticated financial tools, such as the world’s first paper currency. Nowhere were these changes felt more deeply than in the Lower Yangzi region, blessed with fertile soil, a mild climate, and well-developed irrigation and canal transportation networks. In the fourteenth century, civil war, major population losses, and restrictive state policies stifled this dynamism. By the late fifteenth century, though, the tight control of the Hongwu and Yongle eras had slackened considerably. Landlords and peasants found ways to escape government tax rolls, local officials devised ad hoc arrangements, and the economy revived. By Lu’s time, his home region, near contemporary Suzhou, concentrated on cotton and silk production, and imported its grain from provinces hundreds of miles away.

Great numbers of men, however, engaged in other occupations. Millions served in the Ming military, bound originally to the soldier’s life by the state household registration system. The cities and market towns abounded with artisans. The largest enterprises supplied the court and government, producing its paper, porcelain, silk, and even musical entertainment. Salt, an essential commodity, was a state monopoly. These occupations were not mutually exclusive; individuals might take up several lines of work. A farmer’s household during the slack season might make hemp, wood, or bamboo products, or the males might even leave home to fish or mine. At the bottom of social scale, nominally, were merchants, condemned in Confucian dogma as parasites. This category spanned an enormous social range. On the one hand, they included petty shopkeepers, small pawnbrokers, and struggling peddlers who sold to local farmers. On the other, they comprised large, sophisticated magnates, shipping basic necessities and luxury goods throughout the empire. The state, in fact, found their logistical skills indispensable and commissioned merchants
to provision its frontier garrisons, in exchange for monopoly rights to sell salt. The merchants’ heyday would arrive in the late Ming, and mercantile wealth and influence would arouse literati admiration, envy, and unease.

The main social unit for most Ming subjects was the household. A hierarchical system governed all classes, wherein elders dominated their juniors, and women were subject to men. Females, ideally, stayed in the home, leaving only to marry and join their husband’s family. As one ascended the social ladder, gender segregation took on increasing importance, as Confucian strictures governed women’s conduct and relationships. A household’s ability to enforce strict standards of conduct enhanced the family’s reputation as community paragons. Among males, partible inheritance among sons at once promised them a basic minimum but also sowed the seeds of suspicion and competition. At the top of any family’s hierarchy were its dead ancestors, whose souls looked down on the living and required periodic prayers and offerings, at home and at the gravesites. To neglect these ceremonial duties was nearly unthinkable.

In the eleventh century, scholar-officials had begun exploring and creating means to give the expression of filial piety and family solidarity greater institutional permanence. By Lu Rong’s time, elite kin groups often compiled genealogies, conducted large-scale rituals, and buried their dead in family gravesites. In some notable cases, they created lineages with corporate property, ancestral halls, and lineage-run schools and businesses.

SPIRITS, DEITIES, AND CLERGY

For most Chinese, their ancestors constituted the most important residents of the unseen world, but the family dead had plenty of company. The supernatural realm was a crowded, complicated place. One may say that Ming China had five overlapping religions. The most basic one was the ancestor cult, practiced by virtually all people of any means. The next, and the most rarified, was the state cult, a sophisticated panoply of sacrifices, conducted by the emperor, his family, and his officials. Those worshipped in this state-sponsored devotion included the imperial ancestors, as well as the gods of heaven and earth, the spirits of China’s important mountains and rivers, and, finally, Confucius (551–479 BCE). Regular, correct offerings and communication with these celestial beings certified the dynasty’s authority.

Next were the Daoist and Buddhist churches. The former, China’s higher religion, had for centuries assisted the court in supernatural affairs and aided elites and commoners with its prophylactic and exorcistic rituals, for the living and the dead. Outnumbering the Daoists were the Buddhists, whose temples
dotted the Chinese landscape and whose concepts of good works, karmic retribution, and salvation had become basic parts of the Chinese worldview. Finally, the most ubiquitous “religion” was the innumerable local cults, which often lacked formal patrons, fixed dogmas, or set practices. Their shrines were devoted to rivers, mountains, cities, neighborhoods, upright officials, filial children, trees, foxes, tortoises, or any other source of perceived spiritual efficacy. Daoists, Buddhists, and government officials at times looked askance at some of these cults, labeling them as “licentious cults” (yinci) and suspecting them as seedbeds of wasteful, immoral, and violent behavior. At times, they took forceful measures and destroyed them. On other occasions, however, state and religious authorities chose to regulate local cult practice and assign the questionable deities a fixed, if inferior, position in their own systems. Between these five general categories, in fact, we see much more borrowing than fighting, as their relationships evolved over the centuries. For example, the court at times commissioned Daoist priests to conduct state rites at important mountains and rivers. Confucian scholar-officials might chant Buddhist scriptures on behalf of their parents, and Buddhist temples might house shrines to local gods.

The religious scene of Lu Rong’s time had its distinctive features. In particular, literati attitudes toward the Buddhist church, when compared with those expressed in the Song and Yuan dynasties, had undergone a sea change. Despite neo-Confucianism’s growing strength during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, most scholar-officials did not adopt Zhu Xi’s uncompromising anti-Buddhism. By the late fifteenth century, though, Zhu’s views had become much more widespread, and the Buddhists had lost considerable favor among literati. Similarly, cult worship and accounts of the uncanny came under greater suspicion. To explain this shift, one could point to repressive state policies and intensified intellectual dogmatism, as well as to the new salience of kin-centered religious practice and ideology. These changes did not mean that educated Chinese men had become atheistic, let alone “scientific”; they “knew” that spirits existed, that the natural world and humanity responded to each other, and that occasionally inexplicable, wondrous turns of events took place.

THE GENRE

Miscellaneous Records from the Bean Garden belongs to a particular traditional literary genre, called biji, or “brushed records,” among other things. Generic conventions meant a great deal in Chinese writing, prescribing what authors
must say, what they must not say, and what they might hint about. Most genres of writing, composed “on duty” while serving in the government or mourning the dead, offered clear, time-honored guidelines about what ought to go down on paper. Other literary forms, such as personal letters (which often were copied and won a wide distribution), prefaces for books or to send off traveling acquaintances, or commemorations for rebuilt schools and temples, allowed writers more freedom, but most abided by clear norms. They concentrated on the subject at hand and praised the individual or subject under consideration. If the discussion shifted to larger issues, readers still could find the threads of thought leading from the specific to the general.

Biji were different. To begin with, this genre went by several names, such as “miscellaneous histories” (zashi), “miscellaneous learning” (zaxue), “miscellaneous affairs” (zashi), or “small talk” (xiaoshuo). Put simply, biji were anthologies of stories and observations about all sorts of subjects. They appeared in the first century, grew in the ninth century, and then proliferated in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, abetted by the expansion of the literati and woodblock printing. Most entries were short but detailed, presented one after the other, lacking any systematic order. Unlike other genres, they had an informal air, without any particular audience or didactic purpose. Topics included the supernatural, the court and famous officials, local customs and products, medical miracles, crimes, and social trends; they also included commentary on noteworthy poems. Prefaces occasionally reported that the compiler had seen and heard much during his life and wished to record these matters, lest they be lost to posterity. Biji writers necessarily were literati, but they often were lesser-known men, having never served in high office or won a reputation for their classical scholarship or poetry. Some scholars suggest that these men compiled such works partly to gain a name for erudition and judgment; anthologists announced their fidelity to the truth and listed their sources. Writing history in dynastic China, however, meant more than reporting the facts and explaining why and how past events took one course and not another. The historian’s responsibilities included moral assessments of individuals and events, illustrating how they did or did not embody Confucian virtues. That being said, biji were also part of what educated men wrote and read for fun.

