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The Patriarch of Empty Lies

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The Patriarch of Empty Lies

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INTRODUCTION

The Tale of Empty Lies (*Tuokong zhuan* 脫空傳) is a prosimetric narrative in four chapters that tells the story of the poor man Ma Pianliu 馬騙六 who, unable to pay back his creditors, leaves home to escape his troubles. After meeting with characters like Bai Lai 白賴 and Wu Pin 吳品¹ and traveling through a world of horrors, he eventually arrives at the abode of the Patriarch of Empty Lies (*Tuokong zushi* 脫空祖師), who teaches him never to repay any loan even if he would by a stroke of luck become a wealthy man. This text of this catalogue of low-lives at the bottom of Chinese society has been preserved in a set of manuscripts, collectively titled *Liaozhai waizhuan* 聊齋外傳 (Additional tales by Liaozhai) and copied out in the years 1908–1915 by a certain Cao Rugui 曹汝貴, whose grandson Cao Juetian 曹厥田 donated them to the Pu Songling Museum.² Most of the texts included in this collection are well-known “rustic songs” (*liqu* 俚曲) by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), but *The Tale of Empty Lies* cannot have been written by him in its present form, as the text mentions the institution of “Nurturing Incorruptibility Silver” (*yanglianyin* 養廉銀), established in 1723 by the Yongzheng emperor.³ This would suggest that the text was originally composed (or rewritten) in the middle of the eighteenth century. As *Tuokong zhuan* was transmitted together with prosimetric writings by Pu Songling, it may not only have circulated in central Shandong but also have been composed there.

Tuokong (脫空 or 拖空) is a common expression in Yuan and Ming vernacular, meaning a lie or an empty promise.⁴ *Kong* 空 (emptiness) is of course also a major concept in Buddhism and Daoism, so it may not come as a surprise that one also encounters the expression *tuokong chan* 脫空禪

¹ Both Bai Lai and Wu Pin are names with meanings: *bailai* 白賴 means to defraud, to take by force, to refuse to repay a debt; Wu Pin is homophonous with *wupin* 無品, meaning without class, without morals.

² Pu Xizhang 蒲喜章 and Cao Juetian 曹厥田, “Liaozhai yizhu sanzong” 聊齋遺著三種, *Pu Songling yanjiu*, Dec. 2007, 105–133.

³ For the institution of *yanglianyin* as part of the fiscal reforms of the Yongzheng reign (1723–1736), see Madeline Zelin, *The Magistrate's Tael: Rationalizing Fiscal Reform in Eighteenth-Century Ch'ing Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁴ Gu Xuejie 顧學頤 and Wang Xueqi 王學奇, *Yuanqu shici* 元曲釋詞, vol. 3 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1988), pp. 524–525.

(nonsense Chan) as having the same meaning. That latter expression in its turn may have suggested the coinage of the expression *Tuokong zushi* 脫空祖師 (patriarch of empty lies). Such a character makes his first appearance in Chinese literature in *Heavenly Transcendents Wishing Immortality in the Palace of Precious Light* (*Baoguangdian tianzhen zhu wanshou* 寶光殿天真祝萬壽). In this anonymous *zaju* play, most likely dating from the sixteenth century, hosts of heavenly immortals gather to wish the emperor eternal longevity on the occasion of his birthday.⁵ In this play the role of the Patriarch of Empty Lies is performed by a clown. When in Act One quite a number of immortals have gathered in stately array, the scene is enlivened by his entry:

(Clown, costumed as the Patriarch of Empty Lies, enters and speaks)

I am the Patriarch of Empty Lies. / All my life I only loved to play the drum, / But whenever I am idle and have nothing to do, / I carry a basket and move earth. I am the Patriarch of Empty Lies. As for my character—I continuously read sutras and curses and have great supernatural powers, so I am adept at sentencing ghosts and also can produce winds. Whenever I am idle, I go and sound the bell. Even in the middle of winter, however cold it may be, I will jump into a river to play with the ice, and when I come out again, I am frozen stiff. Today I had nothing else to do, so I looked for some goose-egg stones on the hill in the back to brew me some tea. Now I hear that the other immortals have assembled in the temple of bright azure, but I don't know why, so let me go there. Here I come running!⁶

Near the end of the act, the Patriarch of Empty Lies challenges the explanation of internal alchemy by the Immortal of Dark Void (*Xuanxu zhenxian* 玄虛真仙) and, rebuked, is given eight lines of doggerel verse to recite:

⁵ This play has been preserved as a manuscript in the Maiwangguang collection of *zaju*. This collection has been reprinted in facsimile as part of *Guben xiqu congkan siji* 古本戲曲叢刊四集. A typeset edition may be found in *Guben Yuan Ming zaju* 孤本元明雜劇 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1958), vol. 4.

⁶ *Zhu wanshou*, p. 2a–2b.

(The Patriarch of Empty Lies speaks)

How should I be any less than you? Let me explain the Way and its method to you!

As a man of the Way I am most pure and outstanding,
All the classics and canons I have studied to the end!
My whole life through I never liked to eat bland food:
Press the garlic and let's cook the meat of a fat dog.
I exhaustively grasp both the Way and also its method:
Each day I get some toads and let them fight it out,
And if someone behind my back chases them away,
They slip off in one go and make off to the river.

Now what about my Way and method?⁷

As the irritation displayed by the Immortal of Dark Void proves that he has not yet freed himself from all passion, he is reborn on earth as one Sun Yanzhong 孫彥弘, who of course in due time is enlightened and allowed to return to heaven, so that, in the final act of the play, he can join his celestial colleagues in congratulating the emperor. The Patriarch of Empty Lies also shows up in this final act of the play to lighten the mood of obsequious pageantry. In line with the festive character of the play, the Patriarch of Empty Lies is portrayed as a foolish charlatan rather than a criminal fraud.

This Patriarch of Empty Lies may well be a further development of the character of the fake immortal (*qiaoxian* 喬仙) who makes his appearance in the first act of *Zhang Zifang Presents a Shoe at Ruined Bridge* (*Zhang Zifang piqiao jinlü* 張子房圮橋進履), a *zaju* ascribed to Li Wenwei 李文蔚. Li Wenwei is a playwright of the second part of the thirteenth century, but this play is only preserved in the Maiwangguan Collection as a copy of a Ming palace script, which may be far removed from the

⁷ *Zhu wanshou*, p. 3b.

original work.⁸ In the first act of the play Zhang Liang 張良 is fleeing through the wilds pursued by a tiger after his failed attempt on the life of the First Emperor. When he meets the fake immortal, the latter promises to save him from the beast as it is his pet, but he utterly fails to subdue the animal and is dragged off the stage by it.⁹ In his long self-introduction in rhymed seven-syllable verse and a set of four songs to the tune *Shang xiaolou* 上小樓, the fake immortal presents himself as a wine-guzzling, meat-eating thief and a fraud, who concludes by revealing his byname to be Empty Lies (*tuokong* 托空).¹⁰ But for all his other claims, the fake immortal does not yet claim here the title of patriarch.

By the early Qing dynasty, if not earlier, the Patriarch of Empty Lies had become a well-known figure in the popular culture of Suzhou and Yangzhou. From the middle of the eighteenth century (ca. 1760) we have two black and white satirical prints from the first city, both featuring the patriarch and his disciple Bai Lai.¹¹ One of these prints, titled “The Patriarch of Empty Lies Transmits the Way” (*Tuokong zushi chuanfa* 脫空祖師傳法), shows the patriarch seated in his temple, dispensing his teachings to Bai Lai (Fig. 1).

⁸ The opening pages (1a–5a) of the manuscript are missing. A typeset edition is provided in *Guben Yuan Ming zaju*, vol. 1. In his comments on the play *Wang Jilie* 王季烈, the editor notes its disorganized nature, which is also stressed in Yan Dunyi 嚴敦易, *Yuanju zhenyi* 元劇斟疑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 1–5. Yan goes so far as to question Li’s authorship.

⁹ This is a stage routine that can be traced back to the Han dynasty, more than a thousand years earlier.

¹⁰ Hu Ji 胡忌 (*Song Jin zaju kao dingbuben* 宋金雜劇考訂補本 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008], 198), was the first to point out that this long self-introduction can be traced back to the (lost) Song-dynasty farce *Pure and Untrammelled: A True Daoist Master* (*Qingxian zhen daoben* 清閒真道本). A full translation of this self-introduction is provided as an appendix.

¹¹ These two prints are part of a series of twenty-one such prints, earlier in the collection of Robert van Gulik and presently in the collection of Christer von der Burg. Sixteen of these prints, including the two mentioned here, are reproduced in Higuchi Hiroshi 樋口弘, *Chūgoku hanga shūsei* 中國版畫集成 (Tokyo: Mito Shoku, 1967), pp. 73–74.



Figure 1. "The Patriarch of Empty Lies Transmits the Way." Collection Christer von der Burg. Tonal print in gray and black; printed area ca. 35 × 50 cm.

Many of the fantastic features of the temple correspond to the description of the temple in *The Tale of Empty Lies*. Another print, titled "Bai Lai Visits the Pond for Releasing Living Creatures" (Bai Lai you fangshengchi 白賴遊放生池), shows Bai Lai, accompanied by the Patriarch of Empty Lies, passing by the Pond for Releasing Living Creatures (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. “Bai Lai Visits the Pond for Releasing Living Creatures.” Collection Christer von der Burg. Tonal print in gray and black; printed area ca. 35 × 50 cm.

The Tale of Empty Lies contains a brief episode in which Ma Pianliu all by himself passes by that same pond and observes various persons releasing nasty creatures, troubling their fellow men. The print illustrates various expressions containing the phrase *fangshengchi* or *fangsheng*.¹² As *The Tale of Empty Lies* portrays Bai Lai as a student of the patriarch who has completed his studies, one is tempted to surmise that the two prints reflect an earlier stage of the development of the lore of Empty Lies, when his main student was Bai Lai and not Ma Pianliu.

The Patriarch of Empty Lies is also mentioned in several minor novels of the mid-Qing, but he has a substantial role in only two of them. The first of these novels is *The Proverb Says* (*Changyandao* 常

¹² For detailed descriptions of these prints, see Christer von der Burg, *Landscapes, Ladies and Legends: Qing Dynasty Prints from Gusu-Suzhou* (forthcoming).

言道), and it comes with a preface dated to 1804 that implies the work was written in Suzhou.¹³ The second of these is *The Complete Tale of the Flying Cripple* (*Feituo quanzhuan* 飛跢全傳) that comes with a preface from 1817 and was written in Yangzhou.¹⁴ Both are satiric fantasy novels that delight in the use of fixed sayings, set phrases, and proverbs. *The Proverb Says* satirizes the obsession with money in an overseas country of small people; its main character is one Qian Shiming 錢士命 (錢是命, Cash Is My Life), who at one moment comes into conflict with the poor man Qiong Gui 窮詭 (Destitute Swindler). Qiong Gui wants to go to war against Qian Shiming, but as he realizes that he is no match for him in strength, power, or wealth, he wants to acquire some supernatural powers. Having heard about the Patriarch of Empty Lies, who lives in a dilapidated temple on Ants Hill on the road to the yellow springs (the underworld), he sets out on a journey to find him.

When he had climbed the hill, there was indeed a dilapidated temple. The temple gate was half opened and half closed and fastened with a rope, so it was called a rope gate. When he pushed the gate it opened by itself with a squeaking sound. When he looked inside, there was no one to be seen as dust came thickly falling down. He could only go inside, but even when he coughed a few times no one answered. When he came to the hall in the back, there were many fine buddhas, brilliantly shining with gold and jade. A monk was seated on his praying cushion. His face was covered by a bristling beard and his body was a bag of bones. When he had seen Qiong Gui, he opened his eyes wide, saying, "Qiong Gui, you arrived at the right time!"¹⁵

¹³ The 1814 woodblock printed edition of this novel has been reprinted in *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 古本小說集成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980). I have used the typeset edition included in *Gudai zhongpian xiaoshuo sanzong* 古代中篇小說三種 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1986), pp. 113–215. For a summary of the contents of this novel, see *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao* 中國通俗小說總目提要 (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubangongsi, 1990), pp. 592–594.

¹⁴ The 1817 woodblock edition of this novel has been reproduced in *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng*. I am not aware of any modern typeset edition. For a summary of its contents, see *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao*, pp. 622–623. This novel is often credited to the eighteenth-century Yangzhou storyteller Zou Bixian 鄒必顯, but this ascription is not universally accepted.

¹⁵ *Changyandao*, p. 158 (chapter 7).

Qiong Gui is greatly impressed and asks for instruction in the supernatural arts, whereupon the patriarch replies:

“You may have sincerely venerated me as your teacher, but you are far too stupid, so how could you study the magic arts? Fortunately, you and I have a karmic bond. If you sleep with me tonight, I will open the hole of intelligence for you, and then I can instruct you.”¹⁶

Qiong Wei agrees to the deal and over the next few days is indeed instructed in the magic arts, but to no avail: in his battle with Qian Shiming he and his supporting troops are soundly defeated, despite the presence of the patriarch.¹⁷ Later in the novel the patriarch tries to get access to Qian Shiming’s miracle coin by curing his disease but utterly fails in the attempt.¹⁸ And when he tries to take revenge for this debacle by attacking Qian Shiming’s son Qian Baixi 錢百錫, he loses his life.¹⁹ In *Changyandao* both the Patriarch of Empty Lies and his disciple become the victims of their limited skills in the magic arts.

The Flying Cripple describes the war between an imaginary Chinese dynasty and the overseas Kingdom of the Red Haired (Holland) beyond the Great Western Ocean (Atlantic Ocean). The war is not caused by the insatiable greed of the barbarians, but by the Chinese emperor who does not allow the ambassador of the Red Haired Tatars to return home after he has presented tribute. The Red Haired Tatars thereupon, together with the Japanese and the Undefeatable Miao as well as the Rebellious Miao, lay siege to China’s entrance gate. During the following battles, the Chinese side appeals for the help of Flying Cripple Shi Xin 飛跢石信 and his teacher the Great Thearch of the Hanging Sky (Xuantian dadi 懸天大帝),²⁰ whereas the assembled foreigners are supported by various disciples of the Patriarch of

¹⁶ *Changyandao*, p. 158 (chapter 7).

¹⁷ *Changyandao*, pp. 163–164 (chapter 8).

¹⁸ *Changyandao*, p. 180 (chapter 11).

¹⁹ *Changyandao*, p. 205 (chapter 15).

²⁰ Despite the poor quality of the 1817 edition of *Feituo quanzhuan*, the novel consistently writes *xuan* with the character 懸, probably in order to avoid confusion with Xuantian shangdi 玄天上帝 (Highest Thearch of the Dark Heaven), one of the

Empty Lies, who eventually also joins the fray in person. As no party manages to achieve a decisive advantage in the long and involved strife, a peace is eventually brokered. In this novel the Patriarch of Empty Lies is primarily a master of magic arts who is linked to Buddhism (Xuantian dadi is linked to Daoism).²¹

In the opening chapters of the novel, Flying Cripple, when on his way to the Great Thearch, rejects the suggestion of some monks to become a disciple of the Patriarch of Empty Lies.

They said to him: "There is no need to join the Great Thearch of the Hanging Sky. Here is a city of No-Death. In that city there is the Patriarch of Empty Lies who has many disciples. Tomorrow is the date of his preaching. When he preaches, heavenly flowers thickly fall down—these show themselves but have no substance. The proverb says, 'The east is a buddha, and the west is a buddha.' You better become his disciple. He far surpasses that Great Thearch of the Hanging Sky!" Cripple replied: "I will not join him. The proverb says, 'When a monk can make money for them, he will sell his sutras.' 'An animal dressed in gown and cap may preach like the Buddha but has the heart of a snake.' 'According to the Law of the Buddha, he should starve to death; according to the law of the king, he should be beaten to death.' 'When you feed a monk, he'll never be satisfied, so you had better bury him alive.'"²²

At one moment Flying Cripple meets the patriarch's disciple Bai Lai, who introduces himself in this manner: "My surname is Bai and my personal name is Lai. My style is Wuchi (Shameless). I live on the Slippery Street of the District of Deceit in Tongzhou." He says he has learned not to repay his debts from the Patriarch of Empty Lies, and that his teacher's wisdom is summed up in the following four lines:

names of the widely venerated Zhenwu.

²¹ One of the opening illustrations in the 1817 edition portrays the Patriarch of Empty Lies as a monk.

²² *Feituo quanzhuan*, pp. 69–70.

Seas may dry up and rocks pulverize, but I don't care;
 Don't mention gray oceans becoming mulberry fields!
 Even if you in a next existence may be a mule or horse,
 The main thing is you definitely will not return money!²³

This poem makes clear that in the early nineteenth century in Yangzhou the Patriarch of Empty Lies still taught his disciples not to repay their debts under any circumstances.

* * *

The Tale of Empty Lies tells its story in an alternation of passages in prose and passages in verse. In the first three chapters the verse passages start with four or more lines of five-syllable verse, followed by a longer section in ten-syllable verse. In the final chapter the verse passages are made up of eight lines of seven-syllable verse (assigned to Ma Pianliu) or of a variable number of ten-syllable lines (assigned to the patriarch).²⁴ Each chapter starts with a lyric to the tune West River Moon (made up of two stanzas of four lines each; in each stanza lines one, two, and four are made up of six syllables, whereas the third line contains seven syllables). The final, fourth, chapter is concluded by one lyric to the tune West River Moon, and two lyrics to the tune Clear River Intro, spoken by the patriarch and by the disciple, who finally has grasped the essence of his teaching.

This translation is based on the typeset edition of the text (in abbreviated characters) provided in the December 2007 issue of *Pu Songling yanjiu*, pp. 116–133 (I have not seen the manuscript on which it is based). This edition corrects some orthographic mistakes but provides no annotations. This lack of annotation is painfully felt when reading Chapter 2. More than any other chapter, this one relies on homophones and puns as it describes the gruesome journey of Ma Pianliu across the Alas and through a dystopian realm of horror to reach the abode of the Patriarch of Empty Lies. My translation of this chapter is in many places pure guesswork.

²³ *Feituo quanzhuan*, pp. 72–73. Many texts stress that debtors who will not repay their debts in full will be punished by rebirth as an ox or a horse in the house of their creditors in order to pay off their outstanding debts by their labor.

²⁴ Ten-syllable lines have a very strong internal rhythm. In this text, these lines are made up of groups of three, four, and three syllables respectively. In my translation I suggest the tripartite division of these long lines by typographical means.

IDEMA, "THE PATRIARCH OF EMPTY LIES"

THE TALE OF EMPTY LIES
(ANONYMOUS)

CHAPTER ONE

Light one stick of incense each day at break of dawn,
 To thank Heaven and Earth and the Three Lights:²⁵
 Only ask that everywhere the grains will bear fruit
 And wish that everyone may live till a ripe old age.
 May the state have wise ministers to order the land;
 May no family have evil sons who vex their parents.
 As all directions are at peace and warfare has ended,
 Even my poverty isn't of any concern anymore.

This poem states that when we have the good fortune to live in an era of Great Peace, the government acts in accordance with Heaven's Heart, and the officials are honest, the people live at ease. Let's obtain our food by plowing the fields, obtain our water by digging wells, and be decent citizens who, neither greedy nor stingy, serve the common good and obey the law. But who would know that there is also a dishonest²⁶ type who is born from the evil energy between Heaven and Earth? Before the bench of King Yama he may have stolen a human skin to cover his body,²⁷ but his heart is still more poisonous than adders and scorpions. As soon as he is born on earth, he starts to study how he may scare and embezzle from simple country folks, and how he may cheat and swindle them out of their possessions. Each day he is scheming day and night to see which person is susceptible to pressure and which person has to be hoodwinked by cunning; which person he can cheat of a few stones of grains and which person can be swindled out of a few thousand copper coins. His only frustration is that he cannot scrape off the meat on another man's body and add it to his own—only then would he be satisfied. How could he realize that a single man's dishonesty will result in the multitude's resentment? This one will say that he has no

25 The Three Lights are the sun, the moon, and the stars.

26 "Dishonest" here translates to *hunzhang* 混帳, which may also be written as 混賬, in which case the term may be understood literally as "muddled accounts."

27 Yama is the king of the underworld, where the souls of the deceased are judged upon death and their next reincarnation is determined. Evil people may expect to be reborn as animals to pay back for their sins.

conscience, another will say that he is worse than beasts! But without any feeling of shame he will still happily stand in front of others, bragging about his achievements and giving himself airs. Here applies: at midnight a mule knocks at his gate, no human being will come! So I have composed yet another lyric to the tune West River Moon that may serve as an introduction. Following that, I will tell you the village where he lived and his behavior during his lifetime, all in good detail, so when after his death an obituary will have to be written, his sons and grandsons can use it as a reliable record.

In his belly he suffered an urgent disease:
 Against this, even Bian Que had no cure.²⁸
 It was the lust for money that filled his breast
 And that truly affected his life and fate!

In fact he felt no pain and no itch;
 It resembled an ulcer in the bone:
 He lived by stealing money and denying debts,
 Destroying the whites of his eyes.

This lyric to the tune West River Moon is the introduction to a story that is not free from satire, but it is completely made up of good words that admonish to goodness, so it is different from those unfounded phrases that curse the world. When told to those who hand out loans, it teaches them to provide them selectively so they won't have to suffer quite some vexation at some later date; when told to people who owe debts, it teaches them to settle their accounts speedily, so they won't experience considerable humiliation at some later date. If otherwise, it would be difficult to narrate the inner feelings and outward appearance of that person. You may ask in which dynasty this person lived and under whose reign this story happened. During the great Song dynasty,²⁹ in Fearless Village of Slippery District in Destitute Prefecture, there lived a man named Ma Pianliu (Deceive-Six), also known as Jiasan (Add-

²⁸ Bian Que 扁鵲 is a superior physician from antiquity.

²⁹ The Song lasted from 960 to 1279. It is a common setting for stories in vernacular literature.

Three). He had some talent and capability, but he suffered from one disease: if he owed someone money, he never was willing to repay it. Because he had built a lamp wick pavilion,³⁰ he owed other people ten farts of cash, and after many years and days, the interest had become as much as the original amount of the loan. Since ancient times it is said: Mt. Tai does not feel a speck of dust, but it achieved its height because of the accumulation of such small additions.³¹ Every morning those who wished to reclaim their loans filled his gate, and everyday those who demanded their money blocked the door. The situation was such that he had no way to support this any longer, and it seemed unavoidable that he would suffer quite some misfortune. But fortunately his wife—Pi Buqiang,³² the daughter of Pi Shengtou from Pihun Village—was a very smart woman, and when she saw how depressed her husband was, she pointed a clear road out to him.

Woman Pi said with a smile, "My husband,
Please wash out your ears and listen to me.
You owe these people quite a lot of money,
How can you ever clear out those debts?
There's no need to be upset and worried,
And empty sorrow serves no use at all.
When a fire breaks out on top of the roof,
To stay frightened in bed does not help.
If you want to find a permanent solution
The proper thing is to find a good teacher.
You will have to go out into the world,
And I'll stay behind here to hold the fort.

³⁰ An illusionary project? In *Feituo quanzhuan*, p. 20, a "lamp-wick tower" is listed among many imaginary buildings of a garden.

³¹ Mt. Tai in Shandong is the eastern marchmount.

³² The family name Pi 皮 is written with the character that also means skin/leather, and comes with the connotation of thick-skinned.

I have heard
 That in Shandong
 There is a Qingzhou Prefecture;
Outside its south gate
 The Mountain of Holes³³
 Is the most famous scenic spot.
In front of that hill,
 In Sneak-Away Lane
 Off Flee From Fire Street,
There lives
 A Muslim named Bai Lai³⁴
 Who excels in the magic arts.
Whether it is
 Sneaking out or flying away,
 He knows all those tricks,
He also has mastered
 The miraculous methods
 To come and leave like a cloud.
Why don't you
 Scrape together
 The money for your tuition
And hurry to find him
 So he can become
 The star that will save your life?"

³³ The word "hole" is also used in the sense of deficit, loss, debt.

³⁴ The word *bailai* has the meaning to take away by force, to refuse to return, to falsely claim, to cheat. Traditional folk prints often showed Muslims bearing treasure. See Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 200–01.

When Pianliu had heard these words, he was very happy and said, "If it had not been for your advice, my smart wife, I would almost have messed up our situation." He promptly, neatly, gathered his luggage and wanted to leave immediately. When woman Pi saw him off in front of the gate, she said, "Dear husband, take good care of yourself while on the road. Make sure you don't lose your luggage." Pianliu replied, "My smart wife, don't worry. You'd better go back inside, there's no need to see me off for a long way."

He had gathered his luggage neatly
 And this day he set out on the road:
 He took his leave of this woman Pi
 And left to visit that master Bai Lai.

While on the road
 He ate when hungry, drank when thirsty:
 It's impossible to tell every detail;
 It came down to
 Departing at dawn, resting at night,
 And that without any pause at all.

On the main road
 He entered the city of Linzi,
 Within the region of Yidu,
 And there before him
 He saw the old prefecture
 And the walled city of Qingzhou.

Passing through the streets
 He had just arrived
 Outside the Southern Gate,

And fortunately
 Still remembered the name
 Of the street and the lane.
Asking around,
 He quickly learned
 The house where he lived:
Indeed,
 This Muslim Bai Lai
 Was extremely well-known!

Let's forget for the moment about Ma Pianliu's visit to Master Bai Lai and not talk about it for now. Let me tell you that when those rich people who had provided him loans heard that Ma Pianliu had fled despite all his debts, they all were filled with rage, and all ran to his house where they expressed themselves in language not fit to be heard!

All those people all together were shouting,
Each and every one showed himself a hero!
"As that man still owes us so much money,
He should not have wanted to sneak away!"

(To the same tune as above)

This one said,
 "When I find him I'll break
 That guy's curved dog legs!"
That one said,
 "When I catch him I'll pull
 All the hairs from his ass!"

This one said,

“I want to gouge out
His egg-like eye balls!”

That one said,

“I want to scrape off his meat
And chew it with my teeth!”

This one said,

“I want to sell
That house of his!”

That one said,

“I will give his wife
A terrible treatment!”

This one said,

“I can only blame myself
For being so blind!”

That one said,

“How could I know this pimp
Would be such a scoundrel?”

This one said,

“If one would want to bury him alive,
No place would be good enough!”

That one said,

“Lower him down into a well
And let no one dredge him up!”

These many people

Got ever angrier
As they kept shouting and cursing,

While that woman,
All talking and smiling,
Defended his case at length.

If woman Pi would have been a shy woman, she would have been scared to death by such a tumult, but how could they know that she came with the experience of Cooked Books and had confronted even worse enemies, and that she was not only quite brave but also very eloquent? Quietly at ease and unhurriedly, she came outside and told them a reasonable tale, so they all dispersed. Otherwise this would have turned into a major disturbance!

Woman Pi made one very deep bow
And said, "Gentlemen, please listen.
If you want to talk about those debts,
We of course have to quickly pay up,
But we lack the power to repay them,
So it's no use at all to come to our door.
And even if I would sell this property,
It would not be enough for you all.
Now if you want to see your money,
You will have to wait for his return.
The best is still to wait for a while,
Then there's bound to be good news.

My husband
Has left for Manchuria
To trade in ginseng,
And in the Eastern Sea
Will dredge for pearls
And precious stones.

Then there are
 The Eastern Ocean's
 Piercing diamonds—
 He also took along
 Iron nets to bring up
 Coral tree branches.
 When quite soon
 He has made millions
 And comes back home,
 We will treat you
 Lavishly and humbly
 To a festive banquet.
 At that time
 The gold and the silver
 Will be weighed out,
 Without any need
 For you to seek an excuse
 To demand your money.
 The proverb says:
 'Where in this life
 Can we avoid each other?'
 How easy it is
 To take away lightly
 That painted skin!³⁵
 So I urge you all
 To kindly do me a favor
 And all disperse—

³⁵ The painted skin is a false exterior put on to deceive others.

The best is still

To forget about it

And not raise the issue."

Gentlemen, tell me: When woman Pi had given this speech, those with better understanding realized that they most likely had lost their money and left with an angry air. But there also were some younger men. When they saw that woman Pi was quite beautiful and that she also spoke well, they were somewhat softened, and as each of them was enamored of her, they all dispersed in one go. But no more about this.

Let me tell again that Ma Pianliu, pursuing his way, had arrived at Sneak-Away Lane off Flee From Fire Street. When he had found the gate of the Muslim Bai Lai and asked the doorman to announce his arrival, Bai Lai promptly invited him inside. Pianliu made a bow and said, "Teacher, your reputation is as high as the Northern Dipper.³⁶ Your disciple has long admired you from afar. I would like to join your school so as to receive your instruction, and I very much hope that you will admit me." Having said so he presented the gift he offered as his tuition, saying, "I have nothing special to offer to you, so I have brought along a completely wasted muddled account that I present to you so you may hang it somewhere. I also still have two write-offs that I forgot to bring along when I had to leave so hastily, but I will present those later." When Bai Lai heard these words, he was greatly pleased. He thanked him profusely for his kind intentions, "But I don't know why you have come here?" Pianliu folded his hands before his breast and said, "Teacher, please listen!

I live in the prefecture of Destitution,

I have my home in Slippery District.

My lowly name is Ma Pianliu

And far and near have heard my fame.

Jiasan is the way in which I am known

And woman Pi is there my wedded wife.

³⁶ The Northern Dipper is the Chinese name of Ursa Major.

Having come here to be your disciple,
I will tell you the full facts of my case.

Only because

I constructed a single
Lamp wick pavilion,

I contracted

Ten farts of big debts
That entangle me.

Back at home

I hid myself east and west
But could not protect myself,

So could but cross

Thousands of rivers and hills,
Suffering bitterest misery.

I realized that,

Thinking this way and that,
I did not have a solution

But then I heard,

Teacher, that your magic
Surpasses that of others.

I implore you,

Sir, to teach me how I
Can repudiate my debts,

And as your disciple

I will in no future existence
Ever forget your favor!"

When Bai Lai had heard this, he remained silent for quite a while and then said, "It is not that I make excuses, but I can only repudiate one fart of debt. You now owe ten people a stinking debt, so that I have no way to help you. This has nothing to do with your tuition present, and you should take it with you again." When Pianliu heard these words, he was in a panic and said, "Your disciple came here, not thinking a thousand miles too far, hoping for your protection. If you today do not give me clear directions, I can only die." When Bai Lai saw in what a panic he was, he thought hard for a while and then said, "I've found it! I will point out a clear road for you!"

I have a senior fellow student,
His methods are truly superb.
Want to receive his teaching?
Then visit him at his mansion.

He lives at
 That famous mountain
 Of grabbing the wind and catching shadows
Where he inhabits
 A grotto pavilion
 Of missing beams and leaking reeds.
Who doesn't know
 That he is the famous
 Patriarch of Empty Lies?
He also enjoys
 A great reputation
 As the True Person of Thick Skin!
He truly knows
 A thousand tricks
 To cover your front and protect your back;

He truly has

A myriad of ways

To fend off the west and push back the east.

Over there

The disciples of his school

Are without number,

As his methods

For repudiating debts

Cannot be exhausted.

In case that you

Obtain those secrets of his

That are not transmitted,

For sure you can change

A debt as big as the sky

Into a gust of wind.

I here will write

A letter of recommendation

For you to take to him,

And I guess that he,

Even though not seeing me,

Still will take pity on you.”

When Pianliu heard this, he could only take the letter and leave with a bow.

The letter was enclosed in a double envelope

That said only “to be opened by the Patriarch.”

The words of Bai Lai, spoken as he departed,

Those he memorized very firmly in his heart:

"It can't be avoided:

Traveling from place to place

You can linger nowhere;

It makes no difference

That autumn passes, winter ends,

And yet another year arrives.

Suffering wind and frost

You'll concentrate on the study

Of schemes that cannot fail;

Enduring cold and heat

You'll never want to ditch

Any ill-gotten gains.

'Let others in

A howling storm curse out

The deaf old crone,

I will for sure

Bury the corpse

In a pile of snow.'

You'll see many

Throwing their net in the ocean

Who do not see a face;

You'll see many

Squeezing the steelyard between their buttocks³⁷

Without ever turning their heads.

Just have a look:

As you busily pursue your road

Below a sky without sun,

³⁷ To hide the fact that they are not wearing pants below their gowns.

You will over there

Observe in front of you

One straight street.”

