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'Scholars should be considered the last of the Four Classes': The Case of Scholar-official Zheng Banqiao

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Introduction

In 1744, Zheng Banqiao 鄭板橋 (his penname, 'Wooden Bridge'; he is also known under his given name as Zheng Xie 鄭燮, 'Zheng the Harmonizer') wrote the following comments on the existing Confucian classification of society and on the wickedness of officialdom in one of his *Family Letters* (*Zheng Banqiao jiashu* 鄭板橋家書):

> I think the best class of people in the world are the farmers. Scholars should be considered the last of the four classes. The most well-to-do farmers have a hundred *mu* (about sixteen acres), the next seventy or eighty *mu*, and the next fifty or sixty *mu*. They all toil and labor to feed the rest of the world. Were it not for the farmers, we should all starve. We scholars are considered one class higher than the farmers because we are supposed to be good sons at home and courteous abroad, and maintain the ancient tradition of culture; in case of success, we can serve and benefit the people, and in case of failure, we can cultivate our personal lives as an example to the world. But this is no longer true. As soon as a person takes a book in hand, he is thinking of how to pass the examinations and become a *chüjen* or *chinshih*, how to become an official and get rich and build fine houses and buy large property. It is all wrong from the very start, and the further one goes, the more wicked one becomes.[1]

A bit further in this particular *Family Letter*, Zheng Banqiao goes as far as stating that 'we scholars' are nothing but a burden for society, and he even wonders whether scholars de-

1 Translation by Lin Yutang in his *The Wisdom of China* (London: Michael Joseph, 1949), p. 491. Whenever I refer to a translation of the *Family Letters*, it will be Lin's translation; see ibid., pp. 483–496, and Zheng Banqiao, *Banqiao jiashu* (*The Family Letters of Banqiao*), trans. Lin Yutang (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2002), pp. 2–67. Lin translated eleven of the *Family Letters* – be it partly – into English. Not translated by him are the letters III, IV, IX, XI and XII. For the Chinese version, see, for ex., Zheng Banqiao, *Banqiao jiashu. Hutu chenggong daquan* 板橋家書.糊塗成功大全 (Beijing: Zhongguo duiwai fanyi chuban gongsi, 2000).

serve a place in society. If Zheng Banqiao would not have clearly indicated that he himself belonged to the class of people he was so openly criticizing, it would be very hard to believe this critique was written by a scholar-official who – by the time he left officialdom nine years later – had served for twelve years as a county magistrate.

On the one hand, the Qing period in which Zheng Banqiao lived is known for its social stability and orthodox etiquette. Under Manchu rule, Chinese society remained organized according to traditional Confucian standards that classified society into four groups, namely scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants; furthermore, social status largely depended on one's social position. The government adopted Confucian bureaucratic conventions and generally was tolerant towards the so-called 'three teachings', which determined the Neo-Confucian ideology of that period.[2] On the other hand, the early Qing was an unorthodox and innovative period as far as the arts and literature and the socio-cultural milieu is concerned. The intellectual tendency towards more individualism that had originated in the Ming dynasty kept on resonating among scholars. In many cities, of which Yangzhou (where Zheng Banqiao in his later life would settle down) is a striking example, public and social life was not only dominated by scholars, but even more so by rich merchants. These merchants, with their wealth and affluent life-style, gradually changed social stratification, at the same time generating a money-driven society, which in turn influenced the morals of scholars and officials.

Both the traditional and the unconventional aspects of the early Qing period find their expression in Zheng Banqiao, who is well-known for combining many contradictory aspects in his life-style, personal ideals and character. Being a tremendously popular historical figure, many studies about Zheng Banqiao's literature, paintings and calligraphy have been published, with a peak period around his 300th birthday in 1993.[3] As exemplified in the quotation above, many of his personal convictions and feelings are known through his *Family*

2 For more general background information on the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns, see, for ex., Frederick W. Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 856–948; Willard J. Peterson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 9: The Ch'ing Dynasty, Part 1: To 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 120–309.

3 For a complete English monograph on the artist Zheng Banqiao including a biography and discussion of his collected works, see Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao. Poet, Painter and Calligrapher*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series (Nettetal Steyler Verlag: 1990). For Chinese studies on the eccentricity of Zheng Banqiao, see, for ex., Wei Zhiyou 衛志友, "'Bimo dangsui shidai', 'Nu bu tong ren' – Qianxi Zheng Banqiao zhi 'guai'"“笔墨当随时代”“怒不同人 — 浅析郑板桥之," *Beijing ligong daxue xuebao* 北京理工大學學報 (*Shehui kexueban*) no. 5 (2008) and Meng Zhen 孟楨, "Zheng Banqiao de maodun renge" 鄭板橋的矛盾人格, *Chuanshan xuekan* 船山學刊 1 (2006), pp. 59–61.

Letters, which – taken together – can be considered as a book of moral education.[4] His inscriptions and calligraphies, as well as the many anecdotes surrounding him, are also very valuable for assessing his life. His fame is partly due to his rise from a poor family background to the highest official degree (*jinshi* 進士);[5] although this rise came rather late in his life, it may serve as a model example of the Confucian scholar-official and is intimately linked to his recognition as an accomplished poet, painter and calligrapher. He became especially known as a member of the *Yangzhou ba guai* 揚州八怪, the 'Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou', in the artistic world that also came to be known as the 'Yangzhou School'.[6]

Notwithstanding, his tremendous popularity up to the present is certainly also – and maybe even more so – due to his independent, nonconformist, almost rebellious and at the same time upright character, especially in view of his official career in the given socio-cultural circumstances.[7] Both biographical data and anecdotes invariably portray him as an unre-

4 For more on the moral value of the *Family Letters*, see, for ex., Mi Jiangxia 米江霞, "'Zheng Banqiao jiashu' de lunli jiazhi ji xianshi yiyi"“鄭板橋家書”的倫理價值及現實意義, *Hexi xueyuan xuebao* 河西學院學報 21. 1 (2005).

5 The names and degrees in the imperial examinations were as follows: the first examination was the 'Government Examination' (*yuanshi* 院試), with the resulting title of *xiucai* 秀才 or *shengyuan* 生員; the second was the 'Provincial Examination' (*xiangshi* 鄉試), a triennial examination, with the resulting title of *juren* 舉人, 'recommended man' or graduate; the third examination was the 'Metropolitan Examination' (*huishi* 會試) with the resulting title of *gongshi* 貢士; finally, there was the 'Palace Examination' (*dianshi* 殿試), which took place at the palace and led to the title of *jinshi* 進士 'presented scholar'. See Benjamin A. Elman, "The Social Role of Literati in Early to Mid-Ch'ing", in Peterson, *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 9*, p. 379. For Zheng's career in the examination system, see further below.