Lu Rong’s anthology stands out in several ways. First, Chinese bibliographies show a curious shift in the genre’s history. In the Southern Song (1127–1279) and Yuan (1260–1368) dynasties, we see many works of substantial length, with five, ten, or even thirty chapters, if not more. Biji continued to appear in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but most are only a single
chapter, containing several dozen entries. Lu’s work, being fifteen chapters of over five hundred entries, is a far richer collection and presages the genre’s remarkable rebirth in the mid-sixteenth century. Second, when compared with the only two contemporaneous collections of a similar size, Bean Garden’s anecdotes span a much wider range of social classes and experiences. Like many literati, Lu met many sorts of people, but unlike his peers, he decided to write about them. Third, Lu’s presentation offers an unusually outspoken, distinctive Confucian persona. On some matters, he remained silent. We hear almost nothing about his immediate family, his health, or his sources of income, although he might touch on those subjects in other genres. Never, of course, does Lu voice dissatisfaction with the Sons of Heaven from his own dynasty; such statements would have lethal consequences for his person, his reputation, and the lives of his kin and associates.

Biographers credit Lu Rong with writing many works, but only Miscellaneous Records from the Bean Garden had a wide circulation. The collection’s brief preface, unfortunately, says nothing about Lu’s intentions and simply records the praise of two contemporaries. Literati readers assigned Lu considerable authority; trawling through online databases turns up dozens of references to Bean Garden’s entries in books from later centuries. In the eighteenth century, the work numbered among the handful of Ming biji included in the colossal compendium, The Emperor’s Four Treasuries (Siku quanshu). Its bibliographers commended its detail and usefulness as a historical reference, noting also the diverse range of subjects typical of the genre. This variety won the attention of the historian Xie Guozhen (1901–1982), whose survey of Ming-Qing biji highlighted Bean Garden’s entries concerning social hierarchies and customs, peasant life, manufacturing tools, and handicraft production. Historians of the Ming have made plentiful use of Lu’s collection, using its materials concerning politics, mining, language, publishing, taxation, local customs, and religion.

THE AUTHOR

As noted, Lu Rong had the good fortune to hail from the Lower Yangzi region. His home, Suzhou Prefecture (specifically Kunshan County), produced many illustrious statesmen, poets, and painters, and contributed an outsized portion of the realm’s taxes and first-place examination candidates. Lu showed his talents early, becoming a student at the state-run county school at age fifteen. Most of his classmates focused exclusively on the Confucian classics, which served as the civil service examination material. Lu, on the other hand, read
voraciously, studying histories and philosophers, as well as works on law, war, ritual, grain transport, and water conservancy. In other words, with his strong practical bent, he educated himself in public policy long before his first appointment. His peers teased him, but he won the esteem of his fellow Kunshan native, the redoubtable scholar-official Ye Sheng (1420–1474) and eventually passed the jinshi examinations in 1466. Most newly minted jinshi received local positions at first, demonstrated their abilities, and then worked their way up the ladder. Lu, however, started in the Ming’s secondary capital, Nanjing, where he became a secretary in the Board of Honors in the Ministry of Personnel. Soon after, his father died, and the dictates of filial piety demanded that Lu leave his post and spend twenty-seven months in ritual mourning.

Returning to office, Lu spent his career largely in the Ministry of War and won a reputation for energy and integrity. Over the 1470s and 1480s, he served as director in the Board of Operations, the Board of Provisions, and the Board of Military Personnel. His reports to the capital, whether on the management of government horses in north China, strategic topography and troop concentrations on the Mongol frontier, or local garrisons in Taicang Prefecture, were legendary. Biographers portray Lu composing memorials in his own hand, deep into the night, and producing sometimes three or four reports daily, on all manner of subjects. His recommendations, we are told, found approval and wide application. At times he was a voice for moderation. In 1480 Lu advised against plans to punish Annam (contemporary northern Vietnam) for its incursions into Champa (contemporary central and southern Vietnam). When pirates menaced southeast China in 1481, Lu dismissed plans for an expedition and urged that they be lured into surrender with promises of clemency. In the same year, merchants from the Timurid Empire again came to present lions as part of their tribute goods for the Ming court. They requested that high officials greet them at the northwest frontier (in contemporary west Gansu) and that troops escort them to Beijing. Lu objected and urged the court to halt the acceptance of exotic, useless beasts. This protest is the sole incident mentioned in his brief biography in the Ming dynastic history, finished in 1739, during the Qing dynasty.11