Pianliu traveled by day and rested at night, and after he had walked on for quite some time it was again the time that the end of the year was approaching.³⁸

One day when he came to a straight street, he saw a tiny main gate that was not facing the sun, where the door gods and the couplet had already been changed. The couplet read: “Those in the know will not ask for repayment, / Happy wishes have been shared for many years.” Right when Pianliu was reading them, a dog of a family in mourning came running outside, but when it saw Pianliu, it did not even bite him. Behind him a man came walking outside who pointed to Pianliu and respectfully asked, “Sir, where are you from? And what may be your name?” Pianliu hastily returned the courtesy, and thereupon told him in great detail his place of registration and his name, as well as the fact that he had debts that he did not intend to repay and that he wanted to seek instruction from the Patriarch. When he thereupon asked that man for his name, he answered, “My surname is Wu (No), my personal name is Pin (Class), and my social name is Lianchi (Shame). Even though I have never visited his place, I too once formally registered as disciple with that Patriarch you want to visit. As the two of us happen to have the same disease, we should take pity on each other. So please come inside to rest for a while.” Pianliu did not refuse this offer. When he entered the house, a horizontal plaque was displayed which said “Not of any concern.” In the middle a painting had been hung, “Saying Yes to Everything.” In front of the house had been piled up a hill (*shan* 山) that was called “Devoid (*shan* 刪) of all feeling.” To the side there were two benches (*deng* 凳): one of these was “white I don’t look (*deng* 瞪),” and the other was “black I don’t look.” Pianliu sat down on a bench and Wu Pin filled a tobacco pouch with “gone like smoke,” and he also got a jug of unreliable water to pour a cup of not-clear tea. As he told him to drink it, he said with a smile, “There is no need to deceive you. Tonight I have to deliver some happy wishes to others, so I have to leave you alone for a while.” Pianliu could only wait for his return. Suddenly he heard someone shout at the top of his voice, “Wu Pin, I need my money! Is it intended for whistling?

³⁸ Debts had to be repaid by New Year’s Eve.

You know there are those who deliver it to the house. And then there are those who cannot deliver it to the house. But I will sit here and demand the money that's mine!"

Without any delay he started to speak,
"You Wu Pin, now listen to me! You
Good-for-nothing through and through:
When pointing east you call it west!

You told me
That today you would definitely
Deliver the money to me,
And you loudly
Called on the sky and the sun
To swear the holiest oath.

You deceived me
Into waiting at home
Throughout the long day,
But who knew that you
Would wait until right now
And still tarry and hesitate.

I reckon
I have moved
Into your nostrils:

I have suffered
That much foul stench
From you!

You demand
Even more energy
Than that long snake in its hole,

You are
 Even more exceptional
 Than that toad from Suzhou!³⁹
 I think you must
 Want to change into a horse or mule
 In order to pay me back,
 But I'm afraid such an
 Evil mule or obstinate horse
 Will be unfit for riding.
 So I will not
 Widely open the stable gate
 In order to welcome you—
 We rather should
 Settle accounts while still alive,
 That is more convenient.
 In case you
 Will not pay me back tonight
 The money you owe me,
 And tell me for sure
 To wait until after New Year,
 Don't think that I'll agree.
 Today I will
 Definitely fight it out
 With you during this night:

39 A “toad from Suzhou” (*Suzhou hama* 蘇州蝦蟆) is a “southern toad” (*nanchan* 難蟾). That term is homophonous with the word *nanchan* 難纏, meaning “difficult to deal with, hard to handle.”

Don't think that you
Together with your whole family
Can enjoy your dumplings!"

Wu Pin said, "Then we will not celebrate New Year and then we will not eat any dumplings. What concern is it to me if I have to keep you company throughout the night? You may need the money, but if you need it urgently it's not there, and if you need it less urgently it's not there." When suddenly the watch-rooster cried thrice, the man who needed it urgently was in the end the rich man who provided loans, and "not celebrating New Year" were only brave words he had spoken. When he saw that he could not outwait him, he said, "Let me pardon you! But tomorrow, whether it's New Year's Day or not, I will come again to talk with you." As soon as he was out of the door, Wu Pin said with a smile, "Bah! Come back to demand your money, but will you still be such a weakling?" Pianliu from the side praised him loudly, "Great! If I had not made this detour to the Dragon Gate, I might have missed out on this spectacle!"

Pianliu asked Wu Pin a question,
And addressed him most humbly,
"Brother, when it comes to debts,
The two of us are truly identical.

Now right here
You don't want to repay them
And I want to deny them:
You and I
Seem to be born from one mother,
Having shared the same womb.
When I saw your
Flowery words and cunning speech,
You countered him quite well;

I enjoyed how you,
 Neither too stiffly nor too weakly,
 Answered him right on the spot.
As a result
 That creditor who demanded your life
 Was completely at a loss,
And I could not but,
 Happy at heart, submit
 And praise your capacities.
If you still have
 Any other good methods,
 Please teach them to me,
So those
 Ten farts of debts
 Will completely dissolve.
As of today
 I will pay you my respects
 As the teacher in this school,
Why should I have
 To seek the Patriarch
 And study his deceptive pretexts?"
Since ancient times it's said,
 'When a man meets with a true friend,
 It is impossible for them to part.'
Indeed it is true
 That once one agrees in conversation
 A bond of friendship is forged.

Dear audience,

If you want to know what later

Happened to our hero Pianliu,

Have a little patience

And I will explain it

In the next chapter of this book.

CHAPTER TWO

They only scheme to spend, consume right now,
 And don't care about a coming life as horse or ox.
 They cheat others out of money and loans without end
 And even a myriad of millions are never enough.

Let other people laugh at them or curse them out,
 They themselves know no worries, know no cares.
 The skin of their face may be torn, but they feel no shame—
 Who may be the person who taught them this way?

This lyric to the tune of West River Moon tells that when Ma Pianliu saw how good Wu Pin was at refuting debts, he wanted to honor him as a disciple and had no intention anymore to seek the Patriarch. Wu Pin said, "I only blocked him this one time, and I possess no other rare techniques. But that Patriarch enjoys great fame, so he should be of real help. He must be the foreman in refuting debts, the leader in cooking books. Since ancient times it is said that if you take your model from the best, you at most will attain the mediocre. It still would be best to go and seek him." Pianliu could not but agree, and after a long night he took his leave from Wu Pin at dawn on New Year's Day and set out on the main road.

Pianliu took his leave from Wu Pin,
 Out of the gate he reached the main way.
 With hands in the clouds he bid him adieu,
 The shoes below trees he lifted up high.

This day
 Happened to be the opening
 Of the Feast of Triple Yang,⁴⁰

⁴⁰ New Year's Day.

So he heard

The strings of firecrackers
Resound like the thunder.

Everywhere:

The door gods and couplets,
Words welcoming spring;

And then there were

Coins that in front of the gate
Had been closely arranged.

On that side

Was pasted, "Spring constitutes
The beginning of the whole year,"

On this side

Was pasted, "This season invites
The wealth of ten thousand miles."

They all hoped

That their businesses throughout the year
Would be flourishing like spring,

And they feared

That the green bugs,⁴¹ once flown away,
Would not come flying back.

Wherever he looked

The scenery of the new spring
Was an unending delight,

So he was suddenly

Overcome by concern for
The situation back home.

⁴¹ Copper coins.

He only cared,
 Abandoning house and hearth,
 To make a fortune far away,
 But also feared
 That at home life would be hard
 For his wife, a hairpins and skirt.
 "Even though
 My wife since birth
 Had been quite thick-skinned,
 With that many
 Creditors at the door,
 She cannot not turn them away.
 Now that
 Loud clamor outside the gate
 Is still only a minor matter,
 But they definitely
 Once inside the house will want
 To ascend to Yang Terrace.⁴²
 Now in case
 She adapts to circumstances
 To mess up the accounts,
 I can only allow her
 To loosen her gown, undo her belt
 And take the decision herself.
 The proverb says,
 'Accounts that are settled in private
 Will not damage your capital,'

⁴² To have sex.

And when I return

I will use my iron spade⁴³

And pretend to be ignorant."

Ma Pianliu

Pondered and pondered the past

And considered the future:

For better or worse

He must find the Patriarch

In order to escape disaster.

When Ma Pianliu had traveled on for several days on the road, he suddenly while walking saw a large river that blocked his way. That river had a name and was called the Alas.⁴⁴ Downstream there was a curved bridge and from afar he saw one man ascending the bridge, beating a limping nule with half a cucumber. When Ma Pianliu hurriedly also wanted to cross, that man unexpectedly destroyed the bridge as soon as he had crossed it. But then he saw upstream a boat approaching with in it a graybeard who in his hand held a fish that had slipped through the net, standing on tiptoe on both sides. How did this boat look like?

In the middle there was not a single plank,

In the front and the back there was no tip.

A tiger head had been painted at the stern;

There was only one half of a punting pole.

⁴³ An iron spade is an image for a stiff penis.

⁴⁴ The Alas (Naihe 奈何/奈河) is one of the fixtures of the underworld. Sinful souls have to wade through its dirty waves, but virtuous souls are allowed to cross over a golden bridge.

He always wanted
 In one net to catch
 All turtles in the river;
All day long
 He kept on sieving
 The sand without gold.
He was waiting for
 The blind sturgeon of Hao
 To be caught on his hook,
But was afraid that
 The slippery mud-loach
 Would escape his grip.
Even though
 The river lacked fish,
 He would grope for frogs,
And try to dredge
 The bright moon from the bottom
 With his bare hands.
This man
 Strongly pushed the boat
 Without any interruption,
And Ma Pianliu used
 Flowery words and cunning speech
 To implore his assistance.

Ma Pianliu said, "I am a stranger in these parts and have lost my way. I hope you will help me out." That man made no objection, punted the boat to the shore, and said, "Traveler, please come aboard. But don't be flustered." Pianliu stepped aboard and soon they had crossed the Alas. Pianliu picked up

some shavings and gave them to the man, but he said, "That is way too much!" Pianliu took his leave of the boatman and went ashore.

When Pianliu had gone ashore
He turned around to have a look:
He thought to reverse oar and peg
And only then pulled the boat.

"Just look at me how I
Pushed the boat with the stream
And so finished the business,
I was not afraid
The boatman would not offer
To ferry me across the river.

All the way along
I have never once stepped
Into a pool of mud—
Who nowadays
Does not want
To walk on the dry side?

Amidst rivers and lakes,
Whatever storms and waves,
I'll be securely seated—

I have never seen
That monkey
Not climb the pole!

So from now on
I'll not travel by water
But only by dry land.

But look over there—

I see a forked road

Appear before my eyes.”

After Pianliu had crossed the river, he had not yet gone very far when he came to a fork in the road. But he did not know which way was the right road. When he suddenly lifted his head, he saw a man riding a crippled horse. That horse had four need-not hooves, but it was a horse with a head and without a tail, and from its neck hung a string of bells stolen with covered ears.⁴⁵ On his shoulder this man carried a managerial bag mixing up documents. Pianliu said, “Kind sir, please stop so I can ask you a question. I want to go to the mountain for grabbing the wind and catching the clouds, but here I don’t know where to go, so please provide me with directions.” That man replied, “You go ahead, clamber across the mountain of sorrow and then sail across the sea of bitterness. Then there will be two forts: the one is King Yama’s fort, the other is the fort of the little ghosts. There’s also the fort of those who have sold their children and cried out their eyes. There are also two cliffs: the going-forward cliff and the coming-to-an-end cliff. When you have passed those places, you should ask again.