6 Until today, art historians disagree on the question who exactly these Eight Eccentrics were. The most commonly accepted opinion includes Wang Shishen 汪士慎 (1686–1759), Huang Shen 黃慎 (1687–1768), Li Shan 李鱓/李鱓 (1686?–1756), Jin Nong 金農 (1687–1764), Luo Pin 羅聘 (1733–1799), Gao Xiang 高翔 (1688–1753), Li Fangying 李方膺 (1696–1755), and Zheng Banqiao. Whatever opinions there are on this issue, the term 'Eight Eccentrics' should rather be considered to refer to a group of artists who share certain things in common in their life and art. See Zhang Anzhi, *A History of Chinese Painting*, Translated by Dun J. Li (Beijing Foreign Language Press, 2002), p. 200. Li Shan seems to have been a very good friend of Zheng Banqiao, and Zheng Banqiao certainly admired Jin Nong, to whom he wrote some letters that were later published. For a brief (English) discussion on the Yangzhou Eccentrics, see also James Cahill, *Fantastics and Eccentrics in Chinese Painting* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), pp. 88–107 (with a reference to Zheng Banqiao on p. 96), and Sun Li 孙立 (ed.; Yangzhou bowuguan 揚州博物館), *Yangzhou ba guai* (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2003).

7 Until the present day, Zheng Banqiao is glorified for being a moral example for officials, and in the contemporary discourses about him he is often compared with other officials who are celebrated for their moral integrity and smartness such as Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365–427) and the three Kingdoms Era officer Yang Xiu 楊修 (175–219). There are comic books made about him, and in 1983 the Xinghua Zheng Banqiao Memorial Hall (Museum) 興化鄭板橋紀念館 was established in Xinghua. Also in 1983,

strained, individualistic and multi-talented scholar-official, and at the same time as an outright, courageous defender of the poor and weak against the rich and powerful, including his own colleagues and superiors.

However, his idealism and his upright and independent nature inevitably left him disillusioned about the prevailing corruption, the social injustice inherent in the hierarchic and bureaucratic system, and the moral degeneration of scholars at that time. Besides, already from a young age, he was very attracted to a Daoist free and detached life-style. This inner struggle – his ambitions as an upright scholar-official, against his criticism, his independent character, his predilection for a Daoist free and nonconformist life-style, and his sympathy for the less in power – not only often put him in a challenging position, but also drove him to certain important life-choices.

This paper tends to demonstrate how – gradually evolving from artist-bohemian to scholar-official and back to devoted artist – Zheng Banqiao's unconventional, uncompromising and often contradictory personality and ideals developed against the background of the early Qing dynasty. As such, this paper also intends to show how well the inner struggle between his Confucian ideals and a carefree life-style unhampered by conventions, his paradoxical career moves, his unusual behavior, and his critical writings reflect the given *Zeitgeist*.

To this end, I will first outline the political and cultural setting, the structure of society, and the influence of the rich merchants on the cultural milieu in Yangzhou. I will then sketch Zheng Banqiao's story of life, highlighting some of the anecdotes, writings and biographical notes that express the dominant social and philosophical influences that guided his life choices and his moral judgments.[8]

Manchu Rulers, Ming Loyalism and the Hanxue Movement

Born during the reign of emperor Kangxi (r. 1661–1722), a large part of the period in which Zheng Banqiao (1693–1765) lived, was characterized by Ming loyalism. But the Kangxi court maintained social stability by employing Chinese scholars in most of the sub-provincial offices and also allowed them to share power in higher posts. At the same time, the emperor was a fervent supporter of scholarship and the arts and adopted the Song dynasty's idealist

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his former home in Xinghua was restored to what is now a tourist spot. On the occasion of his 300th birthday, in 1993, a Chinese TV serial about the life of Zheng Banqiao became very popular.

8 I would like to note that this article will not deal with Zheng Banqiao's artistic output that differs from his literary pursuits, nor with his view on aesthetics and literature, but that explorations in these fields would certainly confirm the conclusions offered here. For an elaborate discussion of Zheng Banqiao's life and art, see, for ex., the abovementioned monograph by Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*.

philosophy of the Neo-Confucian 'School of Principle' (*lixue* 理學) as the state ideology. By doing so, he was guaranteed the support of most Chinese scholars whom he needed to govern his empire.[9] Nonetheless, his benevolence could not fully neutralize their sympathy for the old Ming dynasty; this is especially true of those officials who were born under the former dynasty. Pohl rightly observes that these anti-Manchu feelings were especially strong in the lower Yangzi provinces such as Zhejiang and Jiangxi, and south of Jiangsu where the memory of the Yangzhou massacre in 1645, in which Manchu troops had killed supporters of the Southern Ming regime (1644–1662), was still very much alive.[10] Originating from that region, Zheng Banqiao's family was very receptive to the tradition of rejecting Qing rule.

In reaction to this, the Kangxi emperor launched military attacks against various rebel groups and in addition set up a political campaign to win the support of the alienated Chinese gentry. Through this campaign, many scholars started to realize that the new dynasty was not as barbaric and uncivilized as initially feared; moreover, compared to the chaotic late Ming, it was a much stronger dynasty, deeply committed to Confucianism.[11] When the Kangxi emperor's son, the Yongzheng ruler, began his reign (r. 1722–1735), the Qing empire was firmly established. However, beneath the surface many scholars still refused to accept Manchu overlordship. Recognizing the importance of loyalty (*zhong* 忠) as one of the basic virtues in Confucianism, the Yongzheng emperor wisely tolerated this anti-Manchu tendency. When he died after only twelve years of reign, his son took over, and the Qing dynasty reached its peak. During this time, Ming loyalism seemed to have disappeared,[12] and the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1795) ordered one of the most illustrious accomplishments of his reign: the compilation of the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (*Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*). Obviously, the Qianlong emperor, just like his father, considered himself as a patron of scholarship and the arts. The first half of the Qianlong reign is generally known as a period of peace and increasing prosperity, as well as a fertile

9 For more on institutional adaption during the reign of the early Manchu rulers, see John King Fairbank, *China. A New History* (Cambridge and London: BelknapPress of Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 146–151.

10 Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, p. 2. The Yangzhou massacre took place from 20–29 May 1645. There are many works on this tragedy. See, for ex., Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800*, pp. 830–831. For more on Ming loyalism during the Kangxi reign, see ibid., pp. 850–855.

11 Pohl, Cheng Pan-ch'iao, p. 3.

12 At least on the surface; cf. the impressive book inquisition under Qianlong during the 1770s: despite the relative social stability, the Qianlong emperor – being a 'barbarian' himself – still feared Ming loyalism among the intellectual class, and all books with disrespectful references to the Manchu ruling elite were put on an index, banned and burned. See Madeleine Zelin, "The Yung-cheng Reign", in Peterson, *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 9*, pp. 189–191.

time for intellectual activities and the arts, of which Yangzhou, where Zheng Banqiao eventually settled down, was a fine example.

The gradual change from strong anti-Manchu feelings during the Kangxi reign to increased acceptance of Manchu rule under Qianlong, might also have been one of the determining factors that led Zheng Banqiao to opt for an official career. It was only in 1729, during the second half of the Yongzheng reign, that he was ready to pick up study for the civil service examination, and it was not until the Qianlong reign that he accepted his first post under alien rule (1742).[13]

Besides persistent Ming loyalism, another major social phenomenon characterized the early Qing period; this was the emergence of the *Hanxue* 漢學 movement. In general, the Manchu rulers displayed a sustained tolerance towards the three teachings (Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism), as well as towards Christianity and Islam. However, under the early Qing many scholars adopted a critical opinion towards Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472–1529, Ming dynasty) Neo-Confucian 'School of Heart-mind' (*Xinxue* 心學), which was an 'idealistic' reaction against the rigid and puritan Neo-Confucian 'School of Principle' that had begun under the Song (960–1279). The advocators of the *Hanxue* were of the opinion that the Neo-Confucian schools of both the Song and Ming dynasties relied too much on Daoist and Buddhist concepts for their interpretations of the Classics. Especially the Neo-Confucian idealistic school of Wang Yangming received a lot of criticism for being too focused on inner reflection as a way to understand the world, which was by many regarded as the main cause for the decadence and decline of the late Ming. As a result, a new intellectual movement rose which advocated a return to the classic scriptures of the Han period. It is this intellectual movement that was called 'Han Learning' (*Hanxue*). Apart from a return to the original sources of Confucianism as recorded by the scholars of the Han dynasty, the emphasis lay on a rational, empirical approach to learning. The most influential thinker of the *Hanxue* movement was Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682), whose criticism on useless book learning and the metaphysical speculations of the Neo-Confucian philosophy started a new trend in scholarship during the Qing dynasty.[14] Under Gu Yanwu's influence, the *Hanxue* movement became an important intellectual movement in the early Qing period, and also influenced Zheng Banqiao's scholarly education.

13 Other possible reasons why Zheng Banqiao finally took up study for the civil examinations will be discussed later.

14 Gu Yanwu, also known as Gu Tinglin 顧亭林, was a Chinese epistemologist and geographer. His positivist approach to a variety of disciplines and his criticism of Neo-Confucianism had a huge influence on later scholars. See, for ex., Jana S. Rosker, *Searching for the Way. Theory of Knowledge in Pre-modern and Modern China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2008), pp. 92–97.

Social Stratification and Elite Culture

Traditional Chinese society was divided into four classes: scholars and gentry including officials (*shi* 士), peasants (*nong* 農), craftsmen (*gong* 工), and merchants (*shang* 商). An official was always a scholar, since to be an official one had to pass the civil service examinations, which tested a candidate's knowledge of the Classics and whether or not he had the right 'frame of mind' to govern according to Confucian standards.[15] The higher the rank one obtained in the imperial examinations, the higher one's post could be, i.e. the closer to the emperor and the greater one's power. Scholars formed a privileged class, even if they had been successful in the examinations but were unemployed.[16]

Second in social status were the farmers. They owed this position to their task of producing the necessary food. In practice, they ranked below the artisans and they largely depended on family ties for their social security. Third in rank were the artisans, who produced useful objects. Merchants ranked at the bottom because they were not involved in production, neither mentally nor materially. Since the main concern of the government was to keep social order and not to create wealth, merchants had the ill reputation of being of no benefit to society.

At the beginning of the Qing dynasty, Chinese society was still organized according to these four distinct social, or rather occupational, classes, based on the Confucian social division for maintaining order. The emperor, belonging to the highest social class, had absolute power, and was assisted by governor-generals (administering more than one province), provincial governors, military commanders and circuit intendants. The smallest administrative unit was the county, ruled by a district magistrate (*zhixian* 知縣), the post Zheng Banqiao obtained.[17]

In principle, the status of scholar was not hereditary, and from the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) onwards, when Confucianism became the state doctrine, the examinations were officially open to all male subjects not originating from an artisan or merchant class. This implied that farmers could also acquire the status of scholar. Although being wealthy or having a noble status was not a prerequisite in receiving a recommendation for entry to

15 For the literati class, see, for ex., Robert Mortimer Marsh, *Mandarins: The Circulation of Elites in China, 1600–1900* (New York: The Free Press, 1961), and Elman, "The Social Role of Literati in Early to Mid-Ch'ing".

16 Only five percent of all the degree holders could ascend high enough in the examination system to become official. For more on the appointments of officials during the Qing dynasty, see, for ex., Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), pp. 94–95.

17 For an overview of Qing administration, ibid., pp. 83–96.

the examinations, in practice however, considering the difficult subject matter and the time consuming study requirements, it was very rare for someone of a laboring, non-aristocratic background such as a farmer to achieve a high rank.[18] By the time of the early Qing dynasty rich merchants could improve their status or the status of their family members by buying a degree and circumventing the official civil examinations, or by organizing a good education for their heirs in the hope that the next generation would attain scholar status and become part of the imperial civil service. This practice of buying degrees certainly contributed to the 'degeneration' of the literati so despised by Zheng Banqiao.

Rankin, Fairbank and Feuerwerker mention a second interesting social division overlapping the horizontal class structure with its extreme differences of wealth. According to them, there was an additional important vertical organization of society, based on kinship and locality. Especially in Central and South China, extended family lineages were a major form of social organization. These extended family ties enhanced the security and continuity of elite families and provided services and opportunities for poorer lineage members. In short, one's position in society was as much dependent on what lineage one belonged to as on what one's economic and occupational status was.[19]

However flexible social mobility theoretically was, high social status thus remained largely associated with the wealthy (able to afford study-leave and tutors in preparation for the examinations) or the well-connected families (with a high degree of influence and connections within the wider family). This situation ultimately led to widespread corruption by wealthy individuals buying examination degrees and hence entry to officialdom, or bribing others within a particular network in return for a state post, or having legal and official matters arranged to one's benefit. No matter to which class one belonged, society was ruled by a very small minority of the population, namely the imperial family, officials, degree holders, landlords and rich merchants , and examinees.

This system of social stratification, rooted in Confucian hierarchic and patriarchic thinking was in the first instance linked to the concept of the 'big unification' (*da yi tong* 大一統). The centralized idea of unification only cherished one kind of 'right' conduct, leaving no

18 See Max Weber, *The Religion of China*. Translated by Hans H. Gerth (New York: The Free Press Macmillan Company, 1964 [1951]), p. 116. For an excellent in-depth analysis of the civil examinations in late imperial China, see Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). For more on the social stratification in China, see Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005).

19 Mary B. Rankin, John K. Fairbank, and Albert Feuerwerker, "Introduction: Perspectives on Modern China's history", in John K. Fairbank and Denis Twitchett (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 13, Republican China 1912–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 29–39.

room for dissident behaviour, certainly not amongst the lower in rank, namely the bulk of the population. Everything that did not fit under this 'ideological roof' was ignored or – sometimes violently – excluded.[20] Li Yi comments on this by saying that although from the Han dynasty on Confucianism was the state ideology, by no means the Chinese elite abandoned Legalism and the right to rule by punishment. He claims that during the next two thousand years, the Chinese elite always propagated Confucianism on the surface but practiced Legalism in their heart (*yang ru yin fa* 陽儒陰法).[21] This means that, apart from self-cultivation through education – in general only accessible to the highest class – docility and conformity were the main individual virtues. This kind of society, in which the uneducated were ruled and highly oppressed by the educated, obviously gave rise to suppressed frustration and feelings of powerlessness amongst the uneducated.