Ming biographies also portray a man of considerable nerve. On one occasion, a demoted official from the Imperial Bodyguard (Jinyiwei), which functioned as the imperial secret police, arrested many people and accused them of plotting a rebellion. Lu persuaded authorities to investigate further, with the result that the charges were exposed as baseless and the official was
executed. The arrest of “rumormongers” had previously led to promotions and hereditary appointments for Imperial Bodyguard personnel. This practice resulted in the deaths of people guilty of nothing but idle remarks, and Lu prevailed on the court to end the policy. In other cases, he defeated efforts by powerful eunuchs to gain plum positions for their favorites among military officials. His memorials minced no words, denouncing the candidates for their incompetence and urging that the eunuchs be disciplined. The most celebrated example came in 1488, when Lu managed to reverse a court edict and have the appointments rescinded.12

Crossing the eunuchs and their official allies, however, had its costs. Two months later, the Chenghua emperor (r. 1465–1487) died, and the Hongzhi emperor (r. 1488–1505) replaced him on the throne. A new Son of Heaven often filled literati with hope for renewal, and Lu submitted a long memorial with suggestions to improve government. The Grand Secretary Liu Ji (1427–1493) and others, upset that Lu had encroached on their authority, planned to strike back. Fortunately for Lu, another high official persuaded the Ministry of Personnel to transfer him to the post of administrative vice-commissioner of the right in Zhejiang. This move removed him from the capital and returned him to south China. The change gave him a higher rank, less authority, and perhaps saved his life. In Zhejiang, his efforts did not slacken. He energized literati morale, stamped out unregistered, “licentious cults,” and continued to send to the capital extensive memorials detailing local problems. In 1493, however, his report about grain transport problems received no answer from the court, and, emmeshed in a larger purge of southern officials, he failed to pass a performance review later that year. Contemporaries were astonished. Lu returned home and, in his final year, constructed his bean garden and lived simply, writing in his study and never speaking of political matters.

Accounts of Lu’s life at home portray a model Confucian, as well as some of the complexities of Chinese families. His great-great-grandfather, apparently a merchant, died in Liaodong (in Liaoning), in northeastern China, when civil war broke out in the mid-fourteenth century. The wife’s family, surnamed Xu, took in their orphaned son, Lu’s great-grandfather, and gave him their surname. His grandfather and father also used the Xu surname, as did he. After passing the jinshi examination in 1466, he decided to restore the extinct patriline and go by the surname Lu. Other feats of outstanding filial piety included his ritual performance in mourning his mother. Despite bitter cold and being in his fifties, Lu went barefoot and stamped his feet as he grieved.
in the prescribed manner. He lived at a hut by her grave for twenty-seven months, and no one saw him enter his own home or even smile. As a young man, we are told, he once returned home drunk, much to his mother’s displeasure, and he vowed later only to drink half-cups of wine. After his marriage and before his own son’s birth, his wife repeatedly urged him to take a concubine to continue the family line. Lu refused, saying his ancestors had never done so. He governed his household and his person in strict fashion, but also generously took care of the children of his late brother. Biographers do not mention any officials or scholars among his father’s or mother’s relatives, suggesting that Lu rose into elite circles mostly through his own efforts. His wife hailed from Taicang as well, and her father, a provincial graduate, served as an assistant prefect.

Lu Rong had three children. Chinese biographies say little about daughters, but Lu’s funeral inscription reports that both women married military officials. Civil officials might nominally have been superior matches, but Lu spent most of his career at the Ministry of War and presumably knew men of good character. His son, Lu Shen (1471–1508), who emulated his father in his passion for books and ritual, also scaled the heights of the examination ladder, winning a jinshi degree in 1508. He married into a Suzhou scholar-official family and counted among his brothers-in-law the mid-Ming’s most prominent scholar-painter, Wen Zhengming (1470–1559). Unfortunately, unlike his father, he failed to escape the wrath of powerful eunuchs. When an anonymous memorial turned up attacking the notorious eunuch Liu Jin (1451–1510), Liu forced Lu Shen and scores of other court officials to kneel for hours in the summer heat so as to exact a confession. Like many others, Lu Shen succumbed to heatstroke, and he died that evening in the prison of the Imperial Bodyguard. This episode served as the opening act of a new, turbulent era in Ming politics and society, which would end only with the dynasty’s passing in the next century.