Pianliu went on ahead,

He had the whole road set out for him.

Mountain and sea were hard to cross,

Then there were still the two cliffs!

How could he know that

A mountain seemingly not far

Would exhaust a horse?

⁴⁵ “Bells stolen with covered ears” is an image for a crime that one deliberately commits while pretending innocence, as one feigns not to hear the stolen bells.

It made him

Wear through a pair

Of shoes without soles!

Even though

The sea of bitterness had no bounds

When you turned to the shore,

You could rely on

Sails filled with wind

To steer the boat.

When he had barely

Walked by one fort,

He still had another to go;

When he had slowly

Worked his way past a cliff

He had still another to pass.

Ma Pianliu

Was all set and determined

On pursuing his journey,

And he had just

Passed those three forts

As well as those two cliffs.

As Pianliu was walking, he suddenly saw a city with its wall and moat. The wall was high and large, so which city could this be? He saw three large characters above [the gate] that read "City Without Beauty." On entering the city there was no end of buying and selling on the main streets and in the small lanes—it was quite a busy crowd.

When Pianliu looked around there,

The buying and selling was very brisk:

On the right side they sold duck's bills,
On the left side wood-burned cakes.

On the street in front
The spendthrift lungs of whoremongers and gamblers
Were hanging on racks;

On the street in back
Large intestines stuffed with rage
Were filling the pans.

Reversely linked hooks
Hooked up
Their own flesh and blood;

Then there were those
Who kneaded bellies,
Not averse to the stench.

He saw there some
Stroking a cow's head's ears,
And the triply spoiled lungs,

He saw there some
Hoofs of dead creatures
Giving off quite a stench.

He also saw some
Horse figs
That were sold as tofu;

He also saw some
Radish-filled buns
Steamed on a basket.

On the eastern side
 Shops for poisons
 Faced shops for killer drugs;
On the western side
 Bottomless pits
 Closely bordered hidden traps.
When he had not yet
 Been able to take in
 All these beautiful sights,
He suddenly
 Clearly heard
 The sounds of sutra recitation.⁴⁶

Right when Pianliu was watching the sights, he suddenly heard the recitation of sutras and prayers to the Buddha somewhere nearby. Pianliu said, "Which temple may this be? Let me have a look!"

Ma Pianliu stopped in his tracks and
Pricked up his ears to listen closely.
It seemed as if the life-saving Buddha
Treated this as wind passing his ears.

Note after note
 They beat out a Clapper tune
 With the soles of their shoes,
While they recited
 Curses that made teeth ache
 Without any proper measure.

⁴⁶ The translation of many of the lines in this versified section, especially its beginning, is extremely tentative.

On the altar table
 Were placed as offerings
 The cut-off meat of humans,
 And in the shrines
 The lanterns were burning
 Oil obtained from dog's fat.
 On the one side
 You had bald old priests
 Who were carrying horns;⁴⁷
 On the other side
 You had monks in a pelt
 That were turned into mules.
 Originally they were
 A bunch of monks and priests
 Who conducted their rituals,
 But now they were
 Singing their ballads
 Inside the Five-Organs Temple!⁴⁸

Now tell me, what were the gods in this Five-Organs Temple? It was the Monkey God, the God of Extreme Denial, the God of Disaster, the God of Wasted Effort. And then there was the god of Straight Seduction in front of the house of the pimp. There's no need to tell how terrible these gods are, so he had better somewhat avoid them.

When Pianliu had left the city, he was both thirsty and hungry, but fortunately there was someone by the side of the city gate who sold Big Gall Soup, so he walked on after having swallowed a bowl. When he had walked for a stretch, he suddenly saw a high mountain, and at the foot of that

⁴⁷ Showing they would become oxen upon their rebirth in order to pay off their debts by their hard work.

⁴⁸ The five organs of the human body.

mountain there was a well that could not be filled, and around it there were more than ten holes. In front of that mountain there were many rare flowers. What kind of flowers? The heavenly flowers that fall down in profusion by your speech when you borrow money—when people want you to return the money they are like willow floss in the wind! There he ran into the Qiong flower from our Yangzhou that only blooms for graybeards. What it offers you, they say, is the reflection of the moon in streams and mirrored flowers, that dazzle and blur your eyes when you watch them. There also grew an iron tree that sprouted illusory flowers, and a plum tree that carried plums that stilled your thirst if you only looked at them. There were two kinds of peaches (*tao* 桃): one was fake-agreement flight (*tao* 逃) and the other was coward flight. The other plants were shrubs like the wiped-out apricot, the desperate tea, and no-concern plum (*li* 李). On top of the mountain two big banners were waving in the wind: one was the banner of going with the wind, and the other was the banner of acting blindly. The flag poles were made up of drum sticks that pierced the sky like bald dicks. Two lines of large characters were written on them. One said: "Mountain of Catching the Wind and Grasping Shadows"; the other: "Grotto for Escaping Scrutiny and Evading the Net."

Pianliu was overjoyed, wondering whether he had arrived at his destination. Sticking up his buttocks, he ascended the mountain step by step, to see a big black oiled gate, called the Big Slippery Gate. Over the gate hung a blue plaque, inscribed with three big characters, reading "Mansion of Lying and Deceit." On both sides had been pasted yellow strips of paper with a couplet reading: "In the wide world without equal: I make my living by defaulting on loans without any regret; / Undisputed champion in the human realm: it is my calling to embezzle from others for dear life." Two big coins had been nailed to the gate: one was the coin of no value, and the other the coin that never returns. Also two bronze rings (*huan* 環) had been fastened to the gate: one signified "I will never pay back (*huan* 還)," and the other, "I swear never to pay back." This gate building had been constructed extremely well. How did it look like?

Twice bright combined with four times dark:

All together it was made up of seven bays.

Encapsulating the mountain, following its corners

It stretched out its roof, extending it by its eaves.

The tiles on the roof (*wa* 瓦)
 Were the wailing (*wa* 哇) for food
 When seeking help in an emergency;
 The bricks in the walls
 Were the big bricks on the backs
 Of the beggars crying out in the streets.
 The billowing smoke
 Was the frustration expressed
 By the unicorn painted on the walls.
 And fiercely and mean,
 The door gods on both sides
 Glanced at the people outside.
 On the ridge pole
 Had been placed a vibrant beast
 With its maw wide open;
 On the gable
 Was sculpted a dead dog
 That ascended to heaven.
 Let's not discuss
 How beautifully that big gate
 Had been constructed,
 As furthermore
 A bell tower and a drum tower
 Arose on its sides
 On the drum tower
 On the left side
 Hung a drum filled with rage;

In the bell tower

On the right side

A basket of shit was suspended.

My dear audience, why had a basket of shit (*fen* 糞) been suspended in this bell tower? Because it was shit (*shi* 始/屎 beginning/shit) without end.

When Pianliu had taken this in, he walked inside, to be grasped by the two doormen who said, "Hey! What are you doing?" Who were these doormen? The one was a broker and the other a guarantor. Pianliu replied, "I hail from Destitute Prefecture, and because I fail to pay my accounts I have been recommended by people for study with the Patriarch." The broker said, "But our customary fee has to be paid!" Pianliu pointed toward the northeast and said, "Isn't it there?" "Many thanks for your generosity," the broker replied. When the guarantor asked, "Where what?" the broker said, "To the northeast is the big ocean, and in that sea you find the bright moon. I cannot deceive you: if you go and dredge it up, we should divide it fairly." When Pianliu saw that both of them were happy and did not block his way, he entered the main gate.

When Pianliu had entered the big gate,

He lifted his eyes and looked around:

He saw a pond for releasing animals

With many people sitting by its side.

This one was releasing

Several huge pythons

That were blocking the road,

That one was releasing

A large swarm of crickets

That were creating a ruckus.

This one was used to
 Releasing wolves and dholes
 That would infest the roads;
 That one would also
 Release fierce tigers
 To come down the mountains.
 This one was
 Scaring away deaf-mutes
 By releasing scorpions;
 That one would
 Pull your ear
 And release a centipede.
 And in the end there were
 People who all together
 Released owls into the air
 That once set free
 In a single moment
 Covered one half of the sky!

My dear audience, how come there were so many people releasing owls? Because nowadays there are no end of people trying to keep falcons (*fangdiao*; creating trouble for others).

When going on he arrived at the second gate; a couplet had been posted there, reading: "The best of all things is to have money in hand; / For a hundred years debts are never repaid." When he went inside to have a look, the gate was guarded on both sides by four little ghosts: one was the ghost of injustice, one was the ghost of suffering, one was the ghost of mischief, and one was the ghost of harassment. The four of them shouted in one voice, "Where are you going?" Pianliu hastily told them the full preceding story, but the four ghosts said, "What about our gate fee?" Pianliu replied, "I paid that already at the main gate!" but the four ghosts said, "You don't understand, here we skin a hare twice!" Pianliu said, "Many thanks for the information!" The four ghosts told him, "Let us explain. Those who

pay back their debts take the eastern side door, and those who take out loans take the western side door. But those who don't pay back take the central gate." Pianliu replied, "Then I will take the central gate, no need to be modest!" When he had entered this gate, he read yet another couplet on the ghost wall,⁴⁹ which said: "If you want to dissolve your debts for a thousand years, / Go ahead and enter one more gate." He saw that on both sides eight offices were arranged. Which eight offices? Borrowing Only Fine-Grained Silver; Hoping to Establish a Family Fortune; Only Wild Thinking; Bankrupt and Involved in Lawsuits; the Office of Feigning Deafness when Being Cursed; the Office of Acting Dumb when Beaten; Pulling Out Hairs in a Fight; and, finally, the True Blindness of Lending Money to Others. Inside the central gate one found the great hall of the Patriarch. On it hung a bright red plaque, with the three gold-colored characters as big as bushels, reading "Hall of Great Slipperiness." By the sides of the hall stood two oily poles. Pianliu thought, "Are these two axles? They must be constantly used by the Patriarch Teacher. Let me go and have a look."

How wonderful was the Patriarch's hall,
Accompanied by a pair of pavilions.
These pavilions also had their own names:
The Pavilion of Sloth and that of Waste.

He only saw
 Someone on the east
 Beat a chime made of leather,
And also heard
 Someone to the west
 Hit a bell carved from wood.

⁴⁹ A wall behind a gate, said to hinder ghosts from entering the courtyard behind it. Ghosts were believed to be only able to walk in straight lines.

On a windscreen
 Had been painted
 The full *Journey to the West*,⁵⁰
 And a number of lamps
 Were burning the oil
 That had been scraped from bones.
 On the walls were hung
 Some unclear and muddled
 Accounts that could not be settled,
 In front of which stood
 A pair of vases without fairness
 That could contain more or less.
 At the back of them
 Was hanging a single
 Pitiable sword,
 And in the middle
 Was placed a table
 Without a heart.
 When Ma Pianliu
 Had in the great hall
 Taken in all these sights,
 He suddenly heard
 A major-domo
 Calling out to him.