In this system, the ruling scholar-officials, who were highly educated in the Confucian Classics, were supposed to followed the path of continuous self-cultivation and become a role-model for their subordinates by representing social morality and virtue. Confucianism views the ideal sovereign as the father and mother of the people. In feudal China, the term *fumuguan* 父母官, or 'father-mother-official', therefore denotes a local magistrate because of his (intended) intimacy with the common people of the county he is responsible for. However, officials were often known for corruption and abuse of power. In Yangzhou, where business was always done under official supervision, the rich merchants, who dominated social and public life, tried to maintain good relations with government officials through gifts or outright bribery. In addition, the local junior 'office runners' or clerks, who were socially looked down upon, and the local scholar-gentry (i.e. the great majority of scholars, who were successful in the examinations but were not employed in the state system), assisting the district magistrate, were both renowned for being very corrupt. As the local scholar-gentry occupied a highly privileged position, they were afforded the freedom for corrupt practices to develop. In this overly corrupt environment, the highly educated and powerful official Zheng Banqiao would always sympathize with the weak, the poor and the oppressed.

Yangzhou, the 'Eccentric Artists' Mecca, and the Degeneration of Scholars

The city of Yangzhou, where Zheng Banqiao would settle down in his later life, is situated at the juncture of the Yangzi River and the Grand Canal. At that time, Yangzhou was not only an important communication link and transportation hub, but also had a prosperous salt

20 See also note 12 on the book inquisition during the Qianlong reign.

21 Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification*, p. 31. This expression is more commonly known as *wai ru nei fa* 外儒內法, 'Confucian on the outside, Legalistic inside'.

market where rich merchants gathered. These merchants built luxurious villas and gardens, and paid high prices for artists to decorate their villas with paintings and calligraphies. The Qing government, meanwhile, established the office of 'Lianghuai Transport' in Yangzhou with the purpose of supervising commercial activities. Lianghuai was one the largest of China's eleven salt districts of that time, and the importance of the 'Lianghuai Transport' office attracted many merchants to come to live in Yangzhou. These favorable circumstances helped to stimulate the city's economic growth as well as its cultural activity, and it soon became a major center of business, culture and amusement in Southern China in the 17th and 18th centuries. These developments made the city of Yangzhou a highly inspiring place for artists, and many poets and painters were highly attracted to its artistic and innovative atmosphere.[22]

Some of these artists enjoyed eccentric life-styles and adopted unorthodox and innovative artistic styles. About one year after the death of Zheng Banqiao, the group of artists which Zheng Banqiao joined after having left his post in 1753 was named the 'Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou', the so-called *Yangzhou ba guai*. The eccentricity of these artists in the first place emphasizes their expressive and individualist style. As they did not adhere to the conventionally accepted aesthetic norms and habits, their paintings were different from those of the Orthodox School.[23] Secondly, the term 'eccentricity' also refers to their strong personalities. Many of these scholars, including Zheng Banqiao, were influenced by the late Ming trend of individualist thinking that resonated throughout the early Qing dynasty. One of the 'arch-individualists' was Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602). After having served for a long time in different official functions, Li Zhi left officialdom behind and went to live in a Buddhist monastery to devote his time to writing and study. Although it is highly doubtful that he became a genuine monk, he was attracted by a life aloof from common rituals and conventions and had a strong fascination with the Diamond Sutra. In his writings, he condemns the slave-like be-

22 For more on the socio-cultural milieu of Yangzhou in the first half of the 18th century, see, for ex., Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, pp. 27–32; Qin Jin'gen 秦金根, *Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu* 清 – 鄭板橋書 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), pp. 46–61; John K. Fairbank and Edwin O. Reischauer, *China: Tradition and Transformation* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), pp. 230–238; Thomas O. Höllmann, "Eine Allianz von Geld und Geist. Die Salzkaufleute von Yangzhou und die Blüte des privaten Mäzenatentums im China des 18. Jahrhunderts", in Helga Breuniger and Rolf P. Sieferle (eds.), *Markt und Macht in der Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1995), pp. 221–240.

23 Zhang, *A History of Chinese Painting*, p. 200. An example of this 'eccentricity' is the innovative free-hand painting of flowers and birds for which the artists of this school are generally known, as well as their artistic stimulation in favor of the development of other new styles. Zheng Banqiao himself is famous for his own particular style called the 'six-and-a-half script' (*liu fen ban shu* 六分半書). This particular style was a combination of different existing calligraphic styles; its main basis was the latest and most refined variation of the clerical official script (*li shu* 隸書) of Later Han times, known as the 'eight parts' (*ba fen* 八分).

havior and treatment of people in the feudal state, arguing in favor of independent thinking not bound by useless forms based on a wrong understanding of the Classics. Li Zhi's own philosophy of life was based on Neo-Confucianism, but in his view, the *lixue* had turned the Confucian teachings too 'sacred' and mystified the person of Confucius in such a way that learning authentic Confucian sagehood had become out of reach for the common people. It is not unlikely that both the ideal of independent thinking with regard to the 'three teachings', and the strife for genuine humanistic Confucian virtues as put forward by Li Zhi strongly influenced Zheng Banqiao.[24]

In this individualist cultural setting, the rich salt merchants, who originally belonged to the fourth and lowest class of society, became the dominant economic and cultural force in Yangzhou, to the extent that their dominance slowly led to the subversion of the traditional Confucian social stratification. By first purchasing the lowest scholarly degree and then having the resources to educate their sons who subsequently became scholars, they quickly moved up into the gentry class. The traditional scholars on the other hand, although occupying the highest social position and belonging to the cultural elite, were not always well off. This was especially so in cases where they did not descend from a wealthy family, or where they did not have an official appointment. The result was that not scholarship became the key to social success, but money.[25]

Nevertheless, the social prestige of the scholars – rich or poor – remained very high, and the merchants – although sometimes wealthy and powerful – were still socially looked down upon. As a result, some of the more cultured rich salt merchants started to patronize scholars, poets and artists, hoping in this way to promote their social position and self-image. At the same time, these rich merchants, through following a decadent life style, initiated what may be called a degenerate *nouveau riche* culture. This in turn influenced the life-style and artistic motivation of the literati, whose lofty artistic intentions lost much of their authenticity. Almost everybody with cultural aspirations, including the merchants, called themselves 'literati'. This was precisely the degeneration of the literati that Zheng Banqiao condemned. As the *Family Letter* at the beginning of this article shows, he never admired the scholar class, and as he wrote in another of his *Family Letters*, the decay of this class only made his indignation grow:

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24 See, for ex., Meng Zhen, "Zheng Banqiao de maodun renge". For more on individualism and humanitarian trends in the Ming dynasty, see William T. de Bary, "Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought", in W. T. de Bary (ed.), *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970). For more in particular on Li Zhi, see ibid., pp. 188–222.

25 Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, p. 28. For more on the relation between merchant and official from an economic point of view, see Fairbank, *China. A New History*, pp. 179–182.

> The ancient people said of Chu-ko Liang that he was "indeed a famous scholar", which means that the term "famous scholar" could be applied worthily only to him. Now the city is full of painters and writers of calligraphy who are called "famous scholars". Would this not make Chu-ko Liang's cheeks burn and turn the high-minded ones' teeth cold (make them sneer)?[26]

Zheng Banqiao: His Life and Life-style

Born in 1693 during the Kangxi era, living through the Yongzheng period, and dying in 1765, under Qianlong rule, Zheng Banqiao experienced the reigns of the three great Qing emperors. His biography can be divided into three cycles in which we can discern major changes in his life-style and ambitions: his early life, full of misery and bohemianism; the period as an official; and his last phase as a devoted but eccentric artist. Below we shall look at these three stages one by one.

Early Life: Misery and a Bohemian Life-style

Zheng Banqiao hailed from a poor family. He lost his mother at the age of three and was raised by his nursing mother whom, we know, he was very attached to.[27] His father remarried, but when he was thirteen, his stepmother died. At the age of seventeen, he went to Zhengzhou where he studied for the county examination to become a *xiucai* 秀才, a scholar preparing for provincial examinations.[28] At the age of twenty-two, Zheng married a woman of the Xu clan in Xinghua 興化, Jiangsu Province. He then moved to Yangzhou trying to make a living as a painter and calligrapher. Judging from several anecdotes and from his own poems and other writings, he became heavily immersed in the bohemian life-style that was so prominent in the city. Being an unrestrained, unconventional and fun-loving person, it is very likely that he was attracted by local facilities providing amusement and cultural entertainment – the gardens and patrons of Yangzhou, and certainly also by the many tea houses, brothels and theatres in that city. Numerous of his early poems testify to excessive drinking

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26 Lin, *The Wisdom of China*, p. 496. Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234), a prime minister of the Shu Han 蜀漢 dynasty during the Three Kingdoms Period (220–265), is famous for being a wise strategist with unsurpassed intelligence. He is generally acclaimed as the embodiment of wisdom. Until the present day, he is extremely popular and his person inspired many popular TV serials, films, comics and historical novels.

27 See for instance the poem 'A poem for my wet nurse', translated by Jonathan Chaves, *The Columbia Book of Later Chinese Poetry: Yüan, Ming, and Ch'ing Dynasties (1279–1911)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 434–435.

28 For the degrees in the civil service examination system see note 5.

and affairs with singing girls. He was also notoriously bisexual as he frankly admits in one of his autobiographic notes: 'I very much delight in beautiful landscape. I also love women; even more so, I like sex with men and intimate play with female servants and boys [...]'.[29] This notwithstanding, his financial situation did not actually allow him to live such an overly decadent lifestyle; he had a wife, two daughters and one son to support. Especially his early poems are full of the joys but also sorrows of the poor scholar and artist. Nevertheless, being young and careless, he could – at least to a certain extent – rely on financial support of his father.

The big turning point came with the death of his father in 1722. It was then that he started to realize the many contradictions he had been caught in: his love for amusement, his sense of responsibility, and his poverty. From this period date the 'Seven Songs' (*Qi ge* 七歌), in which he complains about his situation, but also confesses how ashamed he is about wasting his youthful years. When in 1724 his six years old son passed away, evidently because he was not strong enough to endure hunger and cold, Zheng Banqiao finally decided to take better care of his family and clan. He started teaching and in addition sold his paintings, which was quite unusual (and disgracing) for artists of the age.[30] When, in 1725, he unexpectedly received a generous gift from his friend Cheng Yuchen 程羽宸 in order to start a new life free of misery and grief, he temporarily managed to escape the pressing situation at home, journeying for the first time to Beijing where he became involved in frequent discussions with various Chan adepts.[31]

After his return from Beijing in 1729, Zheng's literary career began to flourish. He published works such as the *Daoqing shi shou* 道情十首 (*Ten Songs with Daoist Sentiments*), which idealize simple life, but also express aversion for officialdom.[32] Up to his point, he had shown no interest in pursuing an official career, probably because he was too attached to the

29 Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, pp. 35–36. Zheng Banqiao even wrote an essay on the beauty of the male buttocks, which can be considered as a classic of homoerotic literature. For a translation and for more on his homoerotic tendencies, see, for ex., Wu Cuncun, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), pp. 103–104.

30 Qin Jin'gen, Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu, p. 10.

31 Ibid.

32 For the original text, see Qin Jin'gen, *Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu*, pp. 225–226. For more on the 'Ten Songs with Daoist Sentiments', see Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, pp. 40, 117–20; Qin Jin'gen, *Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu*, pp. 28–29; Zheng Dekai 鄭德開, "Zheng Banqiao yu ru shi dao" 鄭板橋與儒釋道, *Chuxiong shifan xueyuan xuebao* 楚雄師範學院學報 22.12 (2007); Wei Zhiyou, "'Huanxing chilong, xiaochu fannao', 'jueren jueshi' – Cong 'Daoqing shi shou' guankui Zheng Banqiao zhi fo dao sixiang"“喚醒癡聾,銷除煩惱”,“覺人覺世”– 從“道情十首”管窺鄭板橋之佛道思想, *Guangzhou guangbo dianshi daxue xuebao* 廣州廣播電視大學學報 8.4 (2008), pp. 62–65, and Yin Wen 尹文, "Banqiao daoqing zonglun" 板橋道情縱論, *Dongnan daxue xuebao* 東南大學學報 (*Zhexue shehui kexueban*) 4.6 (2002).

freedom he enjoyed as a penniless scholar and artist. Besides, his family had a tradition of refusing to serve the Manchu rulers, as was already mentioned.[33]

However, not long after his return from Beijing in 1729, he began preparing for the higher civil service examinations. The most likely reason for this change of heart was his domestic situation. The hardships and poverty he and his family had to endure had become unbearable. His son had already died, and he could not bear the pressure of further disasters. Another reason might be that, at the age of thirty-six, he finally decided that it was time to settle down and accept Manchu rule. When he eventually engaged in pursuing an official post, he was ready to take up responsibility for a life according to Confucian etiquette. As a result Zheng put aside his natural inclination towards non-conformity and a free life-style, with the aim of serving the people.[34] In 1732, he passed the provincial examinations, and, in 1736, at the age of forty-three, he achieved the second place in the national examination and was awarded the highest degree possible, the *jinshi* degree. As outlined above, by that time, anti-Manchu sentiments had to a great extent vanished.

Life as an Official

As a *jinshi* holder, in 1742 he assumed a post as magistrate, first in Fanxian 范縣, Shandong Province.[35] In all likelihood this was due to the influence of his friend Prince Shen (Shen Junwang 慎郡王), one of the Kangxi emperor's twenty-four official sons.[36] Four years later, he became county magistrate (*zhixian*) in Weixian 濰縣, again in Shandong, where he served as an official until 1753.

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33 For more on the anti-Manchu tradition in his family, see Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, pp. 39–41.

34 See ibid., pp. 37–41.

35 From the Tang dynasty (618–907) onwards, by law a district officer had to be a stranger in the county he ruled. That is to say, he was employed minimum 500 *li* (about 250 km) away from his birthplace. Other such rules included not being allowed to marry in one's own district nor to own land in that area. This rule was to limit the acquisition of power and unacceptable degrees of autonomy among local officials through 'interpersonal relations'. See Heirman Ann, Dessein Bart and Dominiek Delporte, *China. Een maatschappelijke en filosofische geschiedenis van de vroegste tijden tot de twintigste eeuw* (Gent: Academia Press, 2001), p. 150.

36 In practice, only five percent of all degree holders were awarded an official post, so without supportive connections, it was difficult to be accepted into the imperial administration. – According to Zheng Dekai, Lou Jinyuan, a good friend of Zheng and a famous Daoist, played a crucial role in providing Zheng with the post in Fanxian (Zheng Dekai, "Zheng Banqiao yu ru shi dao", p. 27). Further below we shall briefly return to Lou Jinyuan. – Qin Jin'gen argues that during his first trip to Beijing in 1725–1729, Zheng Banqiao must have been 'preparing' a sound network for an eventual later career as an official (Qin Jin'gen, *Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu*, p. 16).

Zheng Banqiao greatly surpassed his colleagues and superiors as well as the rich people of his county in showing real sympathy and concern for people suffering hardship. During the first two years of service in Weixian, he had to deal with several natural disasters; this was a kind of test for him. The county experienced a disastrous drought, resulting in mass starvation and mass migration. Zheng adopted unusual measures to alleviate the terrible conditions in his county. His biography in the *Qing shi liezhuan* 清史列傳 (*The Biographies of the Qing Dynasty*) records the following:

> When Cheng became a magistrate in Wei-hsien, there was a year of such bad harvest that people ate human flesh. Cheng Hsieh launched a great program for repair and construction work. He called on the starving people from far and near to do work in exchange for food. He ordered the wealthy families of the town to open their kitchens on a rotating basis and to feed the hungry with cooked gruel. He also assumed responsibility over the stored grain in the granaries and sold the grain for a cheaper price. As a result, countless people survived.[37]

The *Zhongxiu Xinghua xianzhi* 重修興化縣志 (*Revised Xinghua County Annals*) further describes a reply by Zheng to some of the people who opposed his reluctance to request the approval of his superiors:

> What kind of times are these? If we wait until the reports to the higher authorities have returned, there will be no survivors. If someone should be reprimanded [in the future], I will take the responsibility![38]

While administering the relief program he kept a record of those who 'borrowed' grain, writing out receipts as bonds for later payment. However, when he left Weixian upon his so-called retirement, he burnt the receipts, releasing the poor from their commitments.[39] This disastrous famine and the conflicts with his superiors left a deep impression on him – to the extent that many of his later poems deal with these events.

Other historical sources also depict Zheng as a courageous defender of the weak. Not only was he concerned with the underprivileged in his own county, but he spoke up in favor of all those who had no power at all or held lower positions, and he openly supported

37 Wang Zhonghan 王鍾翰 (ed.), *Qing shi liezhuan*, 20 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), XVIII, j. 72, pp. 5882–5883. Translation by Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, p. 45.

38 Qin Jin'gen, Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu, p. 31.

39 This is probably the most frequently cited and historically most reliable story that describes Zheng Banqiao's concern for the people and his independent and rebellious character. All works about the life and works of Zheng Banqiao cited in the present article, contain this story with more or less the same elements.

the most vulnerable ones such as children and women, whatever their background was.[40] Another story may serve as an example for this attitude. It shows how Zheng Banqiao, sharp-wittedly and in unusual ways, intervened in an accident between a porridge vendor and a rich merchant:

> As Zheng Banqiao sees the accident happen, he is urged to judge the situation. First he asks everyone nearby whose fault it is, but no one dares to point at the rich merchant. Thereupon the merchant blames a stone because it was in his way, so Zheng decides to put the stone to trial, and invites the people nearby to be witnesses. Obviously, when asking questions and hitting the stone to make it confess, it turns out the stone is mute and blind. Zheng then accuses the merchant of purposely blaming somebody (something) else, and as such deceiving him personally. According to the Confucian etiquette, cheating an official is like cheating your father. Therefore, Zheng orders the merchant to be beaten, who begs him for forgiveness. Thereupon, Zheng gives him the choice of either paying a big fine, or accepting the lashes. Of course, the wealthy merchant happily pays the fine, which Zheng donates entirely to the poor porridge vendor.[41]

Apart from showing sympathy for the poor and powerless, Zheng Banqiao also felt growing resentment against officials and even scholars more generally. As the quotation from his *Fourth Letter to Brother Mo*[42] (1744) at the beginning of this article reveals, he strongly opposed the Confucian division of society into four ranks. He also urges those striving to become officials to 'shut up', because 'the moment we [scholars] open our mouth, people will say, "All you scholars know how to talk. As soon as you become officials, you will not be saying the same things." That is why we have to keep quiet and accept the insults.'[43] In his *Ninth Letter to Brother Mo*, he again shows a skeptical attitude towards Confucian learning: 'The government graduates are also sinners against Confucius, for they are neither kind nor

40 His letters XIII and XIV, addressing brother Mo 墨, discuss the treatment of servants' and poor neighbors' children as being one's own children. For a translation see Lin, *The Wisdom of China*, pp. 492–495.

41 Own paraphrase based on Ouyang Xiulin 歐陽秀林, *Hutuxue* 糊塗學 (Beijing: Beijing dizhen chubanshe, 2006), pp. 12–13. This story has become very popular, to which the English picture story called 'Zheng Banqiao tries a rock' testifies. See Huan Shiming, *Zheng Banqiao tries a Rock, Stories about Ancient Chinese Literary and Art Figures* (Beijing: Morning Glory Press, 1986).

42 Zheng Banqiao had no brothers or sisters, but his paternal uncle had a son whose name was Mo, and who was twenty-four years younger than Zheng Banqiao. Zheng considered him a younger brother and addressed most of his *Family Letters* to this 'Brother Mo'.

43 Lin, The Wisdom of China, p. 491.

wise, and devoid of courtesy and justice.'[44] Zheng Banqiao himself admitted that all his life he had the bad habit of cursing others, who, he said, 'were especially good at scolding scholars'.[45]

Not able to be obedient, he was in constant conflict with his superiors, and he grew even more disillusioned and dissatisfied with officialdom. In one of his later poems *Thinking of Returning Home* (1751), he already announces his retirement:

> Amidst the autumnal clouds, geese will accompany me home;
> In the spring, cranes will seek their food, as I will with them.
> I will leave and hide my ineptitude well,
> The lakes will be full of fragrant watershield.[46]

According to Pohl, 'watershield' is a symbol of retirement from office. By symbolically using this word, Zheng Banqiao anticipated his retreat. He finally left office in 1753, after which he returned to Yangzhou to write and paint rather than to compromise his integrity.

Many stories deal with his retreat from office. Based on extensive textual analysis, Zhou Jiyin discerns two versions of this event: one explanation is that he was dismissed from office (*ba guan* 罷官), and one that he took leave himself (*ci guan* 辭官). His investigations show that the historical sources closest in time to Zheng Banqiao, such as the *Biographies of the Qing Dynasty* and the *Xinghua County Annals*, all mention that he took leave. The first source reveals that because he had offended superior officials, he asked to be discharged on account of poor health.[47] More recent sources, however, including a popular TV serial and several short stories, mention that he was dismissed.[48] The earliest documented version very likely is the most plausible: Zheng Banqiao was thoroughly dissatisfied with the unwillingness of higher authorities to help people in need and was so angered by their inaction that he asked to be discharged.

