

MING THE PHYSIOGNOMIST: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FACE-READER FROM THE SONG

Julia Cohen

Writer's comment: After having read a book detailing the Song period for History 9A (History of East Asian Civilization), students were instructed to visit a Qing scroll, which illustrated aspects of everyday Chinese life during that period. We were encouraged to scrutinize the painting and choose a figure from the scroll to elaborate on and historicize. This was how Ming the Physiognomist was born. A man in a long robe, carrying an umbrella and a sign in Chinese especially intrigued me. I inquired and found that the sign meant "I read faces." I then began investigating both typical daily life of a Hangzhou resident in the late Song, and the practices, beliefs and social roles of Chinese physiognomists. Though an obscure, small, and rather undocumented group in Chinese history, I found that physiognomists specifically, and fortune-tellers more generally, occupied a particularly interesting role as "middle-men," in multiple senses, within Chinese history.

— *Julia Cohen*

Instructor's comment: Julia Cohen's paper was written for an introductory class on Chinese civilization (History 9A: History of East Asian Civilization). The assignment asked students to invent themselves as a character in an early 12th-century Chinese handscroll. Cohen viewed two versions of this handscroll: an 18th-century copy (held in facsimile in Shield's Library's Special Collections and placed on special display for the class), and a CD Rom version that was shown in class and later made available in Hart Hall's audio-visual labs. In the scroll, Cohen spotted a tiny sign marking the spot where a fortune-teller plied his trade. She researched the meaning of the sign-and the rest, so to speak, is history: the history she has brilliantly recreated in the paper that follows.

— *Susan Mann, History Department*

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March 13, 1993

Dear Professor Sallor,

I am submitting to you my translation of an amazing text I found while traveling in China two years back, along with the original booklet which accompanied it. This encounter was not more than a matter of chance: While I was in a small consignment shop in Kaifeng, I mentioned my interest in Chinese history and the shopkeeper pointed me to this text. It was in poor shape and was extremely expensive. Yet, I thumbed through the pages and was increasingly impressed by a seemingly very authentic story. I left, however; still unable to believe the documents were not forged. All that night I thought about them, went over my books, and decided I could quite possibly have come upon something incredible. I went back to the store the next day and bought them.

My own initial reaction considered, I will not be surprised if your reaction is also one of incredulity when I tell you that this text was written during the late Song period. Nevertheless, I implore you to understand that I have spent the last two years examining, translating, and verifying the details of the texts. I have even recently received results from a specialist who dates the paper back to about 1200, which corresponds perfectly with my calculations. It is for this reason that I ask you to use extreme caution with the original booklet drawings and sign, which are all quite fragile. When I found them they were already partially laminated, rather haphazardly. I have left them as is because, at least, this way they are protected. I have made few alterations on these originals, except for temporary numbers by each picture to make my subsequent descriptions easier to follow.

The text itself is an autobiographical one, written by a fortune-teller living in Hangzhou by the name of Ming the Physiognomist. He describes one of the last days of his life, and the reader is brought into the world of what he does and thinks during these last moments. Most likely this text was written at the conclusion of the Feast of Lanterns, as Ming looked back on what he had done that day, though it is written in the present tense. Regardless of the questions which may arise concerning the authenticity of this text, the depiction given of a Song Physiognomist is amazingly true to the picture that Chinese historians paint of this time and practice both. I have translated it as accurately as possible. I have also added notes at the bottom of each page, with details of the story which coincide with various authors' works on the subject. For definitions or clarifications of terms I have used asterisks instead of the normal numerical footnote.

Since my discovery of this text I have been doing extensive research into Chinese fortune-telling, and have found Richard Smith's book *Fortune Tellers and Philosophers* to be particularly informative. Many of the specific references I have made to fortune-telling practices have come from his book, and are therefore often extrapolations, since his work is predominantly based in Qing mantic practices. However, Smith himself notes the fact that physiognomy was born as a study in China in the late Zhou era (22). Yet, there are relatively few elucidating texts on physiognomy in its earlier stages, including during the Song. It is also for this reason that I am so excited to have found what looks like a verifiable source of information in this field. There are many reasons to believe that the Qing practices in physiognomy were closely related to those of the Song. Ming's descriptions of his work confirm this point.

I would appreciate any comments and pieces of advice you have for me after reading what I am submitting. I plan to publish this work along with my own commentaries on its historicity, elaborating upon my notes in this version. Yet, I am also very interested in exploring this character, Ming, as a representative of the fortune-teller's role within China during Imperial times. Richard Smith speaks of fortune-tellers as often occupying the role of "middlemen," quite literally, as mediators between different people in social or public gatherings (269). I would like to explore this idea in all of its ramifications, both literally and metaphorically.

I have noted that Chinese fortune-tellers often play the role of the metaphorical mediator between conflicting values or patterns within Chinese society. Smith describes one of the areas in which fortune-tellers serve to bridge a cultural gap in the following manner: "Divination, as a 'pseudo-science', attempts to bridge the gap between 'hard' science . . . and religion" (283) within China.

This is only one of the ways in which fortune-tellers represented a blend between different aspects of Chinese culture. As I elaborate somewhat in my notes within the text, the fortune-tellers often transmitted values and morals of Confucian culture by combining their forecasting with moral-based advice. Also, Ming, for instance, did his best business during the government-sponsored festivals. In these ways Ming and other fortune-tellers perpetuated the traditional and conventional Confucianism. Yet, many were also either practicing Buddhists, Daoists, or at least were influenced by one or both of these faiths. In my notes I explain the special relationship of physiognomists with Buddhism.

There is yet another way in which fortune-tellers merged two different "poles" within Chinese culture, but in this case they seem to embody the tension itself possibly more than the bridge. This is the case of social ranking, of "high culture" and popular "superstition," known in Chinese as *mixin*. Fortune-tellers were often viewed as dealing in little more than *mixin* (xi), especially by scholars. Yet, many were probably literate, and all had an advanced understanding of their subject.

Interestingly, however, people of all classes often demanded their skills. In Marco Polo's description of the Hangzhou court during the mid-twelfth century, he mentions the astrological services that the King required (Gernet 149). This is just one of an innumerable supply of examples which indicate that soothsayers were often employed at the courts themselves. Geomancers were a regular presence at court. Yet other types of soothsayers were employed as well. One example is that of Sun the Fishmonger, an eccentric diviner whom Ming claimed was his teacher. Fortune-tellers of all sorts were often employed by the upper classes. Birth charts were needed before deciding upon a marriage, and physiognomies were often examined. Smith describes that, though it always retained a "certain heterodox potential . . . [fortune telling] remained an integral part of the most important state and domestic rituals, from official sacrifices to life cycle ceremonies" (Smith 265). As was the case for Ming, a fortune-teller's crowds were made up of people of all classes. The fortune-tellers themselves also probably had a varying status in society, depending upon whether they worked predominantly in the court and on private house calls, or in public along with the merchants. In Ming's case, this tension can be seen as well. Though of a lower-class, he managed to wear a robe, an indication of wealth. Though he worked on the street, he was literate and probably felt himself above many of the merchants and his other peers.

There is also the age-old tension between hierarchy and meritocracy as it manifests itself in the beliefs and practices of the Chinese fortune-tellers. While fortune-tellers would seem to inherently have based their beliefs on an ideology of pre-destination, in reality, it was not that simple. On the one hand, they spoke of what was already written in the stars, the land, or one's face. On the other hand, instead of simply accepting everything as set-in-stone, they also gave advice and counsel, giving the impression that they actually viewed fate as somewhat malleable.

One tension, that of gender, is less noticeably developed in Ming's text but nevertheless seems worthy of mention. While the majority of soothsayers were men, women seemed to constitute a significant portion of their clientele (Smith 268). In a strange sense, therefore, fortune-telling simultaneously came to be associated with both men and women, but in distinct senses. In Ming's case, however, he does not mention a female clientele because he is working in public, a much more restricted space for women. It is likely that he had female clients at other times, when making house calls, for example.

All of this said, I hope you enjoy the text as much as I have.

Sincerely,

Terrence Brighton

Ming the Physiognomist: A Day in the Life of a Face-Reader from the Song

translated and elaborated by Terrence Brighton

— I awake to the last sounding of the watch*. Soon after, I hear the bells of the Buddhist and Daoist monasteries ringing and then the cries of the hermit-monks who descend from the surrounding hills to announce the dawn. Today is a special day, however, and though the hermit-monks beat on their iron strips in the same way they always have, I can sense the difference: Today is the last of the three days of the Feast of Lanterns. They announce the weather as is their custom: “It is cloudy” (1). This may mean rain. I take note of this and decide to bring my umbrella, and prepare to read physiognomies today with few props which could get soiled from the rain.

Though it is only the second hour,** I can hear the whispers of the people preparing themselves for this day, the noise of carts passing over the cobblestone roads, and an occasional scent streaming in through the window of the food already being prepared below. Today I will allow myself the best of the breakfast delicacies, I decide, and I begin to review and consider my options. On the Imperial Way, I will buy fried mutton or goose, or possibly fried tripe. (2) These are delicacies I do not allow myself every day but this day is an occasion to splurge. Everyone, in fact, splurges during this festival. In my hundred and one years I have lived through enough Lantern Feasts to hold this to be unquestionably true. In fact, I have so much faith in this fact that I know today that I will make the money to pay for twenty servings of goose should I will it, if not more. In addition, my particular profession fares well during this festival, which celebrates the coming of a new season. It is a time of new beginnings and people are eager to hear what is in store for them. No less important is the fact that, as I have mentioned already, this is also a time when everyone, even the most miserly of men, becomes extravagant. Yet today I have an additional reason for intending to participate fully in the rituals of the Feast of Lanterns: My own reading has told me that I will die at age one hundred and one. This is, therefore, the last Feast of Lanterns I will celebrate, at least in this life (3).

Therefore, as I climb down the three flights from my house to the street (4), I decide to bypass the store directly below my house and wait until I arrive on the Imperial Way. I notice everything with the eyes of one who knows this city incredibly well, yet, also with those of a foreigner and outsider. The latter perspective arises perhaps for a number of reasons. Firstly, with the knowledge that this will be my last festival, I feel myself to be an observer more than ever. Nevertheless, as a physiognomy-reader, it is true that in some senses I never cease to hold the role of observer. Additionally, after becoming a widower and losing my three daughters to marriage, I have achieved that perspective all the more readily. (Except for times of war, one cannot say that it is lucky to bear only daughters.) Yet, I also feel this way, perhaps, because in my old age, despite my numerous years here in Hangzhou, I have come to remember my native Kaifeng and cannot help but have nostalgia for a world that no longer is (5).

As I stroll down the Imperial Way, I think back to the street of the same name in Kaifeng, which was even larger than that of Hangzhou, and in many ways more grand (6). As I push my small cart across the unevenly paved streets of Hangzhou I remember the facility with which I could push carts in Kaifeng, since the streets were unpaved and therefore smooth. I remember how easy it was also, to push my cart up the Rainbow Bridge there, though that ease must have been augmented not only from the paths but also from my youth. At the time right before the fall of the Northern Song I was still quite young, though my divination skills were advanced enough to predict the falling of the Mandate. In fact, I was a pupil of the

well-known Sun the fishmonger, who talked to me of his premonitions of the imminent fall of the Northern Song dynasty before he was summoned to the court in 1125 (7). As I catch sight of the watchtowers on the hills, I am brought back to my early years in Hangzhou. These watchtowers were built only after the two major fires of the 1130's (8), which decimated the original neighborhood that I had moved into with my wife and three daughters.

As I stroll and think back to these fires, drops of rain begin to fall on my nose and head. The hermit-monks and their warnings of clouds have turned out to be Portentious after all.

As the tapping of the rain onto the pebbles beneath my feet increases, it adds to the general whispering of voices and shops being set up along the Imperial Way. Yet, as my thoughts float between the Kaifeng-that-is-no-longer and the Hangzhou of yesterday, I realize that the day is beginning and that I need to turn my thoughts outward and toward the future. I am now approaching my traditional spot, which I designated upon my arrival to Hangzhou, seventy-two years ago. Being of the first arrivals, and also due to my recognized status as a pupil of Sun the Fishmonger, I was able to help found the very successful guild of physiognomists (9). Consequently, because of my position in the guild, I was able to secure a choice spot in a pleasure ground which lies at the base of one of the most traversed bridges over the Che river, close to both the Imperial Palace and Phoenix Hill.***

It is now not long after the second hour and I arrive at my designated spot. I set up my table, put up my sign which reads *Fengjian* ("Physiognomy"), my umbrella, and place my physiognomy booklet on the table. I notice how old my *Fengjian* sign looks, understandably, for it was the same sign I used to hang up during my early days reading faces in Kaifeng. Like myself, it has seen a lot, traveled far, and is weathered after many years. People begin to pass by almost immediately. Merchants who are going to set up shop sometimes drive carts full with their goods to the pleasure grounds. Those who come in from the countryside, however, almost always rent boats. These rural merchants have neither the money for their own carts nor acceptable road conditions to handle their heavy loads (due to many marshy and wet areas where heavy carts have been known to get stuck upon leaving the city gates). But it is not only the merchants, my neighbors, who begin to pass by. Prospective clients also are out already. I call out to attract general attention and specifically for those unable to read my sign which says *fengjian* ("I read faces").

Soon, two men approach me, wearing black and white turbans, blouses, and trousers, with their belts fastened on the right side (10). I am happy to have clients and do not mind having men of the lower classes as customers. I serve customers of all sorts (11). These men are possibly venders who will not begin their day of work until the sun's light is to be seen within one hour.

Yet, the lack of natural light does not impede my ability to read these men's faces. The light from the lanterns which are left lit up during each of these festival sturdy bones. According to the categorization of the "Five Constant Virtues" (metal, wood, water, fire and earth) this man is a pure "wood" person. I go on to explain to him what this means, for it is very difficult for *waimen han* (literally, "those outside of the gate, but refers to lay people") to understand the complexity of body and physiognomy reading (12). "You possess the traits of humaneness and prosperity" I explain to him. One of his companions, however, is more bulky, thick, and square in composition with a straight posture. "You are a "metal" person with some earth elements," I explain to him. "This means you will be successful and content, since earth produces metal (13)." But these are just their body types, and most important of all is the face, for it reveals the most about a person (14). Of the six different methods of physiognomy interpretation which I practice, the method of the "six storehouses, three powers, and three stops" is the one I utilize the most, yet this, like most physiognomy methods, is complicated for the lay man. I therefore begin with a reference to the first man's "six bigs" (15), being his head, eyes, nose, mouth, ears, and stomach. It is auspicious to have all of these big features, I explain, but I also warn him that though he has a big head, his bones are not particularly protruding. This means he should be careful because a big head without protruding bones on

each side of the forehead can invite poverty. Therefore, even though his body type is that of “wood” which would indicate prosperity, facial signs can outweigh body signs. “You must therefore”, I explain, “use great caution to be neither frivolous nor greedy in order to fulfill your destiny of prosperity rather than that of poverty (16).”

For the case of the second man, I decide to use a different method, since it is more pertinent to his case. This man has a special “geography” to his face, I note. His “Earth Star,” located at the end of his nose, shows signs of a long life span, though not especially so. He will not live to see more than one hundred as I have. Yet, his success will be even greater than mine has been. (I do not disclose this personal comparison to those listening.) This is due to my client’s “Purple Luminary,” on the upper part of his nose, which shows he will someday hold an official position. Both men are quite pleased, seeing as to how both of their readings have been good, and also, undoubtedly, due to the general atmosphere of the festival. Because these are not the types who are able to afford much (for the second man still has yet to fulfill his destiny as an official), I end this session shortly and they pay me in copper cash strands.

After my first customers for the day leave, I pull out my lunch box from my pouch and open the pages of my book on physiognomy for all to see. This method is my own instruction, but rather keep it to attract the attention of passers-by (17).

One man begins to approach my table and I look into his eyes to see what kind of fortune I might read for him. I see that he has snake eyes. Soon, before I know it, he slithers away from my booth as if truly a snake. I, for one, I am not surprised that he shirked away from having his face read. People with snake eyes, round and red, portend treachery and an unhappy family life (18). Maybe he sensed, himself, that it would be better not to hear what I would have to say.

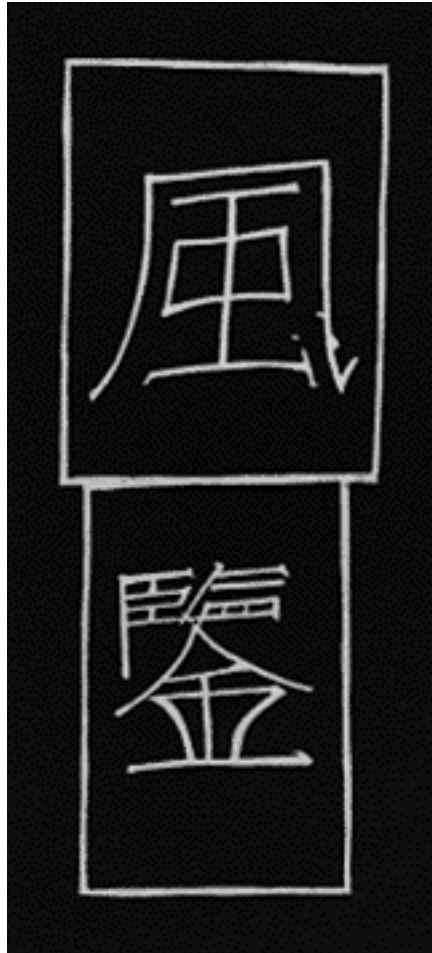
My thoughts are quickly distracted from this man, for a group of five men come towards my station. Only one man wants his face read, for this particular individual explains that he has recently failed the civil service examination and wants to understand his fate more fully and investigate what he might do to change it. The other four stand around in a small circle to watch the reading. I begin to think back to the circles of people I used to have surrounding me in my native Kaifeng at the bottom of the Rainbow Bridge (19), but quickly bring myself away from these distracting daydreams. I notice this man’s face immediately because of the sizable mole which he has on his left cheek. There is an ancient proverb which says “The head has no bad bones; the face has no good moles” (20). This is the way the *waimen han* think. Yet, it is important to analyze each mole for its specific meaning. This man’s moles show that he will have many encounters with failure but, with persistence and diligence, there is an ultimate possibility of success (21). There is more reason to be hopeful, I explain to him, for his skin is of a reddish tone, which is known to be auspicious (22). His eyes have black irises and are spirited, “monkey eyes,” which signify wealth and honor as well as some hardships. Monkey eyes also imply a persistent craving for fruit, which he admits to (23). I then go into the system of the “six storehouses, the three powers and the three stops”(24). Because his reading is somewhat ambiguous, I also apply the method of the “five planets, six luminaries, five mountains and four rivers” for a clearer reading (25). When he is satisfied he leaves with his friends.

In the meantime, however, more people have gathered around forming a larger circle. And so I continue all throughout the day and well into the night, reading faces as I have since my youth, for some eighty years now. Still, today is special, as I watch the city come alive with brilliantly decorated lanterns for the last time. With my hundred and one years I have lived well and worked hard, but now have no one to remember and honor me, since my daughters have all gone and I have had no sons.

From the Sign and Illustrations in Ming's Booklet

SIGN

*The Chinese characters spell out **fengjian**,
meaning "physiognomy"*



圖之三十三



Illustration 1

The Six Storehouses, Three Powers, and Three Stops

圖之三十六



Illustration 2

Study Halls

圖之四十五



Illustration 3

The Five Planets, Six Luminaries, Five Mountains, and Four rivers

圖之面相家二十



Illustration 4
The Twelve Palaces and Five Officials

圖之面相家三十一



Illustration 5
The Thirteen Parts of the Face

圖之面相家三十二



Illustration 6
Yearly Fortune

圖之四吉痣



Illustration 7
Auspicious and Inauspicious Facial Moles

圖之五面人女



Illustration 8
Male moles

圖之六面于男



Illustration 9
Female moles

圖之狀奇貴富



Illustration 10

Palm lines related to “wealth and high position”

圖之狀奇公三



Illustration 11

Palm lines related to the “three dukes”

圖之宮二十卦八



Illustration 12

Palm lines related to the “Eight trigrams and twelve palaces”

Note: The last three illustrations I found in Ming’s booklet were, in fact, instructive for palm-reading. In his recovered autobiographical writing Ming never mentioned reading palms, yet it is possible he was also knowledgeable and practiced palm-reading as well. A second possibility might be that he had entered the drawings into his booklet in his youth, long before he became highly specialized in physiognomy.

References

- 1 Gernet, p.182, mentions this practice.
- 2 Gernet, p.183-4, mentions these foods as “breakfast delicacies” sold on the Imperial Way.
- 3 Smith, p. 208, gives clues as to why it is likely that Ming, as a physiognomy-reader, may have either been a Buddhist, or even more probably, been significantly influenced by Buddhist thought by talking about the special way that “Buddhist doctrine blended well with physiognomy because of the common belief that one of the primary ways karma expresses itself is in the body.” This would explain the reference to reincarnation.
- 4 Gernet, p. 113, mentions the multi-storied, close-quarter houses of the lower classes of Hangzhou.
- 5 The “Notes of the Handscroll Qingming Shanghe Tu” describes the taking of Kaifeng by the Mongols, and the sudden change it incurred, in this way: “Once a million homes, now only grass.”
- 6 Gernet, p. 41. Here Hangzhou is described as being “far from attaining the splendor of Kaifeng.”
- 7 Gernet, p. 208. This character is quoted as saying to the Emperor, after offering the latter some of his pancake and being rejected, that “a day will come when you will be glad to have even a pancake like this,” supposedly forewarning the fall of the court.
- 8 Gernet, p. 34. The devastating fires of 1132 and 1137, and the resulting construction of preventative watchtowers throughout hills around the city, are both described in further detail on this page.
- 9 Gernet, p. 87, makes the point that essentially every profession in Hangzhou was likely to have its guilds, “even...the soothsayers...had their guilds.” Though it was not made clear whether or not a guild for soothsayers would be made up of those with different specialties or simply of one, because of the increasing specialization occurring at this time I have made the assumption that a guild specifically for physiognomists would be feasible.
- 10 Gernet, pp. 128-131. All of these dressing codes are mentioned as “lower-class.” This can be contrasted with the presumed dress of Ming, a long robe, which designated a higher class status. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that this may have been the only garment that Ming owned, and should not be used as the sole indicator of his social position.
- 11 Smith, p. 265. Here, though speaking specifically of Qing divination, Smith describes the “pervasiveness [of divination] at all levels of society.” Considering the openness of Sung urban society, it is likely this argument can be extended to the Sung. Smith, p. 269, also describes how “diviners helped bridge the gap between commoners and the elite.” Smith, p. 270, states that it is known that “at least some fortune-tellers had both elites and commoners as clients and that a number of non-elite diviners enjoyed close relations with the literati by virtue of their unusual and much-coveted skills.” While the first assertion is almost undoubtedly true, even the second seems plausible during the Sung, when an auspicious physiognomy was requisite for a marriage approval. See Gernet, p. 161.
- 12 Smith, p. 3. This quote can be compared to one in *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, which describes an often condescending attitude of fortune-tellers towards the lay-people, or *waimen han*. The idea is very interesting in light of the often-paradoxical status a character like Ming would have. On the one hand he is literate, possesses a specific and complex knowledge, and wears a long robe (as seen in the Qing scroll) which are all things that could differentiate him from associations with the lower-classes. He is, nevertheless, officially still part of the lower-class. As a fortune-teller he is looked down upon for

representing the “popular” elements he criticizes in others.

13 Smith, p. 189.

14 Ibid.

15 Smith, p. 188.

16 It is interesting to note that what a specialist read in the body or face of another could serve as both an explication of a sealed fate, and advice for the future than can help one to avoid that fate. Therefore, a kind of “fluid hierarchy” of the importance of physical features existed, reflecting in some senses the general “fluid hierarchy” of Confucian culture which was characterized by a tension between a pre-established hierarchical system on the one hand, a meritocratic system, based on one’s actions rather than birth, on the other. A further point is that the advice of a Physiognomist would often take the form of moral counseling, such as was the case of Ming when he warned against both frivolity and greed. Smith, p. 265, notes that fortune-tellers were generally “tradition-bound and highly moralistic.” In this sense, Ming, and other Physiognomists, helped to reinforce Confucian culture by passing on its moral codes through their work.

17 Smith, p. 266. It explains that “fortune-tellers invariably surrounded themselves with culturally familiar paraphernalia. Even the most rudimentary fortune-telling table on the street would be adorned with writing materials, books, and calligraphic inscriptions... marks of scholarly refinement and moral cultivation.”

18 Smith, p. 193. This quote is almost identical to one which can be found on this page.

19 Simply as a point of interest here I would like to point to the fact that the Qingming Scroll which depicts Kaifeng during this period contains a character who matches almost identically the Ming’s own description of his earlier days, at the base of the Rainbow Bridge, with his sign reading, *fengjian*, his book, table, umbrella and a circle of men surrounding him.

20 Smith, p. 193.

21 Smith mentions that pre-existing knowledge a fortune-teller had about someone often influenced his reading. This section could be used as evidence towards that point since the young man had recently explained his frustrations regarding the exam system. Also to be noted here is the transmission of Confucian values through Ming’s advice, i.e., the emphasis on consistent and diligent study.

22 Smith, p. 193. Smith makes the interesting point here that Chinese physiognomy often overlapped with Chinese medicine, and was, in this sense, closer to a science possibly even than other types of fortune-telling. Though someone studying physiognomy thought a greenish complexion to be inauspicious in different ways than did a Chinese doctor, they both shared this commonality. Smith, p. 194, then explains that many fortune-tellers either practiced medicine as well, or at least had a knowledge of it. Though it is possible this was so in Ming’s case, there is no evidence in this text which leads us to this conclusion.

23 Smith, p. 193, also mentions this very specific identifier for “fruit craving.”

24 Smith, p. 189.

25 Smith, p. 190.

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