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AN ECCENTRIC CONSIDERS SUICIDE
Self-authored funerary biography by Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593)

In this self-authored funerary biography, Xu Wei, a talented writer, artist, and one of the most eccentric personalities in Chinese history, narrates his life, family, and career.

The second half of the Ming was a time of great social and cultural change. The market economy flourished. The influence of Wang Yangming’s philosophy expanded beyond the literati elite. Ming individualism fostered unprecedented creativity in literary production and artistic expression, making the period a great age of painting and calligraphy. Popular culture, in the form of vernacular literature and theatrical performance, attracted both literati and nonliterati participation. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the Ming fought four major military campaigns along its borders, giving military officials new power in politics and society. The same era was infamous for corruption and bitter factionalism at the court. For decades, two notorious figures, the grand secretariat Yan Song (1480–1567) and eunuch Wei Zhongxian (1568–1627), dominated politics and destroyed the morale of its civil servants.
All these developments were intertwined in Xu Wei’s life and career. A native of Zhejiang, Xu passed the lowest level of the examinations at twenty but failed eight times at the provincial level. For some time, he made a living by serving as a private secretary to Yan Song’s protégé Hu Zongxian (1512–1565), attempting to curb piracy along the southeast coast. When Yan and Hu lost power, Xu Wei was imprisoned for several years. In contrast to his lack of success in government, Xu’s literary and artistic accomplishments were stunning. In his own assessment, he was above all a first-rate calligrapher. This was followed by his achievements in poetry, prose and play writing, and painting.

Xu was also known for his eccentric personality and family drama. A few examples should suffice. The first time Xu married, he “married into” his wife’s family instead of bringing his wife into the Xu household. He killed his second wife during a mental breakdown. He attempted suicide multiple times using extremely violent methods, including driving a spike into his own ear. At the age of forty-five, he self-authored the funerary biography translated below, explaining his decision to die. He did not succeed, however, and in fact lived to seventy-three.

Self-Authored Funerary Biography

I, Xu Wei, am a native of Shanyin [Zhejiang]. I became familiar with the writing of the ancients as a boy and studied even harder when I was older. Later I became interested in the Way, so I went to study the teachings of the Wang [Yangming, 1472–1528] school under Ji Ben [1485–1563]. Realizing its links to Chan Buddhism, I went on to study with Chan masters. Years passed before people thought I was making any progress, and in the end, I understood neither writing nor philosophy. Since I was a person of no status who was, moreover, lazy and blunt, I feared that friends in high positions saw me as overly self-confident. I also spent time with people who casually violated respectability—even going nude in public. Since many disliked the way I behaved, in the end, my arrogance and impudence assured that I did not get anywhere.

At age nine, I was able to compose examination essays, but then neglected to continue practicing for over a decade, which I later regretted. Being impractical and in search of broad learning, I divided my effort among many schools of classics and history and wanted to investigate thoroughly even the most insignificant matter. Once I started pondering something, I would forget to
eat or sleep; when reading, I would leave books everywhere. For this reason, I am approaching forty-five and have been a government school student for twenty-six years. Half of that time, I was on a stipend at the county school. I have taken the lowest level of the civil service examinations eight times and failed every time. People all made fun of me, but I did not let it bother me. For ten years, I rented a place in an out-of-the-way alley and made do with the bare necessities.

Then the junior guardian Hu Zongxian recruited me to serve as an aide with responsibility for drafting official documents. I took the post but several times resigned and left. Once, when Mr. Hu wrote to ask me to return, I did not even get up from my bed when the messenger arrived. Everyone thought that I was being obtuse and worried about my situation, but I remained unconcerned. After that, Mr. Hu acted even more deferential, treating me as an equal. In the end, I worked for him for two years, during which time he bestowed on me hundreds of ounces of silver and treated me with great respect. Everyone was impressed by my success, but for my part, I felt deep unease.