Whatever the different versions say, the truth is that Zheng Banqiao had been at odds with officialdom to begin with, and gradually became more and more fed up with fighting against windmills and with his inability to serve people in such circumstances. One of his later 'Lyrical Poems' called 'Life of an Official' testifies to this:

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44 Ibid., p. 487.

45 Qin Jin'gen, *Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu*, p. 46.

46 For a translation of these poems, see Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, pp. 223–228, especially the cited excerpt on p. 228 there.

47 Wang Zhongshan, *Qing shi liezhuan*, j. 72, pp. 5882–5883. At that time, poor health was the only excuse for which an official could retire.

48 Zhou Jiyin 周積寅, "Ershi nian Banqiao yuan" 二十年板橋緣, *Nantong shifan xueyuan xuebao* 南通師範學院學報 (*Zhexue shehui kexueban*) 18.2 (2002).

After ten years the silken quilt is worn and torn,
Having tasted a full turn of officialdom.
Rain has past by the locust tree hall, the sky now clear as water.
Just right for pouring some tea,
Just right for opening a bottle of wine.
And then again back to piles of books and notes.
Holding court, there is always shouting and brawling,
And the office servants make people to puppets.
Can a conscientious official be just and compassionate?
The wine is done, the candle burnt down,
The cold is leaking through as the wind arises –
How many great hopes lost?[49]

Zheng Banqiao the 'Eccentric' and Devoted Artist

After Zheng Banqiao left his post, the arts strongly appealed again, and he was happy to (re)turn to a life of aesthetics and quietness. He spent much time in Yangzhou, where he joined a group of artists who were innovative in their artistic style and later became known as the 'Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou' (*Yangzhou ba guai*).[50] Many of these artists initially had been scholar-painters who followed the literati tradition in their artistic pursuit and had then become professional painters. As they sold their paintings and calligraphy to earn a living, they were attracted to the affluent commercial city of Yangzhou. It was indeed the liberal atmosphere, freedom of expression and prosperous economy in Yangzhou that allowed these men to focus on the expression of their own feelings and temperament.

Various stories recorded in the historical annals (*Qing shi liezhuan)*, local gazetteers (*Xinghua xianzhi* 興化縣志 and *Yangzhou fuzhi* 揚州府志) and in his own *Family Letters*, poems and inscriptions describe how eccentric Zheng Banqiao was in this period, not only in his art but also as a person. One such story on a pricelist for his paintings gives an account of how little he cared about what people thought of him, and of how sharply and creatively he ridiculed the usual and conventional. Traditionally, a genuine scholar-artist would not paint for money and not on demand, he would keep his products for himself or present them as gifts to others; differently put, it was unusual, disgracing and 'unorthodox' for an artist to nourish commercial intents. However, as described above, many of Zheng's contemporaries made use of their art not just to make a living (as he did himself in his younger years), but to become rich, which afforded them an abundant life-style in an affluent city such as Yangzhou.

49 Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, p. 242.
50 See also note 6 and page 228.

During this period, Zheng Banqiao daringly published a price list for his paintings, on which we can find the words:

> If you present cold, harsh cash, then my heart swells with joy and everything I write or paint is excellent [...] Honied [sic] talk of old friendships and past companions is only the autumn wind blowing past my ear.[51]

Moreover, an addendum to the pricelist mentions: 'Written in 1759 on the advice of Monk Cho-kung who suggested that I should decline visitors.'[52] Given his outspoken and daring sense of humor, it is highly doubtful that the pricelist with inflated prices for his paintings was intended as a money-making scheme, especially given the other accounts of his integrity and incorruptibility. It was more likely a notice warning that he would not paint for those he despised like the rich salt merchants who dominated commercial life in those days in Yangzhou. It should however be noted that, although Zheng Banqiao never liked to paint for money or just to please the merchants, he did have friends among them and painted for them. Nevertheless, he apparently did this only for the more 'cultivated' merchants such as Ma Yueguan 馬曰琯 (1688–1755), one of the 'Ma brothers' who were renowned for their lavish hospitality to scholars. He also joined their artistic salons, and his artistic style undoubtedly – be it indirectly – was influenced by the presence of the salt merchants in Yangzhou.[53]

Indeed, the present situation was very different from when he was young and painted for money, at that time out of financial necessity. When he returned to Yangzhou and started to sell his paintings again, he was quite famous, and would have no problem collecting huge profits if he would have wanted to. In those days, he used to have a seal on which was written 'the same old Banqiao as twenty years ago' (*ershi nian qian jiu Banqiao* 二十年前舊板橋).[54] This self-perception reveals that he still felt the same person, and that, to him, the only difference was that people now treated him differently.

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51 William Henry Scott, "Yangchow and Its Eight Eccentrics," *Asiatische Studien* 17 (1964), p. 11 (cited in Cahill, *Fantastics and Eccentrics in Chinese Painting*, p. 96).

52 See Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, p. 59.

53 For some Chinese studies on the relation between the salt merchants as patrons of the arts and Zheng's artistic production, see, for ex., Yang Xianzong 楊賢宗 and Zhu Tianshu 朱天曙, "Yangzhou yanshang yu Banqiao fengge" 揚州鹽商與板橋風格, *Nantong shifan xueyuan xuebao* 南通師範學院學報 (*Zhexue shehui kexueban*) 19.2 (2003), and Zhang Jing 張靖, "Zheng Banqiao shufa yu Yangzhou Hui shang" 鄭板橋書法與揚州徽商, *Shayang shifan gaodeng zhuanke xuexiao xuebao* 沙洋師範高等專科學校學報 6.6 (2005). For more on Zheng's relation with Ma Yueguan, see Zheng Xie, *Zheng Banqiao ji* 鄭板橋集, 5th revised ed. (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1979), p. 157; Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, p. 58.

54 For an overview of all his commonly used seals, see, for ex., Qin Jin'gen, *Qing – Zheng Banqiao*, pp. 195–199.

The anecdote of the pricelist is another example of the 'wildness' and unconventionality for which Zheng Banqiao is known. The *Qing shi liezhuan* portrays him as *kuang* 狂, i.e. 'unrestrained, wild, and unconventional', because of his frank and critical speech,[55] and this certainly was the case. Already in his young years, Zheng himself often used the terms *luotuo* 落拓 or 'unconventional, unrestrained', and *fengliu* 風流, 'free-spirited, talented in letters and unconventional in life style', in his writings.[56] According to Meng Zhen, Zheng Banqiao's 'wildness' should be considered an example of the particular phenomenon of the 'wild', broadminded and unruly but upright famous scholar (*kuangjuan mingshi* 狂獧名士) represented by figures such as Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263) and Ji Kang 嵇康 (223–262), two members of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (*Zhulin qi xian* 竹林七賢), and later by Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593) and Shi Tao 石濤 (1642–1718) and contemporaries of Zheng Banqiao such as Jin Nong 金農 (1687–1764). Of these scholar-officials, many left officialdom or at least were unusual and unconventional in some ways, and Zheng Banqiao, who publicly admired them, very likely was inspired by their unrestrained and unusual behavior.[57]

In Search for Ideological Equilibrium

Zheng Banqiao was a fascinating character full of contradictions. He displayed a strong inclination to a light-hearted, unconventional and 'crazy' life, while at the same time taking his social and family responsibilities and his engagement as an official very seriously. Ideologically, apart from being a scholar who was deeply immersed in the Confucian tradition and who later in his life became involved in the official hierarchy, he also was a broadminded, non-dogmatic and nonconformist personality, attracted by the Daoist carefree life not bound by worldly worries, and to the Buddhist ideal of detachment. From his personal writings and historical sources commenting on the contacts he had with Daoist and Buddhist masters, we know how deeply he was influenced by the three major teachings of his times.