Where did Lu Rong fit in the pecking order of Ming scholar-officials? He never became a high official, rising to be grand secretary, grand coordinator, vice-minister, or commissioner. The official history of the Ming dynasty, compiled over two centuries after his death, includes an entry for Lu that was only three lines long. His contemporaries and immediate posterity, however, gave Lu higher marks. His funeral epitaph was written by Wu Kuan (1435–1504), supervisor of the household of the heir apparent and secretary of the Ministry of Rites.13 Cheng Minzheng (1444–1499), the most famous scholar-official of Ming-era Huizhou Prefecture, wrote a biography for him.14 Local gazetteers and biographical anthologies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries frequently included an entry for Lu Rong.15 Wang Ao (1450–1524), whose
examination essays exerted a powerful influence on later centuries, composed a preface for Lu’s collected works, *The Collected Works of the Gentleman of Model Studio* (Shizhai xiansheng wenji; “The Gentleman of Model Studio” was Lu’s sobriquet). Writers sometimes furnished such texts for men that they had not known well or even met, but both Wu and Wang report they had associated with Lu for decades.

The content and fate of *The Collected Works* opens another window on the writer of *Miscellaneous Records from the Bean Garden*. Wang Ao’s preface notes that Lu Rong’s writings were very scattered, and the collection is much smaller than those of Wu Kuan, Cheng, and Wang. Although most biographies stress Lu’s constant production of official memoranda, no less than twenty-two of *The Collected Works*’ thirty-seven chapters are devoted to poetry. Only three chapters deal with memorials. In short, most records of his decades of official service are lost. They disappeared very quickly, for the collection was printed by the Lu family in 1501, less than a decade after his death. The collected works of individual writers often owe their long-term survival to inclusion in massive later collectanea, but no Ming-Qing compiler saw fit to make room for Lu Rong’s oeuvre. What do these absences signify? Do they reflect the unwritten, critical judgments of posterity? Or do they simply illustrate that the vast majority of works of mid-level fifteenth-century Chinese literati is lost? Was Lu in his own time a relatively obscure figure? These questions, unfortunately, remain unanswerable.

More constructively, what does *The Collected Works* tell us about Lu Rong? Although memorials, prefaces, essays, commemorations, and encomia inevitably have their conventions, writers might bend these genres, in varying degrees, to their own purposes. Lu was no exception, and so let us look at two texts in particular. In the 1488 memorial that led to his dismissal, Lu held forth on a wide range of problems. Several topics involved military administration, which Lu knew well from years of service. The capital’s armies, he charged, were undermanned, poorly trained, and badly disciplined, which might later fail the throne. In addition, he censured descendants of distinguished imperial relatives, who owed their nobility to their ancestors’ valor on the battlefield, for their sloth and high-handed ways. Another point faulted the civilian bureaucracy for nepotism and careerism, which led officials to prize capital posts and belittle assignments in the hinterland. One section, titled innocuously “Cherishing Talent,” chastised the court for its abrupt demotions of high officials. Citing Mencius, Lu urged extreme caution in personnel matters and stressed that these affairs belonged properly to the Ministry of Personnel (rather than the throne). In making his case, Lu Rong
supplied vivid examples and named offending parties. To correct these problems, he prescribed further moral and technical instruction and supplied detailed curricula. His last two suggestions took up comparatively minor concerns: (a) the cash gifts bestowed by the court to commoners on New Year’s Day and other occasions ought to use fresh notes, not old, ragged ones; and (b) too many unqualified people attended policy meetings, especially on military affairs, which stifled debate among informed officials. In this memorial, we hear a thoughtful, confident scholar-official, by turns critical and optimistic, and endowed with considerable courage and meticulousness.

A second text, written for his own family, further fleshes out Lu’s penchant for moral instruction and supplying revealing details. It is a preface, written in 1494, at the end of his life, for his daughter. As a teenager, twenty-five years earlier, she had enjoyed looking at pictures, and so Lu had commissioned a painter to make twenty-four illustrations of exemplary women from China’s past and then explained to her their stories and significance. This assortment of women, Lu informs us, included four daughters, fourteen wives, and six mothers. Now, living in retirement at her home, he notes that his daughter uses the illustrations to teach her own daughters, moving him to fulfill his wish to append comments to each picture, as well as the short preface. The work suggests an attentive, loving father and grandfather.

Many writers would have simply supplied this information and left it at that, but Lu did not. Rather, he framed his subject in distinctive, telling ways. First, the conclusion faulted the illustrations for various anachronisms concerning the subjects’ dress and sitting postures. Later viewers might understandably wish to rectify these mistakes, Lu said, but such flaws might be overlooked if the pictures succeeded in their didactic purposes. Most curious is the text’s beginning, which recounts how another scholar-official had sought to teach his own children. According to Lu, Xu Tai (1429–1479) gave each of his three daughters a sword, urging them to use it should they (and by extension their families) risk defilement and dishonor. Xu then asked Lu if he had more to add, presumably in the form of a celebratory text. Lu rejected him unequivocally and, quoting Confucius and Mencius, ruled out any place for violence and weapons in family instruction. The only necessary materials, he maintained, were good words, good conduct, and the Confucian classics. This exchange took place at least fifteen years before the preface’s composition, and Xu had long since passed away. That Lu still saw fit to refer to this incident and the illustrations’ inaccuracies reflects a relentless drive to correct, instruct, and improve, even on the most innocuous private occasions.
Other texts in *The Collected Works* suggest that Lu took *Miscellaneous Records from the Bean Garden* and its genre very seriously. For example, one postface tells us that Lu had obtained two famous miscellanies by the late thirteenth-century literatus Zhou Mi (1232–1308) and spent his free time collating them. Another postface comments on one of the most important mid-fifteenth-century miscellanies, compiled by Lu’s one-time patron, Ye Sheng. Lu recounts Ye’s conflict-ridden career and laments being unable to find Ye’s collected works. He praises the collection, noting that it “does not leave out the good, extol the bad, record oddities, or mix in jokes.” Despite its value, Lu notes that the work still requires editing and hopes that Ye’s worthy descendants can carry out this task. One may assume that Lu also anticipated that the *Bean Garden* would be read widely and critically.

*Miscellaneous Records from the Bean Garden* appeared when China, as well as much of the rest of the world, stood on the eve of major transformations. If time travel had allowed Lu Rong to see China in 1694, two centuries later, he would have witnessed many differences. For one, an alien dynasty ruled the empire, and its regulations decreed that males wear their hair in a queue or risk arrest and execution. For another, the Chinese economy produced a greater variety of goods, be it food, textiles, or books, and they were purchased with far more silver in many more markets than was true in 1494. On the other hand, much would have been familiar, such as the state’s structure, its laws, and its examination system and curriculum. The Qing dynasty’s Eight Banners institution (*baqi zhidu*), with its Manchu military installations throughout the empire, might have reminded him of the Ming’s garrison system; he might also have compared Manchu bondservants, especially their power and access to the court, to the eunuchs of his own day. Other aspects of late seventeenth-century life, such as near-universal gender segregation, kinship models, and religious practices, would have required little or no explanation. In vital ways, much of Lu’s world endured for many, many years to come.

If the Ming dynasty was a “resilient empire,” the realm owed its stability to a great extent to scholar-officials like Lu Rong. He did not often engage in canonical exegesis, but classical standards guided what he wrote and did. Combined with his Confucian commitment was an intense curiosity about the details of everyday life, about how things were made and grown, to a degree that far surpassed most of his contemporaries. Pressed to characterize him, I would call Lu “the inquisitive Confucian,” to befit the orthodox yet fresh perspective found in *Miscellaneous Records from the Bean Garden*. 
NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION

The text survives in three different versions. The most common version of *Shuyuan zaji*, contained in the *Siku quanshu*, has fifteen chapters; it was published in a punctuated, annotated edition by Zhonghua Shuju in 1985. The book also appears in the late Ming collectanea *Guochao diangu* (Classics of the dynasty, hereafter called “the Classics edition”), published in a punctuated, annotated edition by Beijing Daxue Chubanshe in 1993: chapters 73–83 bear the name *Shuyuan zaji* and contain chapters 1–11 of the Zhonghua Shuju edition.27; chapters 68–71 bear the name *Pengxuan leiji* (Classified records of the Untended Studio) and are chapters 12–15 of the Zhonghua Shuju edition. In comparing the two versions called *Shuyuan zaji*, the Classics edition has forty more entries. The entries found in both editions are very similar, but in some cases the Classics edition’s language is clearer. In addition, the Zhonghua edition occasionally leaves out comments placed at the entries’ conclusions, which are preserved in the Classics edition. In contrast, despite their different book titles, the common entries in the Zhonghua *Shuyuan zaji* and *Pengxuan leiji* are virtually identical.

I have used the 1985 Zhonghua edition as a base text and at the end of each entry cite the chapter and page (e.g., sz 1.10). In places where I have added material from the Classics edition, I cite also the chapter and page number from the 1993 edition (e.g., GD 74.1552). Some translated entries appear only in the Classics edition of *Shuyuan zaji*. *Pengxuan leiji* also contains entries not in *Shuyuan zaji*, but I have not used them, because they have never appeared in a collection with that name. This translation thus constitutes a composite text, to create the fullest picture possible.

In the original Chinese, the compilation had no apparent organizing principle, and each chapter’s entries dealt with diverse subjects. Neither did the entries have titles. To clarify matters, I have organized the translated entries into five thematic categories and titled each entry. Within these chapters, I have preserved Lu’s original sequence. This order may produce a sense of randomness, which nonetheless was (and remains) part of the genre’s appeal. One hundred and thirty-four entries are translated here, or about one-quarter of the fifteen-chapter book. Some entries here have been translated before, but most often only partially, or they have been summarized or simply footnoted, according to a historian’s need. I have drawn from these translations in places, sometimes modifying them. Most entries, it bears emphasis, have never appeared in full English translation. I have excluded brief entries, as well as comments on poetry or language, where much would be lost in translation. In addition, I have left out technical discussions of geography, bureaucracy, ritual,
and classical commentary. In supplementary sidebars interspersed throughout the main text, I have included background information and supplied selections from *The Collected Works*, as well as works by other writers, where Lu joins conversations begun centuries earlier. I have sought to limit annotation to supply only the explanations necessary for understanding the entry.

Finally, classical Chinese is a very economical language, often omitting nouns, verbs, verb tenses, and prepositions. Staying faithful to the original while writing good English often can be very difficult. In this translation, I have striven to make clarity the top priority, occasionally reworking sentence syntax, replacing pronouns with nouns, and providing words omitted in the original.

**Romanization**

I use the pinyin system of phonetic transliteration for the Chinese names and terms in this book.

**Personal Names**

Chinese scholar-officials went by many names. Beyond their surname, they had their birth name, a style name (given at their coming-of-age ceremony), and sobriquets, which they might coin later in life. If they had served with distinction, the court would also bestow them with a posthumous name. The author of *Miscellaneous Records from the Bean Garden*, for example, was surnamed Lu, had a birth name of Rong, a style name of Wenliang, and a nickname of Shizhai. While modern historians almost exclusively use given names, writers in dynastic China often used style names or sobriquets to refer to their peers. At times, in expressions of respect, they would use both the given and style names. In this translation, for the sake of simplicity, I refer to individuals only by their given names.

Lu, like other writers, often appends the term *gong* to personal names. *Gong* in ancient times meant “duke,” but by late imperial times, it had lost this specificity and expressed respect. To convey the senses of respect and archaism, I have translated *gong* as “excellency” to express Lu’s high opinion of the given individual. Finally, I have supplied birth and death dates in brackets whenever possible.

