A forgotten century marks the years between the Ming dynasty’s (1368–1644) turbulent founding and its sixteenth-century age of exploration and economic transformation. In this period of social stability, retired scholar-official Lu Rong chronicled his observations of Chinese society in Miscellaneous Records from the Bean Garden (Shuyuan zaji). Openly expressing his admissions and frustrations, Lu provides a window into the quotidian that sets Bean Garden apart from other works of the biji genre of “informal notes.”

Mark Halperin organizes a translated selection of Lu’s records to create a panorama of Ming life. A man of unusual curiosity, Lu describes multiple social classes, ethnicities, and locales in his accounts of political intrigues, farming techniques, religious practices, etiquette, crime, and family life. Centuries after their composition, Lu’s words continue to provide a richly textured portrait of China on the cusp of the early modern era.

Lu Rong (1436–1494), a native of Suzhou Prefecture, spent his career in positions at the capital, the northern frontier, and south China. Mark Halperin is associate professor of East Asian languages and cultures at the University of California, Davis. He is author of Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960–1279.

“This first English translation of a major Ming biji presents fascinating material and vivid details about every aspect of Ming China.”—Cong Ellen Zhang, author of Performing Filial Piety in Northern Song China (960–1127): Family, State, and Native Place

“Reveals glimpses of fifteenth-century China that are not found in more orthodox histories. This is a necessary contribution to the growing corpus of informal Chinese literature available in English translation.”—James M. Hargett, author of Jade Mountains and Cinnabar Pools: The History of Travel Literature in Imperial China

“Entering the Bean Garden, you enter the mental world of someone who, six centuries ago, made sense of his life in ways sometimes uncannily familiar and sometimes impossible for us to imagine. Halperin’s translation brings China’s fifteenth century to life in fresh and surprising ways.”—Timothy Brook, author of The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties