1 The Traveler

In 1868, a slim volume unceremoniously titled *Jottings from a Raft* went to press in Beijing and instantly sold out. It was the first travel account of Europe written by a member of the Chinese educated elite. Within a few years, the book was copied, edited, reprinted, translated, illustrated, and interpreted.[1] It was elegant and picturesque, but its greatest charm to the historian lies in the fact that everyone who read it had a different idea about what it said.

The story began in 1865, when Robert Hart, Inspector General of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service, offered to chaperone young students on his home leave to England. Prince Gong, the regent in charge of the Qing's foreign ministry, the Zongli Yamen, seized the opportunity. For with those students, he would send Binchun, an elderly official from the Bordered White Han banner, to keep the youngsters in line and, by the by, "record everything pertaining to mountains, rivers, and customs" in Europe. Here was the mission Prince Gong had always wanted to send, with logistics taken care of and no real risk of stirring up political objections. "Foreigners know everything about us," He wrote in his memorial to the court, "but we do not know anything about them."[2]

As head of the Zongli Yamen, the Qing's new foreign ministry, Prince Gong recognized that Hart's proposal came at an opportune time. The dynasty had just obtained a long-awaited victory against the Taiping rebels in 1864, and hostility from the European powers, which had forced the Qing to sign a series of humiliating treaties after its defeats in the two Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860), was tempered by a cohort of Euro-American diplomats in the name of the "Co-operative

[1] Extant Qing prints of the book include a woodblock edition printed by Binchun's family (date unknown); woodblock editions by the Wenbaotang (1868), Eryoutang (1868) and Zuiliutang (date unknown); an illustrated Japanese edition published (1872); a woodblock edition commissioned by the Linlangge (1882); and an abridged edition in the Xiaofanghu collection (1891) and the Tiexiangshi collection (1898). It also appeared in *Church News* (Zhongguo jiaohui xinbao) edited by Young John Allen in 1871.

[2] CBYWSM (TZ) 39, 1621.

Policy." The Imperial Maritime Customs Service, established in 1854 to collect dues from foreign cargo ships, was now managed by Robert Hart, a young Irishman whose goodwill and loyalty had prompted the Zongli Yamen to make him an unofficial adviser.[3] The abatement of internal crisis and external threats initiated a noticeable thaw in the court's attitude towards the West. An imperial edict approved Prince Gong's petition, granting Binchun brevet rank as a third-degree civil official and making the three Tongwenguan students into lesser officials, in order to "make them look impressive." Two Customs officers under the supervision of Hart, Englishman Edward Bowra and Frenchman Emile de Champs, were to serve as the mission's interpreters and tour managers.[4]

In this manner Binchun became, officially, the Qing's first traveler to Europe. Over the course of seven months, he and the students visited the capitals and major cities of nearly all the European powers: Marseille, Lyon, Paris, London, Birmingham, Manchester, the Hague, Copenhagen, Stockholm, St. Petersburg, and Berlin. The mission members were, in the words of foreign newspapers, "among the lions of the season," prized guests of high society, received by monarchs, ministers, and dignitaries throughout Europe.[5] By Binchun's own account, well before he arrived in Sweden, the fame of his poetry had reached the Swedish royal house. His proudest memory was of the occasion on which the queen of Sweden, impressed by his poems in the local newspaper, entreated him to compose poems for the royal family. His party returned at the end of 1866 to a warm reception from his family and friends in Beijing. His journal was soon submitted to the court and published under the title *Cheng cha biji* (*Jottings from a Raft*).[6] His two collections of poems from the journal circulated widely in literary circles.

Born into the Yao lineage of the Bordered White Banner, Binchun was a Chinese bannerman whose ancestors had likely served the conquering Manchus in the seventeenth century.[7] A provincial-degree holder, he became magistrate in the provinces of Jiangxi and Shanxi before his retirement in 1864.[8] Of his earlier life we know little, but scattered

[3] For a classic treatment of the Co-operative Policy, see Wright, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism*; for a recent study of Robert Hart and the Imperial Customs, see Van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*.
[4] CBYWSM (TZ) 39, 1622.
[5] *Le monde illustré*, May 26, 1866; and *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, June 13, 1866.
[6] Prince Gong submitted Binchun's journal to Emperor Tongzhi a month after the mission's return. For Prince Gong's memorial on the mission, see CBYWSM (TZ) 46, 1958–1959. The page numbers used in this chapter refer to the 1981 reprint of the *Cheng cha biji* published by the Hunan renmin chubanshe based on his family edition (date unknown).
[7] Enhua, *Baqi yiwen bianmu*, 30a. [8] Gu, *Qingdai zhujuan jicheng*, vol. 27, 410.

mentions in official documents painted him as a competent and fair-minded official. He served longest in Gan county, Jiangxi, a hilly region intercepted by numerous waterways, where administration was made difficult by bandits, opium traders, and Catholic missionaries. His name was brought to the attention of Emperor Daoguang in 1839 for his work in suppressing the local opium trade.[9] When a bandit panic seized Jiangxi in 1849, he interrogated suspects who were accused of being Black Lotus sectarians (*qinglian jiao*) and declared them peaceful Christians.[10] Given the merit rating "excellent," he was reappointed as a magistrate in Shanxi.

To his friends, Binchun was a free-spirited and soft-spoken man. Zongli Yamen minister Dong Xun portrayed him as "introverted and too frail to bear the weight of his clothes," and always "speaking in quiet stammers."[11] Tracing his formative years in a long poem, Binchun described himself as adhering to the Confucian tradition of "painstaking study" (*kudu*) in an era of purchased degrees.[12] Following his two accomplished brothers, Binchun held his works to a high literary standard, searching new inspirations and refusing to mimic established conventions.[13] Both the Yao lineage and their maternal cousins, the Yang, were exceedingly successful in the civil examinations and highly acclaimed for their literary achievements.[14] This network of family and friends in the Han banners would become his main literary interlocutors while traveling abroad.

With his retirement from local administration in 1864, Binchun was recruited by his relatives working in the Zongli Yamen and the Imperial Household Department as a Chinese tutor and translator for Robert Hart. In his new position, Binchun worked hard to secure Hart's satisfaction, demonstrated a quick grasp of foreign affairs, and became a vocal advocate for the Qing's establishment of regular diplomatic intercourse with Europe. Family considerations might also have influenced his

[9] *Yapian zhanzheng dang'an shiliao*, vol. 1, 540.

[10] Zhu, *Qingmo jiao'an*, no. 1, 42–43. According to David Ownby, the leader of the Black Lotus sect was a native of Nanchang, Jiangxi. By combining teachings of the Dachengjiao (Great Vehicle Teaching) and Luojiao, he created a distinct sect with its own scriptures for "warding off disasters and hardships." See Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China*, 136.

[11] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 149.

[12] Binchun, *Tianwai guifan cao*, 203.

[13] The titles of the literary collections of all three brothers can be found in the *Baqi yiwen bianmu*, 30a, 102a–b.

[14] For a record of members in the Yao and Yang families who served as officials since Qianlong's reign, see Gu, *Qingdai zhujuan jicheng* 27, 407–415. This entry was compiled for Yang Ji, an affinal cousin of Binchun who became a metropolitan graduate in the class of 1865. From the Yao lineage, Binchun's brother Bintong was a metropolitan graduate in the class of 1836, and another brother, Binmin, was a metropolitan graduate in the class of 1865. The families Yao and Yang had intermarried for generations by Binchun's time.

attitude towards Hart. Binchun was intent on finding employment for his third son, Guangying, in the Maritime Customs.

For the young Hart, ambitious but unconnected, Binchun's family and social networks were an asset. He confessed within his diary that Binchun was a "ship" for his "voyage" to opening the Qing to Europe, and in order to do so he must "keep Pin in a good temper, to make him as powerful as possible," and "to keep him as a friend in power."[15] When officers from the Maritime Customs, Bowra and de Champs, complained that Binchun was "selfish, arrogant, [and] overbearing" during the mission of 1866, Hart reminded them that the old man "has always been pleasant in the extreme" with him and "has shewn himself a man of great good sense." In his diary, Hart even surmised it must have been Bowra and de Champs who were being reckless and foolish. Three overlapping sets of interests animated Binchun's relationship with Robert Hart and the Zongli Yamen: the Yamen officials used Binchun to assist and to keep an eye on the foreigner who was rising quickly to become a valuable adviser; Binchun anticipated that Hart's appreciation would bring career advancement for himself and his son; and Hart wished, covertly, to use Binchun to persuade the Qing government of the merits of a general reform in the Qing's foreign policy.[16]

When Prince Gong memorialized the court, the status of Binchun's mission was left ambiguous by design. In some ways it was reminiscent of the procedure for sending envoys to Korea or Vietnam: members of the mission were given a temporary promotion and appropriate court robes to elevate their appearance. But Binchun's official status remained as a traveler, not an envoy or diplomat. He did not receive any imperial insignia, a seal or even a letter to signify his status, and the mission never received an imperial audience before departure. Furthermore, Prince Gong's memorial avoided associating the mission with diplomacy or intelligence gathering for political purposes. Binchun and the students were, strictly speaking, on a tour of *youli* (to travel and experience) so that the students could practice their foreign-language skills. He was instructed accordingly to write a daily record of the "shapes of the mountains and rivers, and customs and culture."[17]

The result of this ambiguity was that the exact status of the mission became a subject of debate in Europe even before its arrival. Binchun's official rank was given a minute examination by English newspapers, as pundits debated what kind of reception it warranted the mission.

[15] Smith, Fairbank, and Bruner, *Robert Hart and China's Early Modernization*, 393.
[16] For Binchun's role as a mediator between Hart and the Zongli Yamen, see Hart's diary entries on August 14, 1864, October 18, 1864, and August 24, 1865.
[17] CBYWSM (TZ) 39, 1622.

Rumors that the queen was to grant a personal audience to the mission sent concerned readers to educate the public on the actual status of Binchun. One newspaper reported, "The study of buttons is essential to an accurate appreciation of Chinese life ... We have scanned their costumes from their skull cap to their thick-soled shoes; and round the outside of their flowing robes, back and front, without being able to discover the all-important sign of rank about them."[18] Others speculated that Binchun was at least a nobleman, perhaps a brother of the late Emperor Xianfeng. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, citing an official "Red Book" published in Beijing, identified Binchun as equivalent to one of the "Under Secretaries for State" in the British system.[19]

As general manager of the mission, Hart wrote in his diary about the difficulty of arrangements with the Zongli Yamen, but he only gave vague hints to the "number of reminders, memoranda, and the like that must have been necessary to set up the elaborate schedule of appointments, diplomatic calls, and contacts with statesmen in more than half a dozen foreign countries."[20] The news that Binchun would be received by the prince and the queen came rather abruptly towards the end of the mission's stay in London. When Hart learned that Binchun might be invited to the prince's levee, he gave his instruction to Bowra in writing: "let him go (accompanied by yourself of course): but don't let him take his flute!"[21] This kind of last-minute co-ordination suggests that the mission's schedule was full of contingency and flexibility, echoing the ambiguity of Prince Gong's original design. Hart brought Binchun's entourage to Europe, to let things run their course. If the foreign ministry of each country wished to recognize them officially, they would have to make the necessary accommodations on their own initiative. If not, the mission would remain strictly informal and travel on their own. As it turned out, Binchun's public performance did not disappoint his sponsors, as it was soon publicized that "the members of the suite were extremely affable, and entered very readily into conversation, to the extent of their ability, with their guests."[22] The resulting invitations to royal residences gave the mission a de facto "official" status.

The success of the mission both at home and abroad was partly due to a certain "media-savviness" in its leader. Knowing that a wide range of

[18] *Birmingham Daily Post*, June 9, 1866.
[19] "Celestial Buttons," *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 10, 1866. See also *Birmingham Daily Post*, June 12, 1866.
[20] Smith, Fairbank, and Bruner, *Robert Hart and China's Early Modernization*, 349, 350.
[21] Smith, Fairbank, and Bruner, *Robert Hart and China's Early Modernization*, 415, Hart's underlining.
[22] *Birmingham Daily Post*, June 9, 1866.

Figure 1.1 Binchun and the Tongwenguan students at a French salon (*Le monde illustré*, May 19, 1866)

readers awaited his accounts with different expectations, Binchun carefully weighed the interests of the Qing government, the Maritime Office, and his various domestic and foreign readers. To his literati friends and relatives, such as his brothers, cousins, and in-laws, he promised an account of the "scenery overseas" upon his return.[23] While he was abroad, the contents of his journal were the subject of public speculation in the press.[24] Binchun was aware of these expectations, and on at least one occasion promised to the British public that he was going to write a "good report" of things he had seen to "promote harmony between the two countries."[25]

Yet reconciling these promises was not easy. The presence of European powers in China introduced a new imperative to travel writing by officials like Binchun: representations of the West were monitored by foreigners, and China's centrality had to be maintained without offending them. This meant that Binchun had to find a set of rhetorical conventions which suited his roles as both a Qing representative and a congenial traveler to Europe. The huge corpus of imperial travel writings on the

[23] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, no. 10, 158. [24] *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 10, 1866.
[25] *Birmingham Daily Post*, June 8, 1866; *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, June 13, 1866.

frontier or "tributary states" could not be borrowed without some modification. Since the vast majority of them were written for a domestic audience only, these accounts were embellished with China-centered imperial rhetoric.

One suspects that Binchun raised these issues with colleagues in the Zongli Yamen, for just a few days before his departure, Minister Dong Xun gave him a copy of his *Suiyao zaibi* (Travel Notes from a Carriage), a collection of lengthy journals written in the late 1840s on Dong's missions to distant provinces.[26] Xu Jiyu gave him a copy of his *Yinghuan zhilüe*, a hefty volume of foreign geography compiled from carefully selected Chinese and foreign sources. These works would accompany Binchun on his journey to Europe, providing him with the rhetorical devices, geographical information, and stylistic guidance for presenting his own experience. From Dong Xun's work he borrowed the styles and conventions for an envoy journal: its concise documentation of landmarks and historical events, its curt and objective presentation of local customs, and its gentle omission of personal opinions. Xu's geographical compendium, on the other hand, served as an indispensable reference from which Binchun took place names, geographical descriptions, and demographic information. These books ensured that Binchun's travelogue would be both informed and politically correct.

James Carey has drawn our attention to John Dewey's idea that two alternative views of communication have existed in common usage since the nineteenth century: there was the more common understanding of communication as the transmission of information, and then there was an older "ritual view of communication" as maintenance of social relationships and shared beliefs. Regarding the second view, Carey writes,

> This projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form – dance, plays, news stories, strings of speech – creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process.[27]

Although the Zongli Yamen conceptualized the mission mostly as a means for gathering strategic intelligence, for Binchun the transmission of knowledge was not shorn of long-standing rituals regulating the performance and writing of imperial travelers, and his output was influenced by assumptions, motivations, and conundrums quite beyond the control of the court. As revealed by his own promises to his Chinese and

[26] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 1. [27] Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," 19.

European readers, Binchun intended the dissemination of his travel writing to have the effect of reinforcing social bonds among the Confucian literati and establishing a set of shared beliefs between Chinese and Europeans. His accounts of the mission, as a result, resembled a mixture of a ritualistic tour of the imperial envoy and a private endeavor by an adventuresome literatus.

Society

Binchun adopted the dual genre of prose and poetry to resolve his conflicting and ambiguous roles in the mission. By alternating between a private traveler and an imperial envoy, he created an order of the world which maintained the classical topology while respecting the expectations of a wide range of readers. When he wrote as a private scholar, as in his journal and occasionally in poems, he recorded his social interactions and personal sentiments in a down-to-earth fashion. When he assumed the persona of an imperial envoy, a role he adopted in many of his poems, he recast foreign countries as tributary states, and their rulers as petty kings who modeled themselves after the Chinese emperor. The hyperbolic language of poetry, or "the rhetorical schemata of seeing," as it was termed by literary scholar Xiaofei Tian, allowed him to present the mission as a triumph of the Qing's civilizing influence over small oceanic states, and enabled him to praise foreign rulers without compromising the China-centered hierarchy.[28] These two genres were disseminated through two overlapping channels: his journal was submitted to the Zongli Yamen and published, first by his family, then by commercial publishing houses, and translated into English and Japanese. His poems, on the other hand, mostly circulated among the literati interested in poetry who knew him through personal connections.[29]

Binchun's exploitation of the poetic genre followed a long tradition in East Asian diplomacy and cross-cultural exchange. In the fourteenth century, Ming Taizu, founder of the Ming dynasty, negotiated China's relationship with a rebellious Chosŏn Korea precisely in this medium. As Dane Alston has observed, the exchanges of poetry between Ming Taizu and Korean envoy Kwŏn Kŭn allowed the two sides to engage in a "subtle negotiation of regimes and their respective identities" when

[28] For a literary analysis of how this way of seeing mediated late Qing travelers' perception of the West, see Tian, *Visionary Journeys*, 158–214.

[29] For publication information of Binchun's journal and poems, see Okamoto, Hakoda, and Aoyama, *Shusshi nikki no jidai*, 381.

formal negotiations broke down.[30] In the early 1860s, to build rapport with Western diplomatic representatives, Minister Dong Xun, a belletrist himself, translated Longfellow's "Ode to Life," transcribed it on a silk fan, and presented it to American minister Anson Burlingame. The fan was taken as a compliment by Burlingame, who regifted to it Longfellow himself, but Fang Junshi, Dong's secretary in the Zongli Yamen, interpreted it as a means to morally transform barbarians, to "make them more Chinese."[31]

Binchun's use of poems, like those of Ming Taizu and Dong Xun, was not merely an expression of his feelings and sentiments, but consisted of a strong performative component. In the metaphorical space of the poem, Binchun was able to style himself an imperial envoy, a knight-errant, a Confucian scholar on a private journey, and a Buddhist disciple, depending on the circumstances he faced. Rhyming in different emotional keys afforded him a degree of control over the meaning of the mission, and to initiate and develop friendship with foreigners.[32] He wrote poems to commemorate social events, to express gratitude to his hosts, to deliver compliments, and to give out as parting gifts. The poems all had notes appended to them with brief descriptions of the occasion, and many were cross-referenced his journal.

Binchun's meeting with French sinologist Marquis d'Hervey Saint-Denys (De Liwen) demonstrates how this performative aspect of poetry exchange worked. The marquis apparently called on his hotel on a rainy day with a gift in hand: a collection of Tang dynasty poems, selected and translated into French by himself.[33] Delighted to find a soulmate, Binchun recorded in his journal that the marquis was "an extremely artistic person, fond of wine and poetry, and had no interest in advancing his career whatsoever." Two days later, when the marquis returned for another visit, Binchun presented a return gift, a poem in the form of an octet, which reads in part,

> We met in the Outer Ocean.
> Pure talk makes us intimate friends.
> We began in the steps of sages:
> Footsore, he would serve no worldly court.

[30] Alston, "Emperor and Emissary." It should be noted that when Kwŏn Kŭn returned to Korea, he presented the court with his poems to the Ming emperor together with an account of this trip, in a similar way to Binchun.

[31] Fang, *Jiaoxuan suilu, 478*. For a literary analysis of Dong Xun's translation, see Qian, "Hanyi diyishou yingyu shi 'rensheng song' jiqi youguan ersan shi," 1–24.

[32] For a discussion of the social function of poetry among Northern Song literati, see Hawes, *The Social Circulation of Poetry in the Mid-Northern Song*, 51–77.

[33] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 21. See also *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 164, 165, no. 24.

Figure 1.2 Binchun in Manchester, 1866 (courtesy of Tong Bingxue)

In Binchun's rendering, the marquis partook in a distinctly Chinese cultural form and shared the sentiments of a Chinese scholar. "Pure talk" (*qingtan*) was a favorable pastime in the Six Dynasties (220–589 AD) among scholars who, dismayed at the chaos of their age, shunned public service and embraced the private society of like-minded friends. In this vein, the marquis rejected official service in the French government for the pursuit of Chinese poetry, a form of literature he evidently held in higher esteem than that of his native language. It was for this reason that Binchun referred to him as "someone who truly knows me," and later in the poem, "an old friend." The marquis conformed to the image of a "Confucian amateur" described by Joseph Levenson: a "genteel initiate in a human culture, without interest in progress, leanings to science, sympathy for commerce, nor prejudice in favour of utility."[34] In rendering the foreigner as a pure-minded Confucian gentleman, Binchun made a roundabout statement that Confucian culture had a universal appeal in Europe.

To be sure, in most of his meetings, Binchun needed interpreters to render his words and poems into foreign languages, thus surrendering some control over how messages were delivered, but the more important point was made through the repertoire of poetry performance. The drinking, toasting, and conversations with foreigners gave him a way to know the other in a friendly, even intimate, manner, and the knowledge thus gained supplied fresh material for his poems.

When depicting foreign customs and the reception of the mission, Binchun adopted the bamboo branch poetry (*zhuzhici*) genre, sets of four seven-character lines composed in a witty, jovial, or lighthearted manner about social practices, everyday events, and exotic objects of distant lands. Bamboo branch poetry had its origin in the folksongs of the Sichuan basin in the Tang dynasty, and it differed from other mainstream poetic traditions in that it was rarely used for weighty themes or expressions of personal frustration, but invited the poet to momentarily assume the perspectives and voices of others. In the Ming and Qing dynasties it became a favorite genre of imperial envoys and literati travelers. While in the Tang and the Song it had been mostly for the occasional literary play, Ming and Qing literati and armchair travelers expanded the use of the genre, using it to add a touch of zest and spontaneity to textual accounts of historical events and geography of foreign lands. You Tong, an esteemed scholar in the early Qing, for instance, composed hundreds of bamboo branch poems on eighty-six regions beyond the Qing's territorial boundary, taking his materials from Ming historical and envoys'

[34] Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, 19.

accounts. He had never visited any of those places.[35] In this respect, Binchun's use of this genre for documenting his travels was a natural choice, and so was its result in yielding a striking similarity between previous envoy poems and his portrait of European societies.

On a practical level, Binchun's use of poetry also rendered the etiquette and agendas of his European hosts less important and helped him adopt a ritual and aesthetic interpretation of the mission. Poems describing his meetings with European monarchs resembled those written by Ming dynasty envoys to Korea and Annam and celebrated his travels as evidence of the Qing's imperial reach.[36] He reported delight when he learned that a poem he had written on the Netherlands polders had been transcribed on "hundreds of thousands of sheets of newspapers" and "spread all over the ocean countries."[37] Upon his visit to a zoo in Amsterdam, he discovered that the curator had laid out Chinese paper, ink and brush, entreating him for a quatrain. His wish granted, the curator clutched the poem tightly in his hands, leaving with satisfaction. Among the fans of his poems were members of the Swedish royal family. The queen, who was a Dutch princess, intimated to him that she felt honored that Binchun had graced her home country with such beautiful verses.[38] The king personally arranged his visit to all places of interest in the palace, with the queen pointing out to him objects of significance.

Palace style poetry was one of the main vehicles Binchun employed to transform European monarchs into Confucian-style rulers. The following excerpt is taken from a set of poems he composed for Leopold II of Belgium (Binchun's notes in parentheses).

> The king loves rites more than kith or kin.
> His learning and judgment outshine the ocean.
> He rules like a disciple of Mencius, even Duke Wen of Teng (he traveled to Canton once, but went home promptly when his father fell ill),
> Over a land wider than the Xia. (Belgium spans six hundred square li; the Xia lords ruled less land than that.)

[35] Yin, *Wan Qing haiwai zhuzhici kaolun*, 1–28.

[36] For a study of the *Huanghua ji*, collections of poems written by Ming envoys and Korean officials, see Du, *Mingdai wenchen chushi chaoxian yu Huanghua ji*. The Chinese historically used "Annam" to designate the territories within what is known as Vietnam today, but the term also applied to the middle territory of the three into which Vietnam was divided from north to south (the other parts were Tonkin and Cochinchina). The French forces had conquered the southernmost, Cochinchina, by 1862. In this chapter Annam is used in the Chinese sense.

[37] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 34. Binchun's poem appeared on *Rotterdamsche Courant* on July 4, 1866 (Yin, *Wan Qing haiwai zhuzhici kaolun*, 95).

[38] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 38. See also *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 173, 174, 175, nos. 49–54.

In resplendent embroidery, his attendants throw wide the royal gates,
His painted towers encircled by ranks of armed guards.
He extolled the abundant imperial grace (officials in Canton received him graciously)
Still he feels the cherishing touch on his hands and forehead.
The institutions of the prospering dynasty enchant him,
He traveled long and tirelessly.
Unable to set eyes on the gate of the double phoenix (his wish to go to Beijing was not fulfilled),
He loved the City of the Five Goats the most.

They esteemed me for my endurance of stormy waves (the king and queen were happy to hear that I could brave the ocean),
And opened palace gates one by one in their welcome and farewell (after our custom, not theirs.)
I was not surprised to see that the king's dignity alone gave order and discipline to his troops,
As a hundred soldiers flew their flag in front of the palace (a hundred palace guards with helmets and guns, all lined up to send off the guests. This was all according to Chinese customs).[39]

Leopold II of Belgium had briefly traveled to China in 1855, as the poem indicated, but his main purpose was to explore possibilities for new treaties and trade expansion. Having succeeded to the throne less than a year before Binchun's arrival, in 1865, Leopold II's generous reception of the mission was likely motivated, at least in part, by a desire to secure Belgium's own treaty with the Qing. It was a goal which his father had been unable to achieve, mostly because of Belgium's lack of military power.[40] Binchun rendered Leopold II's travel to China as a pilgrimage to the civilized center by a vassal ruler, and the poem resembled those written by Vietnamese envoys to the Ming and the Qing courts from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.[41] This narrative was reinforced by his interlinear notes within the poems, which provided a historical account of the visit supported by dates and figures. Ironically, Binchun's description of the military parade captured perfectly Leopold II's intention of showing off Belgium's military might to back up his desire for a treaty, but his poem left no doubt that this military demonstration was a proper gesture of respect.

While his reception by the "lesser rulers" such as the king of Belgium and the Swedish royal family was expressed in a joyous and unproblematic

[39] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 179.
[40] Vande Walle and Golvers, *The History of the Relations between the Low Countries and China*, 29–30. For an overview of the Qing envoys and diplomats' perception of Belgium, see Lin, "Sino-Belgium Relations during the Reign of Leopold II."
[41] Kelly, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars*.

manner, Binchun's encounter with the British monarch presented a bigger challenge for representation. The *biji* contained three long entries on his visits with the British royalty lasting three full days. The reader was told that on the first day, the group took a train to Windsor Castle and toured its gardens and major collections of antiques and art. On the morning of the second day, a court official delivered an invitation from the Prince of Wales to his state ball in the afternoon, and immediately the British assistants and translators "rushed to make their uniform and ceremonial swords ready" and the Chinese members put on their official gowns. In the afternoon, they were taken to the palace by a pair of royal carriages.

Windsor Castle, in Binchun's depiction, was guarded by heavily armed "generals" and "unreachable by common people." After being led through a bewildering number of hallways and stairs, the party arrived at a "dance palace" of the most amazing splendor (he estimated the number of lights to be "eight thousand and five or six hundred"). Four hundred royalty and ministers were present, together with more than eight hundred "palace ladies." Binchun did not dance that evening, but he observed everything with good humor. The dance seemed like a semi-formal ceremony in which all participants adhered to a dress code and rules of conduct. As he expected to see on ceremonial occasions, the prince and his consort sat in the center of the hall, facing south. Officials sat or stood on three levels of stages flanking the royal family. Men and women danced about ten times to the rhythm of the sonorous music played by musicians sitting on the very top level of the hall. Military ministers wore red uniforms, whereas civil ministers wore black ones, and both had their clothes embellished with gold. After the dance, all stood up and waited on the two sides as the prince and his consort walked to another room.

A more casual meeting then took place between members of the mission and the prince. In response to the prince's question of how London compared to China, Binchun tactfully avoided any direct comparison. "China has never before sent any envoy to foreign countries," he said, "and it was only with this imperial commission that [we] first learned that there are such beautiful places overseas." The reply was the product of a great deal of deliberation, and Binchun would continue to use the same line in other countries.[42] The prince was apparently overjoyed to hear this reply, but still modestly declined his praise. In a poem dedicated to the occasion, Binchun painted him as a brilliant young leader steeped in a Confucian deference and humility. Praising his fame as "well known throughout the countries of the ocean," the poem went on, "in this

[42] Binchun praised Sweden in similar terms. See *Cheng cha biji*, 39.

faraway place he found ways to show respect to the Chinese envoy. His humble words and modest air only accentuated his excellence."[43]

Comparisons between China and Britain came up again the next day, when the mission was received informally by Queen Victoria. Unlike the Prince of Wales, the queen insisted on hearing exactly what Binchun thought of England and inquired flatly what he made of the differences between Britain and China. Binchun replied that the English "buildings and equipment exceeded the Chinese in the intricacy of their manufacture, and its governance also has merits." Thanks to the Queen's generous accommodation, he gushed, the mission had seen the country's most fabulous sights. Visibly delighted, the Queen expressed the hope that Binchun would report observations back to China "to bring the two countries even closer."[44]

By his own account, Binchun's reply satisfied his British royal hosts, but an astute reader of this account might notice a bit of sleight of hand in how he represented the exchange. His compliments gave more weight to the appearance and utility of what he saw in England – the beauty of the scenery, the grandeur of buildings, and the dexterity of machines – but he reduced matters pertaining to governance and culture to dropping a hint. The real emphasis of his portrayal of the exchange seems to be the gloating satisfaction of Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales upon hearing his compliments: they were anxious to receive such praise from a Chinese envoy.

Despite Binchun's literary circumspection, he did not shoehorn his description of the audiences into a fixed tributary style, but conveyed a startlingly new message about the life of the British monarchy. Mid-nineteenth-century Chinese accounts of the West generally skirted the institutional and ideological components of Western governments by insinuating that these countries did not have an understanding of ritual. Lin Zexu, the opium suppressor whose destruction of the drug provoked the first Opium War, learned from his British informants that the royal families of Europe "lived in houses not at all different from those of the commoners," with only a couple of guards.[45] Qishan, the Manchu official who negotiated a ceasefire with the British Navy in 1841, reported that England was "a country of barbarians ... They do not yet know about ritual, righteousness, benevolence, and humility, and how could they know anything about the differences between the monarch and the ministers, and between the high and the low?"[46] Even in geologist Xu Jiyu's

[43] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 28. [44] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 28.
[45] Lin, *Yangshi za lu*, 19. According to Lin's descendants, this account was collected by his private secretary, Chen Depei.
[46] *Yapian zhanzheng dang'an shiliao*, vol. 2, 392.

far more accurate *Yinghuan zhilüe*, court etiquette in England was painted as a confusing scene where "the base and the noble are mixed in their seating, and no difference was observed between those below and those above, and those on the left and on the right."[47]

Binchun's depiction of his visits to European palaces contrasted sharply with those binary and detached portrayals of China and England. An awareness of social distinctions, as expressed in the relative positioning of the high and the low, suggested that the British court in fact shared certain concerns for ritual with the Qing. Even the state ball was seen as a co-ordinated dance with an elaborate dress code and sophisticated musical accompaniment to punctate every movement of the dancers. The ruling house commanded enormous wealth, power and prestige, and lived in a guarded palace forbidden to commoners. At the top of the hierarchy was the virtuous prince who greeted the Qing visitors with civility. In its ritual parlance, Binchun's account suppressed cultural differences, but it also relegated European courts to a place of respectful subordination to a China-centered world.

The Power of Steam

For all Chinese members of the 1866 mission, the first train ride in Cairo was a momentous experience, delicious and disorienting, and one which stretched the possibilities of imagination about time and space. But Binchun's representation of his first train ride betrayed careful design, with his journal and poems each capturing a distinct mode of perception. Readers of his *biji* would encounter an exhaustive enumeration of all practical conveniences he thought relevant: the thick and soft cotton-padded cushions, the spacious storage cabinets, the large glass windows protecting passengers from wind and sun. He loved the freedom of movement it afforded: one could choose to sit or lie down, eat or drink, to stand up and look around. The train started after a bell rang three times to notify the passengers. At first it moved slowly, but after a few paces "ran like an unbridled horse." As to his personal experience, he simply wrote that at the train's full speed, objects outside the window flew by so quickly that it was impossible to see them clearly.

In contrast to what reads like a dry consumer report after a test drive, Binchun's poetic imagination captured a childlike ecstasy:

> It looks like a house in the middle of the road,
> With intricate wheels that can stop and run freely.
> Liezi's wind-ride took a similar shape.

[47] Xu, *Yinghuan zhilüe*, 240.

Now we know how "a long house can shrink the world."
Six wheels heave like a thousand oxen,
To pull a hundred carriages outpacing the eight steeds.
If King Mu of the Zhou had had this, he would have laid tracks over all the world!

Rushing like a flash of lightning,
In a fleeting second, it travels ten days of postal distance.
Looking back, distant hills withdraw like seagulls;
Looking near, country cottages roll by like a floating river.
It cut through thousands of mountains,
And rushed by expansive plains in the glance of an eye.
The starry envoy has arrived from Heaven,
And he wishes to sail off into the Milky Way.

The festive language here expressed warm and unreserved praise for the train. The poet's imagination mediated between the classical–mythical world of ancient China and his experience of European technology in a foreign city. The train gave concrete visualization to the fabled travels of the Daoist Liezi, who was known to have the ability to ride the wind for thousands of miles. This classical reference established a counterpart to the steam locomotive within the Chinese tradition. Similarly, by drawing on the mythical travels around the world by King Mu, the fabled fifth monarch of the Zhou dynasty, he bridged traditional lore with his own experience and channeled his fascination with a foreign technology into the glorification of Chinese traditions. It enabled him to make a stunning claim: had King Mu known of the train's existence, His Majesty would surely have built tracks all over the world. The poem ended on a victorious note by anthropomorphizing the scenery along the way, transforming inanimate objects into sentient beings celebrating his mission.

In 1867, soon after the mission returned, the Zongli Yamen initiated a secret correspondence with seventeen officials on a number of topics regarding modernization and further opening to the West. One of the six questionnaires it sent out applied to the construction of telegraphs and railway lines in China by foreigners. With the exception of a few self-strengthening officials, the replies expressed "unanimous opposition to allowing foreigners to build railway and telegraph lines in China."[48] Binchun's poems on the train, when placed into their historical context,

[48] For a study of these exchanges, see Biggerstaff, "The Secret Correspondence of 1867–1868." When the subject was raised again by English merchants during the Zhigang mission in 1868–1870, Zhigang courteously replied that the Chinese were greatly impressed by the railway system and wished to make use of it, but it would not be feasible for some time because its construction would require the removal of the ancestral tombs scattered across the country. See Zhigang, *Chushi taixi ji*, 311–312.

may be understood to be an oblique rejoinder to the ongoing discussions about the railroad. Rather than subscribing to a set of fixed demarcations between China and the West, he imagined and internalized the foreign by enlarging the conceptual scope associated with China.

The physical and mental disorientation demonstrated in Binchun's writing exemplified a common feature in representations of early Chinese encounters with the West, but it was not a phenomenon particular to Chinese travelers.[49] Quite independent of Binchun, the Scottish poet James Thomson (1834–1882), an atheist and advocate for social reform, described his train ride in the following terms:

> As we rush, as we rush in the Train,
> The trees and the houses go wheeling back
> But the starry heavens above the plain
> Come flying on our track.
>
> All the beautiful stars of the sky,
> The silver doves of the forest of Night
> Over the dull earth swarm and fly
> Companions of our flight.
>
> We will rush ever on without fear
> Let the goal be far, the flight be fleet!
> For we carry the Heavens with us, dear,
> While the earth slips from our feet!

The similarities between Thomson's and Binchun's poems are striking: both invoked anthropomorphized imagery of moving earth, stars, and heavens, and both expressed a sense of ecstasy and empowerment. While Thomson's object of empowerment was man himself (in particular, those of the poor and the working class) who "see[s] so much divine beauty in the common everyday world," Binchun channeled his experience into his persona as an imperial envoy, interpreting the moving objects as a cosmic response to his visit.[50] He utilized the disorientation induced by the train ride to create a new rhetorical space for writing about the train: it was comfortable, convenient, consistent with traditional practices, and harmonious with Chinese cosmology.

Elsewhere, Binchun's depictions of steam-powered machines in land reclamation had the effect of legitimizing the technology by associating them with China's agrarian economy. The low-lying Netherlands and its extensive drainage works piqued the interest of the ex-magistrate who had spent many years in Jiangxi, where hydraulic maintenance had always

[49] Zhang, "Naturalizing Industrial Wonders," 67–88.
[50] For a contemporary reading of Thomson's poems, see "Poet of To-day," *To-day*, 318.

been indispensable for agriculture.[51] Crossing the border from Belgium, he observed how the landscape changed: "the waterways became numerous, all straight and long; bridges are as dense as a forest, and the natives are all simple and rustic." After a few days examining the systems of polders, drainage ditches, and pumping stations, he wrote, "their residents maintain the rivers and erect stones in the water on which they built wooden platforms and build houses of six or seven stories. They gather soil on the banks and plant trees, leaving roads two or three *zhang* wide so that carriages can drive by." The swamps were made suitable for agriculture by using steam-powered polder mills to remove excess water, an application that Binchun thought "reversed the nature of water" and was rarely seen in Chinese agriculture. "Peasants living on the hills of the lower Yangzi used bamboo ditches to channel water from ravines," he recalled having seen as a magistrate, "but they were merely yielding to the nature of water."[52] His poem on the system, glowing with praise, was soon translated and published in an Amsterdam newspaper.[53]

Although Binchun selectively emphasized Western inventions which he considered useful, he showed little interest in the principles behind them. The term *fa* ("method") was used ubiquitously to capture the "ways" of the devices: *huolunfa* (the "method of fire wheels") was his general term for the application of steam engines; *dianji jixinfa* (the "method of using electric machines to send letters") was the secret behind telegraphy; *shuifa* (the "method of water") was what enabled the dancing fountains; *zhaoxiangfa* (the "method of illuminating physiognomy") was how photography worked. That each of these devices had its own *fa* meant that Binchun interpreted each device as following a different mechanism. By coupling *fa* with the names of the devices, he attributed the natural principles behind them to the devices themselves, not to abstract bodies of knowledge (*xue*).

Fa occupied a vague and unstable space in Binchun's linguistic repertoire. Take his writing on the steam engine. A Buddhist term signifying illusion (literally a fire whirled in a circle), *huolun* had been borrowed by European translators as a general term for steamships and trains.[54] By the late Qing, *huolun* became a rough equivalent of "steam engine." Binchun consistently used it for the power source of many Western machines. The elevator was a vertically mobile room *driven by the huolun method*. Cotton textiles were woven *by a huolun*. Carpenters used *a huolun* to carve

[51] See, for example, Qing official Chen Hongmou's advocacy of hydraulic projects, especially of polder construction in Jiangxi, as described in Rowe, *Saving the World*, 229.
[52] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 33, 34. [53] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, no. 37, 170.
[54] Soothil and Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, 162. See also Day, "From Fire-Wheel Boats to Cities on the Sea."

wood. A water pump was powered *by the method of huolun*. The object of the fire-wheel was taken as a solution to all problems, and was used interchangeably with the principle behind it, as in his suggestion: "China is using *huolun* to fill her ships; if we use this *fa* in peasants' fields, the country will never worry about flood or drought."[55]

Like most well-educated Europeans prior to the early nineteenth century, Binchun probably felt that investigating machines was below his status. Having discerned that the universal principle behind these self-driven machines was the application of the various *fa*, he saw no need to dwell on the details of their working. Did the steam engine always produce benefits? Binchun left no doubt that it did, but the younger members of his group drew different conclusions. Kuijiu, the youngest member of the mission, wondered openly about the connection between the industrial wealth in France and their countrymen's dubious ventures in China. When he was told that France was among the wealthiest countries in the world, he blurted out, "Then why do they come to China to gain money?"[56] Zhang Deyi, another student interpreter, reflexively reached for his purse when a poor child begged for money.[57] The plight of children and youth eking out a life in factories and on streets struck a sympathetic chord in these younger members of the mission. The following excerpt about Fengyi, a Tongwenguan student, is from a *Birmingham Daily Post* report on the mission's visit to an edge-tool works at Aston:

> While standing in one place, watching some men busy at the forges, Fung-Yi questioned some of the youngsters near as to their age, and whether they could read and write. One ragged little urchin, who was begrimed with dirt, said he was eight years of age, and could neither read nor write. Next to him was another, who said he was eleven and he could write his name, but could not read. "Ah!" said Fung-yi, "Your fathers ought not to make you work before you can read."[58]

Since Binchun stayed with the students for the entire visit, we know that he, too, was exposed to the social problems the youngsters identified. It was by choice, rather than coincidence or negligence, that he left out the underside of the Industrial Revolution: the poor, the homeless, the exploited, and the politically subversive. The Europe he described was populated exclusively by men and women of high society, of respectable character and refined taste. The reader was told that "streets and markets are bustling and prosperous. All buildings are six or seven stories, with

[55] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 34.
[56] *London Daily News*, May 17, 1866.
[57] Zhang, *Hanghai shuqi*, 482.
[58] "The Chinese Commissioner at Suite in Birmingham," *Birmingham Daily Post*, June 9, 1866.

carved and painted gables, reaching to the clouds." Gas lamps lit up night streets, and passengers did not need to bring candles. The vibrant street activities in the evening also received his favorable notice: "Streets and alleys are all connected, and market lamps are as numerous as stars. [On a normal day] they outnumber the lights on New Year's Eve elsewhere." Besides the wealth, cleanliness and convenience of the city, he marveled at the discipline of the police and the law-abidingness of the citizens in both Paris and London. The police monitoring the streets, he wrote, "shuttled back and forth without a moment's rest, and their clothes and hats are bright-colored and all brand new." Even during the day the only sound audible was from the wheels of the carts. "Passengers are as quiet as ants, and no one makes any noise." He gave open praise to European journalists, and before long an English newspaper was able to report that "the cleanliness and maintenance of order in the streets of Paris have placed Baron Haussmann very high in [Binchun's] estimation."[59]

Women

A common trope in mid-nineteenth-century Qing sources about European societies was an inversion of the patriarchal order upheld in the Confucian tradition. The facts can be found in Xu Jiyu's *Yinghuan zhilüe*, laid out in a pithy, easily comprehensible statement: "men constantly obey women – it is true throughout the entire country."[60] Wang Tao, a translator and journalist who visited Britain himself in the 1860s, even went so far as to construct Western states in his fiction as the legendary "Kingdoms of Women."[61] These impressions were immediately confirmed by members of 1866 mission to Europe. Binchun wrote sympathetically that European husbands served their wives "like a maid or a concubine" on a daily basis.[62] Zhang Deyi related what he was told by a Westerner on a steamship: "Foreigners constantly debased men while exalting women. Husbands were subservient to their wives, not daring to leave them an inch. In child rearing too, men tended to everything like a wet nurse."[63]

It eluded the Qing travelers in 1866 that the appearance of women in elite society was relatively recent in Europe, and it by no means meant the subversion of male dominance in politics or the family. Even when we make room for a certain compulsion to "inverse" or "other" the foreign society, it is still surprising the degree to which Binchun tilted his

[59] *Newcastle Courant*, May 23, 1866. [60] Xu, *Yinghuan zhilüe*, 240.
[61] Teng, "Women and Occidentalism in Wang Tao's Tales of Travel," 97–124.
[62] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 11. [63] Zhang, *Zai shuqi*, 59.

representation of European society to emphasize his socialization with women. Of the forty-nine sets of poems he composed in Europe, seventeen were for women or womanly things. Some of these were dedicated to women of royal houses and wives of high officials and local notables; others were written for dancers, singers, and actresses whom he saw in theaters. The effect was a thoroughly effeminized Western society.

Binchun's preference for women as subjects of his poetics can be partially explained by practical convenience. Interaction with women gave Binchun a freer hand in steering and representing the mission in the ways he desired. Entertaining ladies was a good way to avoid being dragged into conversations with foreign diplomats, officials, and other interested parties. It was also a quiet form of protest against the agenda imposed by Robert Hart's associates. When an official reception of his mission took place in Paris, he quietly slipped away to visit the Théâtre de l'ambigu, leaving only the students and his European assistants to attend the event.[64] He reported not a word on the reception, but of the dazzling scenes in the play and the beautiful actresses he was effusive.[65] On a meeting with French ministers the next day, he wrote only of "sitting down with their mistresses who asked him about Chinese customs."[66] This shift of focus enabled him to represent himself as the propagator of Confucian values to European ladies, and to report that they spoke highly of Confucianism (once they understood it). Binchun also preferred to rest among ladies when he was tired, a choice of company which took his hosts by surprise sometimes. While the mission was in England, a newspaper reported that after having gone through a number of rooms in a button manufactory, Binchun left the group, "betook himself to a small room where only a few young women were at work," and remained there to rest. His intrusion evidently took by surprise the women workers enjoying their teatime. One of them, "a blushing damsel," "offered him a cup of tea, which he drank with evident relish."[67]

In her study of women in late imperial China, Susan Mann has described two familiar tropes in Qing literary constructions of women: the secluded, pure-minded *guixiu* and the cultivated and sensuous courtesan.[68] Binchun's writing about upper-class European women combined the two categories, alternating between their learning, cultivation, playful vivacity, and stunning beauty. As party hostesses, European women often resembled upper-class Confucian ladies in thoughtfulness

[64] Drage, *Servants of the Dragon Throne*, 143. [65] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 19.
[66] Binchun, *Cheng cha biji*, 20.
[67] "The Chinese Commissioner and Suite in Birmingham," *Birmingham Daily Post*, June 9, 1866.
[68] Mann, *Precious Records*, 53.

and wisdom.[69] A princess, for example, was praised for "belaboring herself exchanging greetings" with him.[70] The queen of Prussia had a "gentle and honorable manner," with a radiating modesty and a genial voice.[71] These honorable women were physically attractive, featuring pleasing fragrance, elegant figures and stunning faces. In a group of three poems devoted to European customs, he portrayed himself like a chivalrous gentleman guarding the ladies from smokers: "Women are untouched by worldly smog. So please! Do not let your tobacco near them." The poem was followed by a note explaining that, given the high respect society paid to women, men should avoid women's presence whenever they smoked.[72]

On other occasions – especially with younger guests – his depictions of women resembled courtesans more closely. He befriended them unapologetically, playing games with them, and in one instance receiving from two young ladies a photograph of themselves.[73] His poems on such occasions were full of verve and naughty, casual joy. Appropriating a term which Tang Xuanzong, a famous eighth-century emperor, had used for his favorite consort, Binchun told us that Bowra's sister, Anna, was a multilingual "talking flower" (*jieyuhua*).[74] Bright and clever, she "loved Chinese the best of all languages." Another female guest at the same party was "a rare beauty." She made flowers into a hairpin for herself, and followed Binchun everywhere like a fluttering butterfly. Still a third female guest had "a smile echoing springtime." Delighted to be in Binchun's company, she volunteered to take off her wedding ring to show it to him. He had been told that Europeans considered taking off their wedding rings as inauspicious, so he praised her for the intelligence she demonstrated in refusing to accept such superstitious ideas.[75]

Binchun's literary treatment of European women adopted a strategic framing similar to his writing on Western courts, machines, and cities. He emphasized their aesthetically pleasing aspects in a language of assimilation, leaving out any content which might appear troubling or difficult to explain. For a comparison, Zhang Deyi filled his account with strange observations such as the custom whereby young men and women "pecked the back of their own hands to pass kisses in the air," the common practice at Windsor Castle where one "held and smelled" the Queen's extended hand to show respect, and the rumors about pretty shop attendants who lured rich customers into becoming their liaisons.[76]

[69] Mann, *Precious Records*, 19–44.
[70] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 167, no. 29.
[71] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 178, no. 63.
[72] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 165, no. 26.
[73] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 172, no. 45.
[74] Tian, *Visionary Journeys*, 195.
[75] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 168, no. 32.
[76] Zhang, *Hanghai shu qi*, 46, 71, 80.

Although Binchun likely encountered many of the same stories, he made no mention of them. Instead, he explained that foreigners' customs, strange though they might appear at first, were all perfectly sensible to a Chinese gentleman like him. As he wrote in a set of poems about European women: "only after a handshake could one be said to have fulfilled the ritual." Asking his readers not to blame him for transgressing the Confucian tradition of gender segregation in a public space, he wrote, "I am afraid that you, my reader, might blame me for my careless conduct, but it wasn't that I loved their soft hands." In a note below, he added that handshaking was a sign of respect performed regardless of sex.[77]

No fundamental divide separated China and the West in culture, ritual, or gender practice. He used the metaphor of *liang qi* ("two branches") in a poem about cultural differences: one branch was the Chinese way of doing things, and the other European. There was a measure of good sense in these foreign customs, which he was willing to acknowledge: "Upon entering the door I inquired after their customs, and I am amazed at how they do things differently from China! Taking off one's hat is an observance of ritual protocol – surely, if one has a sincere and honest heart, what is the point of setting up fences?" He did occasionally drop a hint of bewilderment and regret. "They do not hesitate to stain their texts," he wrote, "Men and women do not avoid each other and they will not be suspected of impropriety. It is most regrettable how they let their beautiful skirts trail along the ground to sweep the floor."[78] But the juxtaposition of gender transgression with his regret about their skirts getting dusty significantly reduces the weight of the moral concern.

The Journey Home

For a man who had spent most of his life on examinations and in bureaucratic service, traveling to the Far West was a fulfillment of the wilder side of his youthful dreams – being a knight-errant (*youxia*) like those in the vernacular novels he had idolized as a child. Towards the end of his trip, Binchun wrote a long poem to his brothers and cousins as a personal conclusion to the mission. It began, "I have always longed to drift on the ocean . . . Every time visitors came from overseas, I envied endlessly their rambling talks." He took enormous pride in the attention they received in Europe: "They started spreading the word of our arrival two months ago, and when we arrived, many came to see us and to take photographs of us." Like the Song dynasty celebrity poet Lu You, whose sensuous figure was

[77] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 165, no. 26.
[78] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 165, no. 26.

a favorite image decorating literati's fans, his photographs became increasingly expensive due to popular demand.[79]

This state of buoyancy took a turn at the time of his return. In contrast to *Haiguo shengyou cao* (Poems from a Triumphant Oceanic Voyage), his poetry collection written before the mission's return, *Tianwai guifan cao* (Poems on Returning to the Mortal Realm) captured the poet's emotional fluctuations and metaphysical speculations during his long journey home. The first entry of *Tianwai* adopted a melancholy tone: "I have already seen much, and so we made plans for our return. Foreigners came to see me off, and they, too, were sorrowful at our parting."[80] When they reached Denmark, it was announced that an epidemic had spread from continental Europe, and the country was closed to any visitors from those countries. Binchun took the quarantine as a personal affront. He chastised Denmark in a poem: "An epidemic is a disaster sent from Heaven; how could it be brought in by visitors? Closing the country solves nothing; they wantonly suspect passing visitors."[81] From here on, he frequently complained in his poems about the physical hardship, loneliness, and uncertainty he endured in the trip.

The return trip was long, lonely, and uneventful. But it was also the kind of quiet that he needed to settle his thoughts and prepare himself for his friends and colleagues back home. It gave him the time he needed to edit his journal for its presentation to the Zongli Yamen. While he had used poems to express a wide range of personal sentiments in the first half of the journey, now he used them as a vehicle for getting his thoughts in order. Was the kind of prosperity and strength of Europe to be desired and emulated by China? What was the meaning of his journey in the grand scheme of things? He did not ask these questions explicitly, but he searched for the shape of a broader answer in his poems.

A glimpse of the answer was revealed to him in the middle of a night on the Indian Ocean, when a beam of white light shone through the dark and illuminated the night. While the other passengers chattered about its beauty and strangeness, he alone understood the meaning of the sign. As he stood out on the deck, the message conveyed in the Śūraṅṅgama Sūtra (*lengyanjing*), a Tantric Buddhist text that he had studied for many years, emerged in full clarity. Truly, this was Heaven's way of telling him that all attachments to materiality were derived from delusions and moral corruption.[82] During the next few days, he composed a set of eight twelve-line poems in which he meditated on many historical figures, from

[79] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 166, no. 27.
[80] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 187, no. 1.
[81] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 191, no. 10.
[82] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 194, no. 20.

kings who lost their thrones due to immoral conduct to ministers who suffered from their own clever schemes. "The sages only taught virtue," he wrote in a verse, and "true gentlemen abide by a life of poverty."[83] Wealth and fame were not worth pursuing.

By the time the ship reached Hong Kong, his recasting of the mission had taken yet another turn. In highly dramatized language, he described the exotic elements and "magnificent beauty" (*zhuangmei*) of the fifteen countries: the huge and horrendous lions, the snowy white pheasants, the enormous whales, the fountains that shoot water up ten *zhang*, the fireworks that spread the whole sky with glittering beads. He also recapitulated his audiences with European monarchs, casting them in a strictly orthodox light:

> The vassal lords (*fanwang*) all understood how to respect their guests, and invited us everywhere for sightseeing.
> They asked about our Great Central State – "is it as extravagant as the foreign states?"
> I answered, "Our sacred doctrine values study and propriety. Heaven and earth are bonded by five relations, among which filial piety comes first.
> The righteous principle is most strictly differentiated from profit, and greed and brutality are despised by all.
> His Majesty is sage and virtuous, and does not hold clever contrivances in high esteem.
> His virtue propagates like that of Yao and Shun, and he admonishes us against extravagance and arrogance."[84]

The rulers whom Binchun had portrayed as Confucian-style monarchs in his poems during his travel – the charismatic, virtuous, and humble kings – were now described in the hierarchical language to emphasize their moral inferiority and subordination to the imperial center. The lavish accommodation he received in foreign countries was attributed exclusively to the power and influence of the Qing empire: "They valued me not for other things, but because I am from the Central Kingdom."[85] With this final encapsulation, Binchun affirmed the significance of his mission in accordance with the tributary system.

Yet this fixing of the mission's meaning was unstable, and elsewhere Binchun gave clues to his troubled thoughts. In one of his short poems towards the end of the collection, he hinted that things were different from the past, and that the foreigners he visited were quite unlike the imaginary tributary rulers. He wrote it while his ship sailed north along

[83] Binchun, *Haiguo shengyou cao*, 194, 195, no. 21.
[84] Binchun, *Tianwai guifan cao*, 202, no. 43.
[85] Binchun, *Tianwai guifan cao*, 204, no. 46.

the coast of Tianjin, where the sight of the Dagu forts evoked in him memories of the Anglo-French expedition seven years before. Ruminating on the thick ice covering the road, he wrote,

> Treading on frost lets one know the firmness of ice.
> Before the coming of rain and snow, thick clouds will gather.
> The greatest cold does not come suddenly,
> Omens can always be observed early on.
> Heavenly signs are not dangling in vain, and
> Sages are alert to heavenly changes.
> History is not recorded in a single book, and
> Past events are every bit as portentous as cracked turtle shells.[86]

Anyone who knew of the battles at Dagu in 1858 and 1860 would get Binchun's message easily: the challenge from Europe was no less than a heavenly change, but one could prepare for it by carefully analyzing all the available signs and studying history. Did Binchun see his mission as one of these portents? Did he construct his writing to embed an important message? We do not know for sure, but some of his readers indeed read between the lines and discovered hidden messages.

How His Readers Responded

Only a few weeks after his return, Binchun delivered his journal and a collection of maps to the Zongli Yamen and the governor general of Zhili, Li Hongzhang, and circulated his poems among his friends and relatives. Prince Gong was candid when he reported to the throne that Binchun offered "only a general shape" of European countries and did not "get to the bottom of things."[87] Li Hongzhang read his account immediately, and in a letter to Fang Junshi, a secretary in the Zongli Yamen, complained that it failed to meet his expectations: "I find it written with clarity and entirely too perfect. It has absolutely nothing specific to say of the political affairs and key manufacture methods of each country. It is only a record of his travel!"[88] Fang also thought that Binchun's account "only covers the distance of each country and the strangeness and craftiness of their clothes and carts. It does not go beyond what the *Yinghuan Zhilüe* covered."[89]

Yet others in the Zongli Yamen saw profound implications in Binchun's depiction of Europe. In a memorial drafted on behalf of the

[86] Binchun, *Tianwai guifan cao*, 208, no. 59.
[87] See Prince Gong's memorial reporting the return of the Binchun mission in CBYWSM (TZ) 46, 4445.
[88] Li, *Li Hongzhang quanji*, vol. 29, 468. [89] Fang, *Jiaoxuan suilu*, 326.

ministers soon after Binchun's return, secretary Zhou Jiamei summarized the Zongli Yamen's view as follows:

> This official [Binchun]'s diary presents unbounded extravagance in foreign palaces. It shows that political authority has been moved down to the merchants, and their ritual makes no distinction in the hats and clothes [between the high and low]. Surely their illusory prosperity cannot last long. Yet there are no beggars among these people and their land defense is secure. The excellence of their craft means their profit will be doubled. The precision of their guns and cannons means they have basis for success. Their present wealth and power is indeed worrisome![90]

Zhou then recommended dispatching permanent legations. The reasons he gave were these: first, these envoys could report on the governance of European countries and open up channels of communication with their domestic authorities. Second, envoys could ensure the speedy delivery of trustworthy information on military technology. Third, as Binchun's discovery made clear, Europeans were receptive to the teachings of Confucianism and respected Chinese ritual, and numerous Chinese in Hong Kong and Singapore welcomed the sight of Chinese officials. If the government could dispatch envoys to those regions, the Zongli Yamen was confident that it could recruit overseas Chinese or foreigners who could devote themselves to the Qing's service.[91]

In this memorial, Zhou cited Binchun's journal to show that no beggars were observed on the streets of Europe. As we have already seen, the mission did in fact encounter the poor and the homeless in European cities, but Binchun avoided mentioning them because they did not fit into his carefully constructed account weighing the interests of all his readers. Zhou's memorial took Binchun's literary construct as a matter-of-fact depiction of the social and political conditions of Europe. If we do not think that Zhou (or his astute patron Wenxiang, who most likely dictated the memorial) was quite so naive as to accept Binchun's sanitized account as a truthful representation, we are left to conclude that the content of this memorial was fixed, at least partly, before Binchun turned in his journal. Zhou's memorial also cited Binchun's journal for its depiction of European political structures, land and maritime defense, and arms manufacturing, but Binchun's work scarcely mentioned those things. All of this points to the fact that high ministers in the Zongli Yamen had already formed their opinions about how to use Binchun's report independent of what he actually wrote.

[90] Zhou, *Qi bu fu zhai zhengshu, juan* 1, 68.
[91] Zhou, *Qi bu fu zhai zhengshu, juan* 1, 70.

A very different sort of reception awaited Binchun's writing outside the court and high official circles. Domestic demand for the book was astonishing. As Xu Jiyu recounted in his preface to Binchun's *biji*, "So many came to request the journal that he decided to publish it for all admirers to read."[92] To prepare the manuscript for publication, Binchun invited friends and relatives to write prefaces, including officials at the Zongli Yamen and Tongwenguan. Yamen secretary Fang Junshi proofread it to ensure its correctness.[93] Authors of these prefaces were unanimous in celebrating his travel as a civilizing mission of the Qing empire. Xu Jiyu started his preface with just such a flourish: "Since the virtue of our Celestial Dynasty is spread afar, Western countries have all been waiting anxiously to communicate with the Heavenly Home."[94] Li Shanlan, a Tongwenguan teacher of mathematics and astronomy, used this occasion to praise the accuracy of geography in Buddhist texts. In this wordy introduction, densely packed with Buddhist terms, Li emphasized that the theory of the earth's movement around the sun did not, as European missionaries insisted, originate in the West, but was first expounded in the Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching.[95] Binchun's travel was depicted as a continuation of the Chinese empire's long tradition of cherishing distant lands.

Literati readers scrutinized Binchun's writing for its novelty, balance, and elegance. Lin Changyi, an acclaimed Fuzhou scholar fond of reviewing poems with exotic, foreign flavors, praised Binchun's verses for their literary achievement and fresh content.[96] As literary scholar Sing-chen Lydia Chiang has observed, although the term *biji* referred to unregulated prose broadly, the elasticity and heterogeneity of the genre made it a popular medium for recording "anomalies, personalities, and wonders."[97] Although it is not clear whether Binchun intended his title as a double entendre, we should not be surprised that some readers interpreted the *Cheng cha biji* as a notebook on the exotic. For example, Mao Xianglin, an expectant salt commissioner in Zhejiang, devoted a long entry on Binchun's *biji* in his 1870 *Mo yu lu*, an encyclopedia on strange tales and uncommon phenomena. "It is full of strange and curious things," he remarked, "a modern *Classic of Mountains and Seas*." As to its literary quality and substance, Mao thought that Binchun's account was "too long and uncontrolled," and it suffered from a lack of insight into the "vital and vulnerable parts of foreign countries and the ways of their

[92] Xu, "Preface," *Cheng cha biji*, 1. [93] Fang, *Jiao xuan sui lu*, 317.
[94] Xu, "Preface," *Cheng cha biji*. [95] Li, "Preface," *Cheng cha biji*.
[96] Lin, *Hai tian qin si xu lu*, 444–450. On Lin's intellectual background, see Ng, "Shooting the Eagles," 373–386.
[97] Chiang, *Collecting the Self*, 28.

institutions," but still "sufficiently interesting to provide material for idle chats over tea." In his own transcription of *Cheng cha biji*, Mao expunged most of Binchun's social accounts, preserving only his meetings with monarchs and officials. Mao also cut Binchun's descriptions of city scenes and passages relating to customs and everyday life, but reproduced the exact descriptions of the zoo (including a long description of plants inside), the prime minister's house, the Crystal Palace, Windsor Castle, and a factory. Notwithstanding Mao's complaint that Binchun focused on trivialities to attract his reader, his own condensed version further reduced Europe to a list of exotic objects devoid of context and meaning. The term *huolunfa*, which Binchun had used to denote steam engines, appeared as *falun* (dharma wheel), *zhuanlun* (spinning wheel), or simply *lun*, a magic, self-propelled wheel.[98]

When Mao died a few years later, his work was compiled and edited by his friend Zhu Zuolin, who furnished each essay in *Mo yu lu* with a commentary. Zhu wrote about his own experience upon reading Mao's adaptation of *Cheng cha biji*.

> Sipping a cup of finely steeped tea, one may open this book and read a few passages. It makes the reader feel like he is riding the wind and braving ocean waves himself! Both the Emperor Qinshi huangdi and the Emperor Wu of Han had longed to reach the outer world. According to this account of Binchun (although it is merely a textual recording; it is not fabricated), the teaching and music of our country have truly spread afar. Otherwise how could Binchun have encountered what he did tens of thousands of miles away? [Mao] thought Binchun's writing was uncontrolled and wordy, so he deleted some parts and enriched its literary flavor. It has now become a work of its own, and the best parts in Mao's collection far exceed Binchun's original work.[99]

In contrast to the mixed reviews from his Chinese readers, to Western observers in China Binchun's account was wonderfully refreshing and politically progressive. Young John Allen serialized it in his *Zhongguo jiaohui xinbao* in 1871. Wandering in rural Zhili in the 1870s, missionary Joseph Edkins struck up a conversation with a few local notables and asked whether they had read Binchun's travel account. They had not, so he wrote, "A work like this, elegantly written in prose and poetry, fails to reach far in Chinese society. The Chinese conductors of the book trade do nothing to push the circulation of new works."[100] Binchun's positive image of the West went so far beyond his expectation that W.A.P. Martin, president of the Tongwenguan, conjured up reasons to explain why it was so flattering. Martin guessed, groundlessly, that "for every

[98] Mao, *Mo yu lu*, 40–42. [99] Mao, *Mo yu lu*, 46. [100] Edkins, *Religion in China*, 209.

word of praise he no doubt had ten of censure . . . but the censure was confidential and did not appear in print."[101]

In a few years, the *Cheng cha biji* found its way to the Japanese book market for its vivid depictions of European life. Shigeno Yasutsugu, a historian and sinologist who first brought the book home and published it, presented the book as evidence that China was learning its lessons and transforming itself into a strong country:

> What I see in this book is that it praises Western countries' pursuit of substantive learning and material benefits, and attributes it as the reason why their civilization is advancing. It is as if [Binchun] is afraid that China cannot catch up with them, and is remorseful and embarrassed by what it has done. If a large country like China can self-reflect and encourage its entire population to engage in scientific studies and the pursuit of wealth and power, then it will not be difficult for it become a strong country. How do we know that this was not the real purpose of Binchun's mission?

Shigeno's interpretation of the book was partially confirmed by Ishihata Yoshihira, a member of an 1870 mission to China for a treaty negotiation. Ishihata reported that the Qing's internal affairs had been in decay for decades, but recently a group of officials led by Prince Gong were steering its foreign affairs on the right track. He was especially impressed by Li Hongzhang, whose attitude towards foreigners exhibited a clear grasp of international affairs. In 1872, Shigeno and his friends published an abridged and annotated edition of *Cheng cha biji* (*Jōsa hikki*) in order to spur the Japanese government to follow suit. They furnished the book with woodblock illustrations to help readers visualize the grandeur and wealth of European cities. Drawn by an artist who most likely had never traveled to Europe, many of the illustrations were mechanical interpretations of Binchun's descriptions (see Figure 1.3), with no appearance of Chinese visitors. Reframed in this manner, the *Jōsa hikki* became a statement of early Meiji aspirations.[102]

Binchun's journal and poems, after they were edited, embellished, and reframed, were integrated into the consumption of what Stanley Fish has called "interpretive communities" in a variety of different ways. Similar to the way that Ming-era booksellers adapted envoy accounts of foreign countries into eye-catching best sellers, the content of Binchun's writing was used as raw material for imaginary and literary exercises by his

[101] Martin, *A Cycle of Cathay*, 374. There is a complete lack of evidence and of a clear motivation for Binchun to criticize Europe, even in private writing. Xiaofei Tian has found several minor variations in contemporary editions of Binchun's work, which suggests that he was cautious in the words he used, even after the initial publication of his journal. But none of these edits were significant enough to alter his meaning.

[102] *Jōsa hikki*, 2b.

Figure 1.3 The *Jōsa hikki*'s illustration of a dance and banquet at Windsor Castle

readers.[103] The various responses to Binchun's writing by Zongli Yamen officials, Meiji intellectuals, Westerners in China, and Qing literati suggest that contemporaries imbued it with meaning according to their own interests and perspectives. The Zongli Yamen used it to demonstrate the

[103] For an analysis of this phenomenon in the Ming, see He, *Home and the World*, 202–244.

need for further reform in foreign affairs. Meiji intellectuals used it to argue that the Qing was modernizing and to spur their own government into action. Depending on their positions, Western missionaries interpreted it as evidence either of China's progress or of the abject lack thereof. Finally, his literati readers saw his writing as proof of the Qing's imperial reach, and – while they might not have been completely convinced by its claims – enjoyed it for its elegance and novelty.

The creative energy in interpreting Binchun's accounts far outlasted the Qing dynasty itself. Since *Cheng cha biji* was the first nineteenth-century Chinese account of Europe based on the personal experience of a ranking official, historians have often found it useful as a measure of Qing attitudes about the West. Twentieth-century Western and Chinese historians characterized Binchun as a conservative-minded official who was unable to see anything of real interest to China, and his mission as a failure in acquiring real knowledge about the West.[104] A more charitable reading was offered by Knight Biggerstaff, historian of Qing modernization, who attributed Binchun's lack of deeper insight to the fact that "insufficient time was spent in Europe for the members of the mission to obtain information which would be of very great value to the Foreign Office."[105] While Binchun's critics faulted him for what he did not notice, scholars of the modernization school, looking at what he *did* record, argued for a progressive, proto-modernist consciousness.

The divergent interpretations of Binchun's accounts can be attributed to the differences in how readers understood the purpose of his writing. The Zongli Yamen, true to its original intention, understood the mission as strategic investigation, but the literati who purchased Binchun's works recognized them as travel literature to be consumed for pleasure, fun, and general knowledge about the world. Western and Japanese readers searched in Binchun's works for evidence of "progress" of the Qing government's attitude towards the West, and were liable to shift their evaluations based on their existing frames of reference. Each interpretive community, with their shared strategies and core assumptions, rendered the meaning of Binchun's text subordinate to their own perspectives.[106] One suspects that if Binchun had known the ways in which his works would be interpreted, he would not have been entirely surprised by the multiplicity of interpretations. The ambiguity was, after all, built into how he constructed his account.

[104] See, for example, Drage, *Servants of the Dragon Throne*, 133–156; Smith, Fairbank, and Bruner, *Robert Hart and China's Early Modernization*, 348–361; and Zhong, *Zouxiang shijie*, 60–72.
[105] Biggerstaff, "The First Chinese Mission of Investigation Sent to Europe," 318.
[106] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 341.

Conclusion

As Mao's and Zhu's notes suggest, Binchun's journal bolstered the literati's confidence in the superiority of Chinese culture by providing evidence that "the teaching and music" of China had spread to foreign countries. He did not give any indication that there was an alternative vision of civilization apart from that of China. Despite differences in customs and culture, Europe was essentially *Chinese* in its most fundamental aspects. The Europeans were peaceful, industrious, and civilized people. Their manufacturing, communication, and transportation methods were all intended to improve people's livelihood. The Western monarchs were, at their best, Confucian-style rulers, and at their worst, extravagant and materialistic princes who nevertheless knew enough to admire Chinese emperors. In this purified version of Western society, everything was aesthetically pleasing or tantalizingly exotic, and all the virtues of the West were virtues of the Chinese.

Nevertheless, the diffusion of Binchun's writing among the poetry circles did help break new ground in creating a way of depicting the West. He equated Western customs with Chinese ritual and showed Europeans to be admirers of Chinese arts and the Confucian tradition. In light of the larger context of his time and the tradition of envoy writing he inherited, there seems to be more to Binchun's project than the sum of all the images he constructed for himself – a Confucian gentleman, an imperial envoy, a poet on a grand journey, or a knight-errant. This is because he was not blind to the realpolitik in Sino-Western relations, and plainly saw that further conflict between China and Europe could lead to unprecedented calamity. He dealt with the daunting task assigned to him by painting the West with a Confucian brush, and, by doing so, proved to others that a Qing official could travel to Europe, publish a well-received journal about his experience, and earn the appropriate recognition from the imperial government. The Zongli Yamen engaged him to work as a director in the Tongwenguan in 1870 (he died the next year).[107]

By committing to a literary course of action, however, Binchun's practical value to Robert Hart and self-strengthening officials such as Li Hongzhang diminished. Hart seemed to have forgotten him entirely in early 1868, when preparation for the Burlingame mission was under way. The rapid expansion of information about the West after the 1870s made Binchun's writing quickly obsolete and seemingly "conservative." Li Hongzhang's complaint that Binchun's account was "entirely too perfect" gives away his expectation that, to gather information useful for the

[107] *Cornhilll Magazine*, vol. xxi, 1870, 29.

government, a certain breach of convention was unavoidable. Binchun's failure, from Li's perspective, lay in his giving in too much to the traditional patterns of literary consumption while ignoring the real purpose of his mission: to collect information and intelligence useful for the state. It also reveals Li's expectation that the actual conditions of foreign countries could not be fully conveyed without compromising a China-centered worldview. For historians, then, Binchun's story raises more questions than it settles: how did envoys to the West after him construct their accounts? In particular, how did they reconcile their roles as imperial envoys with the changing demands of the empire?