Then, all of a sudden, I wanted to kill myself. People thought that a scholar with integrity like me had no reason to die. They did not know that many scholars with lofty character from the past who aided powerful men ended up dead. In my case, I wanted to commit suicide, so it was different from being executed. As a person, when a matter has nothing to do with moral obligation, I am usually relaxed and choose not to be bound by the Confucian principle of righteousness. But if a matter violates righteousness and carries the risk of bringing me shame and a bad reputation, I am willing to sacrifice my life in order to act on principle. For this reason, my relatives cannot stop me from killing myself. Nor do my friends understand why I want to do it.

I am especially terrible at earning a living, to the extent that on the day I die, I will not have enough money to cover the costs of my funeral. My belongings include several thousand volumes of books, two chime stones, plus some inkstones, swords, and paintings, as well as a number of my own works of prose and poetry. I have asked a fellow townsman to sell the swords and paintings for me and have written to urge him to proceed so that the funds from the sale will be available for my burial. My unfinished drafts were also taken by a friend.

I once said that, of all the books I have studied, I have gained the most from The Śūraṅgama Sūtra, Zhuangzi, Liezi, and The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine (Huangdi neijing). If I had had more time to expound on
them, I would have been able to demonstrate all the errors of the commentators and show posterity their original meaning. I am profoundly fascinated by the “Basic Question” chapter in *Internal Medicine* and confident of my reading of it.

I was planning to arrange a marriage for my son this year. That way, I could entrust my mother’s welfare to the new couple so that I could tour all the celebrated mountains, get out of the house, and escape distractions. These wishes are all impossible to realize now. I don’t hide my mistakes, and I consider it shameful to claim I know what I don’t know. Describing me that way is not far from the mark.

My original courtesy name was Wenqing, but I later changed it to Wenchang. I was born on the fourth day of the second month of the *xinsi* year in the Zhengde reign period [1521] to a concubine of my father, the associate prefect of Kuizhoufu [Sichuan]. My father died when I was a hundred days old. I was raised by my legal mother, Madame Miao, for fourteen years. After she died, I lived with my eldest brother, Huai, for six years. In the *gengzi* year of the Jiangjing reign period [1540], I enrolled in the county school and took the first level of the civil service examination without success.

I married into the Pan family as their son-in-law. My father-in-law was the recorder of Yangjiang in Guangdong. We accompanied him there and lived south of the Ridges [Guangdong] for two years. Two years after we returned, my eldest brother, Huai, died during the summer. That winter, I lost the family property in a lawsuit. In the winter of the next year, my father-in-law died. The next fall, I rented a place and began to teach students. Ten years later in the winter, I became an aide at Mr. Hu’s office. Altogether, I worked under him for five years. I died four years later on a certain day in a certain month in the *yichou* year of the Jiangjing reign period [1565].

I have two sons. The older, born to Madame Pan, is Mei; the younger, Du, by my successor wife, is only four. Information about my ancestors is included in the funerary biography for my father, so I won’t repeat it here. I am buried in Mount Muzha of Shanyin. Since I don’t know the date of my funeral, I’ll skip that information too. The inscription reads:

Cui Zhu [d. 546 BCE] allowed Yan Ying [d. 500 BCE] to express his loyalty;
Geng Liang’s [289–340] illness saved his life.
They should have lived;
Their deaths would have destroyed their trust in each other. Zhong Jing [n.d.] imprisoned Ban Gu [32–92]; Wang Yun [137–192] arrested Cai Yong [133–192]. It was fine for them to die; What would have justified a different outcome? I ridicule myself for jumping into the water because of my fear of drowning, But sympathize with Ma Rong [79–166] for attempting suicide following his demotion. When his life was in danger, Confucius [551–479 BCE] escaped by hiding his identity; Jizi [n.d.] faked lunacy after King Zhou [d. 1046 BCE] [of the Shang] rejected his advice. Again and again, I recite “The People of Our Race,” Feeling ashamed that I am not as wise as Zhong Shanfu [Western Zhou].


Further Reading