⁵⁰ *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西遊記) is a sixteenth-century novel that tells the fantastic tale of the pilgrimage of the holy monk Xuanzang to the home of the Buddha to fetch the sutras that were unavailable in China. On his journey he is confronted by many monsters. The wall paintings in a proper monastery would illustrate more canonical sources.

If you want to know

How he met

The Patriarch of Empty Lies

You will have to wait

For the next chapter

That will tell it in all detail.

CHAPTER THREE

Having suffered all the travails of the road
 He had arrived at the hall of the Patriarch.
 Both Bai Lai and Wu Pin had told him about the man
 But meeting in person beats hearing about.

Have a look at the way of his teaching:
 The present returns to the pre-celestial!
 All the marvels you will hear in the following
 Show the insatiability of the depraved.

This song to the tune of West River Moon tells us how Ma Pianliu arrived in the hall. He craned his neck, wishing to see its arrangement. On that day Muddleheaded Zhang Three was on duty, and he shouted, "Who are you that you dare to inspect the great hall of the Patriarch!" Pianliu hastily greeted him, and said with a smile, "I hail from Destitute Prefecture, and am called Ma Pianliu. I bring a letter of introduction from Bai Lai the Muslim, as I would like to receive the Patriarch's instruction. If you will kindly take me to him, I will thank you handsomely." Muddleheaded Zhang Three asked, "How will you thank me?" Pianliu replied, "When I lately sailed the ocean I dropped both my night-shining pearl and my cat-eye gem into the water. I didn't dredge them up, leaving them there for you as a small token of my gratitude." Muddleheaded Zhang Three was overjoyed on hearing this, and he promptly raised the banner of sailing with the wind, displayed the banner of acting blindly, beat the leather chime, and struck the wooden bell. Soon after the cloud plaque had sounded, the Patriarch ascended the great hall.

How was the Patriarch costumed? On his head he wore a sky-piercing cap, and his feet were shod in reverse-escape boots. His body was dressed in a leather jacket, not made of sable fur and not made of fox fur, but of the lined fur of spreading lies. Around his waist he wore a long belt, which was not a Master Lü belt,⁵¹ and not a belt of engraved segments, but a string of nonsense. What did he look like? He had a face with a thousand layers of oily skin: when he ran into ghosts they were filled with fear!

⁵¹ Pig's guts.

He had a mouth like an oily plaque, so persuasive that even a pervert would convert. His two ears feigned deafness: when he heard the wind, it was the rain. He had one pair of eyes that turned white: on seeing a thing, his desire was awakened. All over his body grew nonsensical boils, but they didn't hurt and they didn't itch. His stomach was filled by the addiction to money, whether dead or alive. His two hands were hot iron, and his ten fingers resembled needles and hooks. When facing people he told them a hundred kinds of smart words, but behind their back he lacked even the smallest inkling of a conscience.

Now the Patriarch had ascended the hall,
So Pianliu could observe him in all detail.
In the presence of this celestial authority,
He could not but shake and shiver for fear.

"Indeed, what an
 Imposing and majestic
 Old Patriarch Empty Lies!
Truly no wonder
 That the whole wide world
 Sings his praises without end!
Judging by
 The impressive nature
 Of his external appearance
One had to conclude
 That the skills in his heart
 Had to be quite excellent.
Now I today
 Enjoy the good fortune
 To be received by him,

I cannot but
 Strictly follow the rules
 And obey all his orders.
 So I must,
 Bowing down with folded hands,
 Stand here below the hall,
 And wait until
 The announcer Zhang Three
 Will report my presence."

When the Patriarch Teacher had taken his seat in the hall, it turned out that he carried axles at his waist and held an iron brush in his hand with which he scratched an itch under his boot. The order was given to take up one's position. How do you think his staff was arranged? On one side stood those with sharp teeth and clever tongues, and on the other side those with red lips and sparkling teeth. When they all had taken up their positions, Muddleheaded Zhang Three ascended the hall, knelt down and reported, "The Muslim Bai Lai from Qingzhou, the god of dire straits, has sent a letter to recommend a person who wants to receive your instruction. He is awaiting your decision." On receiving and reading this letter, the Patriarch Teacher was overjoyed and said, 'If he has come from afar, he must have brought some rare goods as introduction presents, so quickly bring him here." Hearing this, Pianliu performed eighteen rolls, and after he had performed a handless kowtow, he entered the hall and presented his gifts, saying, "I, your disciple, am from a destitute village and a backward region, so I have no rare goods to present. I have brought two goose heads for you to dine on, and I kneaded a cap for you to wear." Empty Lies said, "One goose head would have been more than enough, why did you have to bring two? You are too generous." After he had received the gifts, he ordered Zhang Three, "In my opinion this person can be counted sincere, so don't treat him without respect. Prepare a welcome banquet for him." Zhang Three promptly set out a table and told him to sit down. What did he get to eat?

The main fare was a soup without any rice,
 For the meat you had to chew your own lips.

The water was hauled in a bamboo basket
So you drank what was served only slowly.

A bowl was filled
 With soul-deluding soup,
 So you saw no face at all,

A plate was served
 Of kudzu skins mixed
 With dead-face tendons.

You had barely swallowed
 A dogmeat-filled dumpling
 Without any fear or taboo,

When was set down
 A bloated belly,
 A knife paining the heart.

The unborn lamb steamed
 Over the basket's handle
 Was alas too tough to bite;

When you saw those
 Hunger-stilling painted cakes
 You were filled with joy.

So even though
 The three colds and two hots
 Were all fully provided,

It was all only
 A bone gnawed clean by a dog,
 So you swallowed your saliva in vain.

We don't have to narrate this episode in full, but there were also three joints (*ti* 蹄): no need to mention (*ti* 提), why mention it, and don't mention it again. There also were three kinds of tripes (*chang* 腸): a shouting match, a good fight, and a broken heart. There also was one bowl of balls: the balls without worry. Then there was a platter of liver: I don't care. Then there was a box filled with idle chatter made up of bird beaks. At the end were added two plates: the black heart of one who defaults on his debts and the two dead sheep eyes of one who forwards money.

When the banquet was finished, Pianliu asked Muddleheaded Zhang Three, "The banquet is already finished, but why did the Patriarch not say a single word?" Zhang Three replied, "Sir, you are new here and don't yet know the rules. You have to draw up a contract in which you promise him a huge payment. If you hand that to the Patriarch Teacher, he will of course teach you all he knows." "No problem," answered Pianliu, and he drew up a contract which he submitted to the Patriarch Teacher. What was its content?

"The undersigned, Ma Pianliu:

Slippery was my inheritance.

Pestering people is my calling,

Not paying debts my fortune.

Only because I

Without any reason

Acted the big guy,

My lamp wick pavilion

Turned out not square

But long and round.

At present I now

Owe many people

Quite a number of debts,

And as a result

My water gourd

Cannot leak out enough.

Considering

What was the best

Of the thirty-six strategies,

I therefore

Abandoned my home

And fled thousands of miles.

But because

My ancestors had amassed

Good karma by their deeds,

I today may meet

The Patriarch in person,

An immortal who found the Way.

As you have hands

That pluck the stars and moon

As well as the clouds from the sky,

I have come here

To receive your teaching

And venerate you as my teacher.

I implore you to

Teach me with skill and patience,

Providing me with instruction.

And I promise you

That I will later

Pay you a sum as big as heaven!"

When the Patriarch Teacher saw this, he was overjoyed and said, "Your gratitude is truly not small, so I will accept you as a student. Since ancient times it is said that an enlightened teacher cannot match beneficial friends. Behind this hall are quite some pupils who are studying there, so Zhang Three should introduce you to them."

When the two of them had taken their leave from the Patriarch and went to the back, Pianliu stumbled and fell down. This scared him so much that he was covered in sweat, but Zhang Three hastily explained to him, "Sir, don't be afraid, this is the pitfall for tripping up people." When Pianliu had scrambled to his feet, he felt some urgency in his bowels and wanted to defecate, but Zhang Three told him, "We have no toilet here, and why? The Patriarch corks things all up and he doesn't even have an arsehole." Pianliu replied, "So I can only keep it up as we walk on." When they had walked for some distance, there were two pavilions next to each other. When he read the plaques, one of them was the pavilion of should not, and the other of please don't. The floors were covered with a fitting carpet from which thorns arose. Inside there were many heroes, all properly devoting themselves to their studies. Who do you think these people were? They were Feng Rempian (Cheating Everyone), Ma Piansan (Ma Cheat-Three), Tuo Taixu (Escape Empty), Liu Guazui (Few-Mouths), Gan Chushen (Fake Career), Sai Retie (Hotter Than Iron) and Gang'er Wanzi. There also were two tutors: one was Oil Paper and the other was Leather Ladle. And what do you think was the content of their studies?

How to adeptly pierce a seamless egg,
 How to be first when food is cooked;
 How to stand straight below a dark sky,
 How to turn a somersault in the clouds.

One of them

Cheated others into climbing a high pole
 And then took away the ladder;

One of them

Carefully observed wind and waves
 Before raising the sail.

One of them

Attempted to dive
Into a rock;

One of them

Did not eat mulberries,
Pretending to sleep.

One of them

Tried with wet hands
To occupy the wash basin;

One of them

Learned without jujubes
Not to drop the stave.⁵²

One of them

Performed marionettes
On Watching-Home Terrace;⁵³

One of them

Guided other people
Down a whirlpool.

One of them

Manipulated a corpse
To hang itself;

One of them

Cut off another man's flesh
To place it on his own body.

⁵² I do not know what kind of criminal scheme is intended here.

⁵³ The Watching-Home Terrace is the place in the underworld from which the deceased may for one last time see their descendants. A marionette show creates an illusion, so the line probably refers to cheating impressionable people.

One of them

Scraped the sticky rice
From a beggar's bowl;

One of them

Loved to use the well chain
To string his coins.⁵⁴

They studied how

The wily sparrow
Brought maggots down;

They studied

Whose padded jacket
Was not worth wearing.

True indeed:

Even if they had swallowed Mt. Tai,
They would not thank the Earth;

And on top of that

They'll cut your eyes,
Not caring for blindness.

These many forms of martial arts cannot be listed in full. As soon as they saw Pianliu appear, they all stared at him with white eyes. Zhang Three explained: "This is a new pupil of our teacher, who comes here to pay his respects to you." Hearing this, all of them were overjoyed, hoping that he would have fine presents for them. Pianliu introduced himself, "Brothers, my surname is Ma, my personal name is Pianliu (Cheat-Six), and my social name is Jiasan (Add-Three). I come empty-handed, so I had no gifts for you, but I brought a few belts, and I will give each of you a pair." They were overjoyed, thinking that if it would not be a belt for stringing coins, it would be a belt for laying tiles, so each stretched out his legs and each was provided with a couple, but when they looked down, it turned out that dead snakes

⁵⁴ Traditional Chinese copper coins had a square hole in the middle.

circled their thighs. They said, "Dear brother, you came from quite a distance and before we could welcome you, you already presented us with generous gifts, so we will give you some living treasures in return." They each groped their waist for a handful, and when they had placed them on his body, Pianliu felt an itch no scratching could undo. What were these creatures do you think? These were starving lice. After they had mutually thanked each other, Pianliu said, "First of all I came to pay my respects, but secondly I would like to receive your instruction." When they asked him which martial art he wanted to master, Pianliu replied, "I only want to learn the method for refusing to repay my debts." They all replied, "No problem at all!

You only are owing some money,
So there's no reason for sorrow.
We all must be on the look-out:
If we can sneak away, we'll do it!

First you must learn
 To have a smart eye
 So you can flee and run off,
Secondly you must learn
 To feel no pain when beaten,
 No shame when cursed out.
Then you must
 Learn from the old ox
 To hide in some deep gully
And all day long
 Not show up
 For any of your meals.
Let them come down
 In a crowd to find you
 And demand repayment,

You only should
 Make false promises
 And talk pure nonsense.
 This is the way in which
 We your brothers all day
 Refuse to repay our debts,
 So that's why
 We present you, brother,
 With a complete account!"

Pianliu replied, "I don't have to study this, because this is the road I have travelled well." Ma Piansan (Cheat-Three) remarked, "Brother, you know the art without studying, and are capable without emptiness. Your capacity may perhaps be more than mine, so no wonder your social name is Jiasan (Add-Three). I cannot match you, so please achieve enlightenment by yourself." When he had said this, they all dispersed, leaving Ma Pianliu behind in a depressed mood. But his luck was great and his mind numinous, so he achieved several insights. Indeed, If you want to cheat people out of great treasure, / You have to exert your three-hair, seven-hole heart! If you want to know whether these [insights] were approved by the Patriarch, then later developments will be explained in the remaining chapter of this book.

CHAPTER FOUR

Most I fear those who are greedy and cunning:
They ruin and deceive so many good people.
Seeing a coin in boiling water, they'll put in their hand
And they are not afraid of breaking their back.

You'd want them to feel ashamed of themselves
But instead they will use brazen words and brag.
Just look, if your behavior resembles those scoundrels,
You don't have any inkling of conscience at all!

This song to the tune of West River Moon explains that the Patriarch of Empty Lies each year on the fixed date of the first third day of the Third Month expounded his Way. When on this day he had ascended the great hall and everyone had made their bows and taken their seats, the Patriarch called on Ma Pianliu, asking him, "Which insights have you reached these last few days?" Pianliu replied, "I have reached some insights, but I don't know whether they will fit your ideas." The Patriarch said, "Let me first submit you to a test. You act the man who owes a debt and I will act the part of one who demands his money. Let's play it out." When Pianliu had said, "Fine!" Empty Lies said, "Ma Pianliu, you owe me money, why haven't you repaid me yet?" Pianliu replied,

"I owe you some silver and I will pay it back,
Don't be so angry, please allow me some time.
One of these days when my good fortune arrives,
I will step outside and pick up a treasure pot.
In it will grow coral trees as high as a rod,
I'll have no place to store pearls and gems.
Coins I shake from the trees will flow outside:
Only then will I repay your silver to you!"

Empty Lies said, “Wrong! You’re wide off the mark! Listen to me!

Let’s assume that
 A numinous and a responsive
 Fortune-dispensing divinity
 Would out of the blue
 Present you with
 A treasure-collecting pot
 That would produce
 Gold, silver, and jewels
 Beyond any counting,
 Making you
 The equal of
 Deng Tong and Shi Chong,⁵⁵
 Then you should
 Travel to Yangzhou
 With millions at your waist
 And acquire there
 Quite a number
 Of beauties white as jade—
 During the daytime
 You will sit together and drink,
 Leisurely chatting and laughing

⁵⁵ Deng Tong 鄧通 and Shi Chong 石崇 were proverbial for their wealth during their lifetime. Deng Tong was the lover of Emperor Wen (r. 180–157 BCE), who showered him with gifts and privileges that were rescinded by the succeeding emperor, and Deng Tong died a poor man. Shi Chong (249–300) amassed his fabulous fortune as a local governor, but his wealth incurred the jealousy of the emperor’s bother, who had him killed.

And during the night

 You will under your quilts

 Imitate clouds and rains.⁵⁶

No need to worry

 About your low position

 And your small family—

Within a few years

 You will have quite a crowd

 Of sons and also of grandsons!

Let those people

 Of status and power

 Come and demand their cash,

You'll all together

 Without mercy or reason

 Knock them down flat.

You must treat

 Your possessions

 As your inalienable property,

And never listen

 To the nonsensical babble of

 'Dispersing riches based on righteousness.'

If you are set on

 Amassing capital

 That will last a millennium,

You'll never have,

 Numerous men of a big family,

 To suffer constant poverty!

⁵⁶ "Clouds and rains" is a common euphemism for having sex.

You cannot mean that you would pay people back once you had a treasure-amassing pot? Once again!
Ma Pianliu, you owe me money. Now pay me back!" Pianliu replied.

"I owe you money, so I'll repay my debt.
I don't deny it, but have some patience!
When one day my good fortune will flourish,
The god of wealth will come down to earth.
I'll find a hundred and thousand piles of pearls,
And I will polish two ponds of steel diamonds.
Once I have sold those for mountains of gold,
Then I will pay back the debts I owe to you."

Empty Lies said, "Wrong! Listen to me!

Let's assume
 That you have amassed
 Hills of gold and mountains of silver—
Those you will need
 To provide food when hungry,
 Buy clothes when freezing.
First make sure
 You have plenty of food and clothes
 So your base is secure,
And then arrange
 To open a salt shop and pawn shop
 To make good money.
Build some
 Storied pavilions and terraces
 And high and large mansions

And buy the rank
 Of a substantial but unsalaried
 Assistant prefect.
Find yourself some
 Butt-licking obsequious
 Sycophants and hangers-on
With whom to discuss
 The drumbeat of Kunqiang⁵⁷
 And of strong music.
When you feel bored
 You can loudly sing over wine,
 Making fun together,
The whole bunch
 Playing riddles and games,
 Engaging in finger-fights.
People at present
 Are only concerned about
 Pleasure right now,
Who cares about
 Punishments upon death,
 Climbing the mountain of swords?⁵⁸

You can't mean that once you have mountains of gold and mountains of silver you will pay back their money? Once again! Ma Pianliu, you owe me gold, why don't you pay me back?" Ma Pianliu replied,

⁵⁷ Kunqiang was the fashionable music associated with elite drama in the eighteenth century.

⁵⁸ The mountains of swords are among the punishments for sinners in the underworld.

"I owe you some gold, so I'll return the gold,
 But do not get angry, set your mind at rest!
 When one day soon my good fortune will flourish
 I will run into Lü Dongbin upon stepping outside.⁵⁹
 I will not study the art of longevity with him,
 But only how to turn stones into solid gold.
 Then I will touch Mt. Tai just only one time—
 Once it's turned into gold, I'll pay you back!"

Empty Lies said, "Wrong! Wrong again! Listen to me:

I also know that
 Among the superior immortals
 There is one Lü Dongbin:
 He truly has
 Rare techniques and capacities,
 His magic is exceptional.
 Perhaps he has
 A karmic affinity with you
 So you will encounter him,
 And he will teach you
 Indeed to touch rocks
 And turn them into gold.
 But if you make
 More gold
 Than you ever can use,

⁵⁹ Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 is one of the famous Eight Immortals. He was also renowned as a master of alchemical techniques.

Then dig a number
Of big, deep holes
Where you can hide it.
Even though
You will not use it
For the next few generations,
You should leave it behind
For your offspring as numerous
As the hairs on the hide of an ox.

You don't mean that you would give the money back even if you could turn rocks into gold? Once again!
Ma Pianliu, you owe me cash. Repay me quickly!" Pianliu replied,

"If I owe you cash, I will pay you back in cash,
There's no need to shout, no need to quarrel.
When one day my good fortune will arrive,
I will stumble on seven or eight pits of gold.
Since ancient times, the rich become officials,
Riding a horse once outside, or a sedan chair.
When I have gold and silver as an official,
You get your principal and interest together!"

Empty Lies said, "This also won't do. Listen to me:

Just have a look:
A holy king possessing the Way
Occupies the imperial throne,

And those that serve
 As his high officials
 All are wise and good, square and right.
 When they arrive at their post
 The titled gentry of the whole district
 Offer their presents in congratulation,
 And in addition,
 His Majesty's largesse
 Is as expansive as heaven.
 No need to talk
 Of his salary each year
 Of three or four hundred ounces,
 Then there is also
 The newly-added bonus⁶⁰
 That runs into a thousand!
 In case that you also
 Serve for three years,
 As an incorruptible prefect,
 I guarantee you
 Ten thousand ounces
 Of highest grade pure silver.
 Once you have made the money
 You should save it
 In case of any emergency,

60 In 1723 the Yongzheng emperor increased the salaries of the officials in the imperial bureaucracy by granting them an annual bonus that was called the "Nurturing Incorruptibility Silver" (*yanglianyin*).

So hurry up

And build yourself a house

And buy the best fields!

If you will use

This money to pay off

The loans you owe others,

I only fear

You'll suffer hunger and cold

In old age in retirement!

You don't mean you will pay people back their money when you become an official? Once again! Ma Pianliu, you have an outstanding debt, when will you repay me?" Pianliu said,

"If I owe you a debt, I surely will clear it,

Just wait a while, it's the right thing to do.

Within the near future my fortune will come

And I'll easily worm my way into the yamen.⁶¹

When there's a process, I'll serve the warrant,

Making sure that that family goes bankrupt.

When I will have got their gold and silver,

Principal and interest will be paid in full."

Empty Lies said, "Wrong! Wrong! Listen to me.

I urge you, Sir,

Never desire

To get a job in the yamen:

⁶¹ To obtain a position as a runner in the district office.

The majority there
 Are former monks
 Bereft of good conscience.
 Once they have raised
 Their spiked cudgels
 And their triangular eyes,
 They, fiercely imposing,
 Resemble a band of tigers
 Coming down from the hills.
 Once they have received
 A warrant stating a name
 Issued in red ink,
 They that very moment
 —A pack of wolves—
 Go and arrest that man.
 They don't care
 About your academic status
 Or your literary talent,
 They don't fear
 Your examination status
 And your great renown.
 If you only have
 Three tenths
 Of one *mu* of land,
 You will have to
 Present them some silver,
 Offering it in both your hands.

Inside a government office

There exists no fairness

And no heavenly justice—

Who cares about

Retribution in this life

Or reaching your offspring?

Don't say that

As a yamen runner

Your social status is low,

You will feel

Perhaps even

The equal of local gentry.

If you will

Once at the yamen

Pay back your debts,

You clearly are

The greatest fool

Down here on earth!

Ain't the present day yamen runners the people who don't pay back their debts? Once again! Ma Pianliu, you owe me money, pay up!" Pianliu replied,

"I owe you some money and I sure will repay you,

But if you want cash now, that's truly impossible.

In the near future I will make a trip to the South⁶²

And find me a boatload of the prettiest beauties!