Emperors were known by a variety of names. Being Sons of Heaven, they existed in a different realm in subjects’ eyes, and so were never referred to by their surnames and given names. After their death, they often were cited by their ancestral temple name, for example, Ming Xiaozong (Ming Filial Ancestor), the appellation given to Zhu Youtang, who ruled from 1488 to 1505. In addition, Ming emperors, unlike their predecessors, used one reign title to
mark their rule, and modern scholars often employ this title to label the monarch in question. Ming Xiaozong’s reign title was Hongzhi (Grand Order), leading historians to commonly refer to him as “the Hongzhi emperor.” Moreover, the dynasty’s first and third emperors received other lofty titles, and Lu uses these expressions. To minimize confusion, however, I refer to emperors simply by their reign title, in the hope the gains from greater simplicity will outweigh the losses of neglected nuances. The sole Ming exception lies with Zhu Qizhen, who ruled first as the Zhengtong emperor, from 1436 to 1449, and then as the Tianshun emperor from 1457 to 1464, after his restoration to the throne. In the interests of clarity, I refer to him by his ancestral temple name, Yingzong (Excellent Ancestor). Finally, because monarchs in earlier dynasties often had several reign titles, I adhere to common practice and refer to these men by their ancestral temple names.

Official Titles

English translations for offices and government agency titles follow those given by Charles O. Hucker in A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China. In addition to the ministers, vice-ministers, and directors in the six ministries, key positions during the Ming included grand secretaries, a small group that gave recommendations on memorials and proposals and then drafted edicts concerning policy implementation. Below them was the Hanlin Academy, an elite corps that drafted more routine sorts of imperial pronouncements, as well as the court history. Outside the capital, provincial governors, prefects, and district magistrates constituted the main parts of the bureaucracy’s skeleton. Supervising and orchestrating their operations were grand coordinators, who enjoyed high rank and considerable prestige. Their work, in theory, enhanced the central government’s control over the provinces. They also carried the title of censor-in-chief, which gave them powers of impeachment and access to the throne. In addition, some positions were held by two men at once, and the terms “right” or “left” were added to their job titles. Those on the left were higher than those on the right. Finally, the court occasionally granted officials titles from the preimperial era, such as “marquis” or “earl.” Such fortunate men and women were said to be “enfeoffed,” another archaic expression that here meant the bestowal of an illustrious name, not a fief.

Place-Names

I keep all the Ming dynasty place-names, as found in the text, and provide their modern provincial locations in brackets. The names follow those given in Zhongguo lishi da cidian, lishi dili juan.
Time
The Chinese recorded time in two different ways. One way was to note the number of years since the adoption of a reign title, which usually had two characters. Emperors in earlier dynasties often had a series of reign titles. In the Ming, however, emperors kept the same title throughout their reign. In addition, Chinese employed a sixty-unit cycle to mark days and years. This cycle comprised two smaller cycles, one with ten units (called the stem cycle) and another with twelve units (called the branch cycle), which meshed like two cogs and created the sixty units. Lu uses both methods, referring to the “seventh year of the Chenghua reign” and to the examination class of “the bingxu year [1466].” As done here, I translate the former, romanize and italicize the latter, and supply the modern, Gregorian date in brackets.

Weights and Measures
Historians tell us that Ming measures varied over time and place. Those below follow the approximations given in *The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, vol. 7 of *The Cambridge History of China*.

Length: 1 *chi*, or Chinese foot, is a bit longer than 12 inches. Ten *chi* make one *zhang*. (In the text I refer to *chi* as foot or feet.)

Weight: 1 *liang* is about 1.3 ounces. 1 *jin* is about 1.33 pounds.

Capacity: 1 *dou* is about 10 quarts. 1 *hu* (or 5 *dou*) is about 1.65 bushels. 1 *dan* (or 2 *hu*) is about 3.1 bushels.

Area: 1 *mu* is one-sixth of an acre. A *qing* is 100 *mu*, or about 16.7 acres.

Distance: 1 *li* is one-third of a mile.

Money and Prices
Finding reliable sources of prices and wages has long bedeviled Ming historians, as they varied widely over time and place. For a baseline indicator, in Huizhou Prefecture (in Anhui), the price for one *mu* of land in the late fifteenth century averaged 13.19 *liang* of silver.28