Made up with rouge and powder, standing outside,

⁶² The Jiangnan area, with the big cities of Yangzhou and Suzhou.

They'll seduce the playboys to have sex with them.
Only when I will have obtained their assets in full,
I'll pay you back in full, both principal and interest."

Empty Lies said, "Wrong! This won't do at all! Listen to me!

At present

There's truly no lack
Of such gentleman pimps

Who completely rely

On the bedroom charms
Of their cute wenches.

This is even more

Effective indeed
Than any other trade:

Only this is

Grabbing hot buns
Without burning your hands!

Once you've made the money

You first have to learn
How to improve your status;

Changing your outfit

You wear a leather jacket in winter
And light silks in summer.

Joining the upper class

You'll ride in a carriage
Or sit astride a fine horse;

Assuming airs

You want to be addressed as Sir

And not as bro anymore.

When receiving guests

You order your little boy

To pour them fresh tea,

Joining new fads

You will smoke tobacco,

Displaying your gorge.

Even though others

May despise your pretensions

And talk behind your back,

You will quite happily

Cough, clear your throat,

And spit out your saliva.

When, by special grace,

You have been allowed

To buy a rank eight office,

The next village

Will invite you

To appoint the leader.

All people will say,

'Our village has produced

A new office holder,'

And they will

Clean your face

Of the actor's make-up.

But if you

Take this money

And go and pay your debts,

You truly are

'Stepping on the nest

And breaking the eggs'!

Which present-day pimp pays back his debts? Once again! Once again! Ma Pianliu, you owe me some grain. When will you return it to me?" Pianliu said,

"I haven't forgotten that I owe you some grain,

Don't be in such a hurry, let it rest for a while.

In the near future my fortune will greatly flourish,

I will easily make my career in the green woods.

During the daytime I will be a highway robber,

At night I'll carry a torch and engage in a fight.

Once I'll have obtained gold and silver that way,

I definitely will not lose my conscience at all."

Empty Lies said, "Wrong! This will do even less. Listen to me.

Now just have a look:

Our holy ruler has the Way,

And all things flourish and grow,

So one should

Maintain the rules, keep to the law

And be a loyal tax-paying citizen.

If you dodge your debts
 People will only complain
 You don't clear your accounts,
So why should you
 Court death and risk your life
 By a career in the green woods?
But if you indeed
 Love to walk down this
 Light and slippery road,
You of course
 Will have gold and silver
 Filling both your hands.
By daytime you
 Call together your friends
 To go drinking together,
And at night
 You will sleep with
 The camp's finest moll.
If you cross the law
 And commit a crime
 Deserving the death penalty,
You should not leave
 Any part of the loot
 To your sons and grandsons.
If you will
 Use this money
 To pay back your debts,

You truly have
Swallowed the fattest oil
And muddled your mind!

Do you mean to say that robbers pay back their debts? Once again! Ma Pianliu, you borrowed some clothes from me. Return them to me immediately!" Pianliu said,

"Your clothes are indeed still at my place,
But wait a while, don't demand them now.
In the near future it's our turn for the festival
So I will set up a racket and be the leader.
Once some people are hoodwinked by us,
We'll make them lose everything they have.
Their money and goods will all be mine,
And I will not keep anything of your stuff."

Empty Lies said, "Wrong! This way you are not a beneficial friend. Listen to me.

It's always said,
Setting up a gambling racket
Is a scheme without limits:
All day long
You only hope to find people
Who will take the hook.
You don't care about
Friends and relatives,
Or family relations,

But you want to scrape
 The last drop of oil
 From their bones.
You've learned to use
 Lead-filled dice
 That are always false,
And then you have
 All those tricks
 To watch the dice roll.
Those in the racket
 Are indeed bereft
 Of all conscience,
They actually are
 Bare scoundrels without concern
 For either life and death.
Hidden in the village
 Is a scoundrel
 With an added business:
He has his
 Unmarried daughters
 All sleep with all men.
What they scheme to eat
 Is nothing but the flesh
 Of their fellow villagers;
In their next life
 They for sure will be reborn
 As a horse or an ox.

If you make any money,
 You should keep it
 And use it yourself,
 Don't ever plan
 To use it and clean away
 The shame on your face.
 If you are going
 To take this money
 And pay off your debts,
 You had better
 Become a male prostitute—
 That's your best chance.

This business of being a boss is not something for humans to do, but you even thought of this enterprise! If you have yet another way of returning people's money, go ahead and tell me!" Pianliu replied, "Your disciple only achieved these few insights. I have nothing more to say and look forward to your instruction." Empty Lies said, "Fine." Thereupon he ordered the other pupils all to return to the hall in the rear. Empty Lies said, "Pianliu, the method is never transmitted to six ears. Close the gate securely, so I can transmit the Way to you." When Pianliu had hastily closed the gate, he knelt down, saying, "Your disciple respectfully receives your secret words." Empty Lies said, "Let me whisper them in your ears.

Since the great chaos was split into two parts,
 Profit comes first in human life, feeding fate.
 Those who are covetous and mean enjoy fun,
 Those who are honest and sincere suffer want.
 No matter whether fields turn into oceans,
 No matter whether oceans turn into fields,
 Equally as well in this life or a next existence
 Make up your mind to never repay any money!

Ma Pianliu, have you achieved enlightenment?" Pianliu replied, "I have achieved enlightenment." Empty Lies said, "I have here a magic formula of a single word that I will also transmit to you.

Not to loan to me was initially up to you,
Now I have borrowed, the power is mine.
Whether you roar and shout and pummel me with your fists,
The one-word magic formula is 'deceit.'

Ma Pianliu replied, "Your disciple also has conceived a magic formula of one word. Please let me know your opinion.

I trekked a thousand miles to find a teacher,
Only today I received the true transmission.
Spending other people's money should be seen as a game:
The magic formula in one word is 'debt.'⁶³

Empty Lies said, "Quite an insight! You are indeed an intelligent person. Wonderful! I have here a song to the tune of Clear River Intro as a parting gift:

I won't repay, I truly won't repay
Even if a thousand men may hate me.
If I have the money I will enjoy it;
If one lacks money, one is despised.
Once you and I have parted our ways,
Who would be willing to give me some more?
Once you and I have parted our ways,
Who would be willing to give me some more?"

⁶³ These two four-line poems make up a lyric to the tune West River Moon.

Ma Pianliu replied, "Your disciple also has a song to the tune of Clear River Intro that I respectfully present to you as a token of my gratitude.

Wonderful, wonderful, o how wonderful,
I found myself a good teacher!
Earlier I had no method I could develop,
But now I know how to tell people off.
I will not repay your money unless you come and take it from my hands!
I will not repay your money unless you come and take it from my hands!

A poem reads:
If one probes people's feelings one calls out Alas!
Rumors and gossip have been arranged as a song.
Don't take this rustic tale as so many empty words:
Such men now are many, all over the place.

APPENDIX: *PURE AND UNTRAMMELED, A TRUE DAOIST MASTER*

FROM *ZHANG ZIFANG PRESENTS A SHOE AT RUINED BRIDGE*

[(Fake Immortal *speaks*:)]⁶⁴

...

I wait until the sky is turning dark at night
And sneak into a house, next to the stove.
If there is no one who bursts inside,
I steal there something and am out again!
In this house I steal ten pieces of cotton,
Over there I filch five pounds of brocade.
Why do I, poor priest, love to be a thief?
It's because this is our ancestral tradition.
If a patron invites me to conduct a ritual,
I am with pure mind even more sincere:
Before reading scriptures, I need to eat meat,
Eat till I am sated, my belly one round ball!
All my life I've liked to eat good dog meat,
And once I've had dog meat, I recite mantras.
Who could know I would run into a soldier on patrol

Who said that I⁶⁵

Broke the fast, offended the commandments and ruined the ritual feast!
All those present thereupon grabbed me tightly,
Tied my arms behind my back and took me to court.
Seeing I wasn't in a hurry, they beat me with staves

64 The opening pages of this play are missing.

65 Passages printed in a smaller font in this translation are written in smaller characters in the original manuscript to mark the words concerned as extrametrical.

And slapped me seven or eight times in the face.
 Taken to the court hall, I met with the magistrate,
 So I hastily knelt down before the hall's steps.
 The magistrate ordered me to state my case,⁶⁶
 He said that I
 Corrupted customs, a most serious crime!
 So my back was beaten two hundred times,
 My eyebrows were beaten seven, eight thousand times.
 But the magistrate was still not satisfied
 And ordered this guy to carry city-wall bricks on his head!
 But I would patiently sit down in meditation,
 And silently suffering I broke out in laughter.

 Who was like me
 Filled with pleasure? Bereft of all joy?
 Haha I loudly laughed without saying a word.
 All those present praised me as with one mouth,
 The bystanders on both sides said even more.

 They claimed that I
 Was a pure and untrammelled true Daoist master,
 They said that I
 Was a free divine immortal without care or worry!

(Fake Immortal *sings*:)

(*Shang xiaolou*)

My home is in the deepest mountains, the empty wilderness,
 I have neither a neighbor to the east nor a house to the west.
 What I love to eat are wild apricots and mountain peaches,

66 The collator of the manuscript changed “state my case” (*shuo ciyin* 說詞因) to “tell the truth” (*gong qingshi* 供情實).

Bland rice and yellowed leeks,
Bamboo sprouts and tea leaves.
At my place there are no people,
No bird is heard.
When the lamp is out and the fire is dead,
I accompany the morning star and fading moon above the trees.

(Shang xiaolou)

My home is in the deepest mountains,
What I love to eat is beef and mutton.
When at leisure I enter homes and commit robbery,
Dig through walls and excavate tunnels,
Steal horses and rustle cattle.
The staves of lances,
Big truncheons,
And cobblestones:
That is what this ascetic has gained by his bitter self-cultivation!

(Shang xiaolou)

I don't fear your royal law and its articles,
I also don't fear any cinnabar rescript summoning me.
I also don't fear lances and swords surging forward during the twelve hours of day and night.
One poisonous snake,
A pair of big monsters,
Dholes and wolves blocking the road—
I also don't fear ferocious lions, wolves and bears, tigers and leopards!

(Shang xiaolou)

Don't deride me for coveting flowers and loving wine:
In wine I perceive the mysterious trigger;⁶⁷

⁶⁷ The "trigger" refers to an incipient movement that is not yet visible outside and so refers to the dynamic aspect of the Dao.

In wine I find the Way.
Divine immortals among the flowers
Have left their legends from ancient times.
The refined cinnabar elixir
Has been completed in nine revolutions
And my whole body is without leakage:
My self-cultivation achieved freedom from birth and death, a longevity equal to heaven!

(*Speaks:*) I am one who beyond heaven has a shadow but no form, comes with the wind and leaves in a cloud, can be heard but not seen, can be grasped but not caught. My name in religion is Grasping Vacuity and my byname is Empty Lies.⁶⁸

See Fabrizio Pregadio, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge, 2008), vol. 1, pp. 336–37.

68 *Maiwangguan chaojiaoben gujin zaju* (in *Guben xiqu congkan siji*), vol. 15, pp. 5b–7a.

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