It needs no explanation that Zheng Banqiao's knowledge and ideals, but also his critical attitude towards officialdom, were deeply rooted in Confucian ethics and the structure of society. Moral virtues such as loyalty to the dynasty, benevolence and righteousness were emphasized in order to obtain (and maintain) social harmony. Zheng Banqiao, in his criti-

55 Ibid., p. 16. For the original text, see Wang Zhongshan, *Qing Shi Liezhuan*, j. 72, pp. 5882–5883.

56 The term *fengliu* was a term associated with the Neo-Daoist discourse in the Wei and Jin periods (3rd to 4th century AD). It refers to men of free spirit who were unbound by the morals and institutions of the Confucian school. For a detailed description of the various meanings of *fengliu*, see Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy. A Systematic Account of Chinese Thought from its Origins to the Present Day* (New York: The Free Press, 1997 [1948]), pp. 231–240.

57 Meng Zhen, "Zheng Banqiao de maodun renge", p. 61.

cism on the scholar class, took this very seriously and thought of all those who displayed corrupt practices, without sympathy for the underprivileged, as being degenerated and far from the authentic Confucian ideals. Especially in his position as a scholar, he showed himself to be a true 'father-mother-official', and later in his life he turned out to be surprisingly successful in the Confucian hierarchic social structure. It was only at the age of sixty-one – the age that Confucius himself said he 'was already obedient (to the 'Decree of Heaven', *tianming* 天命)' (*Lunyu* II, 4) – that he finally decided to stop struggling with his moral integrity amidst corrupt officials and degenerated scholars, renounce his lofty ideals as an official, and leave officialdom behind to obey another 'Decree of Heaven', namely that of the artist in him.

Among Zheng Banqiao's best friends, Buddhist monks ranked very highly. By leafing through his *Collected Works*, one can find many poems donated to these men, some describing their life-style and living environment, others narrating their thoughts; still others tell us about Zheng's friendship with them. Some of the poems cannot hide his admiration of and envy towards the simple, quiet and care-free life of men in seclusion. It is very likely that Zheng enjoyed his time with these religious friends to be free of the responsibilities and worries of his public life as an official.

Chan Buddhism in particular had a strong influence on Zheng Banqiao's thinking and his art.[58] In his *Fourth Letter to Brother Mo from Weixian* for instance, we can find hints at Chan Buddhist ideals when he wonders for himself:

> A man loses his character by rushing about and attending to worthless affairs and in the end gains nothing. It would be better for him to wander about [...] without any object of seeking benefit, but suddenly coming upon some truth before his very eyes.[59]

Especially Wufang Shangren 無方上人, also known as the 'Honorable Chan Senior', who was very proficient in poetry, painting and seal carving, became an important and long-standing friend.[60]

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58 Qin Jin'gen, *Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu*, p. 60.

59 Translation by Lin Yutang in Lin, *The Wisdom of China*, p. 495.

60 See Qin Jin'gen, *Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu*, p. 15. Wufang Shangren stayed his whole life in the "background" of society, unaffected by current conventions. In his younger years, he lived on the Lushan mountains and later became the abbot of Wengshan Monastery in Beijing. During Zheng Banqiao's sojourn in Beijing (1725–1729), he often had long discussions with him. Towards the end of his days, he lived as a recluse. As a consequence of his low-profile life, there are very few historical sources about him. But he was not just an ordinary monk. For all this, see Jin Shiqiu 金實秋, *Zheng Banqiao yu fojiao chanzong* 鄭板橋與佛教禪宗 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2001), pp. 69–70.

The fact that the emperor, particularly the Yongzheng emperor, as well as some of the gentry supported the Chan school certainly contributed to the presence of Buddhist monks among Zheng's friends. Many of the Chan Buddhist adepts occupied high positions, and as they were lettered men, loving poems and paintings, they shared a common interest.[61]

No matter how deep the Confucian and Buddhist traditions influenced Zheng Banqiao's lifestyle and personal convictions, the Daoist philosophy of life clearly comes closest to Zheng's inner temperament. Many of his writings contain Daoist elements, and his own nickname and often used seal *Banqiao daoren* 板橋道人 ('Banqiao the Daoist') confirm his life-long esteem of the Daoist philosophy. Long before he assumed an official post, he seemed to have been very fond of the Daoist way of 'leisurely wandering around' (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙游),[62] and he often wrote poems that testify of his love for nature and natural pureness.[63] Also when he served as an official and later as an artist in Yangzhou, several of Zheng's close friends were Daoist masters, of which probably the closest and most famous friend was Lou Jinyuan 樓近垣.[64]

In his *Family Letters*, Zheng also frequently makes use of Daoist symbols and ideas. An excerpt from his *Second Letter to Brother Mo* shows his concern with nature and the natural life according to the Daoist principles:

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61 Zheng Dekai, "Zheng Banqiao yu ru shi dao", pp. 25–26. For a study on Zheng Banqiao and *Chan* Buddhism, see also Jin Shiqiu, *Zheng Banqiao yu fojiao chanzong*. Other studies mentioning Buddhism as a source of influence include Qin Jin'gen, *Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu*; Jin Shiqiu, "Zheng Banqiao fangwai you kaolüe" 鄭板橋方外友考略, *Dongnan wenhua* 東南文化 3 (1999); Wei Zhiyou, "Huanxing chilong, xiaochu fannao".

62 The theme of *xiaoyao you* covers the first section of the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*. It is a metaphor for the state of mind of the illuminated man and depicts the ideal of spontaneity resulting from true knowledge of the *dao* and actualizing one's inner *dao*, which will automatically bring about a carefree life in harmony with nature. For a translation, see Burton Watson, *Chuang-tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 23–30.

63 Zheng Dekai, "Zheng Banqiao yu ru shi dao", p. 26.

64 Lou Jinyuan was also called Lou Zhenren 樓真人, 'Lou the (Daoist) genuine man'. *Zhenren* generally refers to the Daoist sage or perfect man, which denotes a person who has 'actualized' (realized) his inner self or 'virtue' (*de* 德) in accordance with the *dao*. He was not just an ordinary Daoist master, but also excelled in medical knowledge. He maintained a very close relationship with the Yongzheng emperor and once was asked to cure the emperor of a serious disease, which he successfully did. Zheng was only four years younger than Lou, and they hailed from the same region. Moreover, their attitude towards life was very similar, which enhanced their friendship even more. See Zheng Dekai, "Zheng Banqiao yu ru shi dao", p. 27. For an analysis of the life, works and thoughts of Lou Jinyuan, see Kong Xiangyu 孔祥毓, "Miaozheng zhenren Lou Jinyuan de shengping zhuzuo ji sixiang" 真人樓近垣的生平著作及思想, *Zhongguo daojiao* 中國道教 3 (2006).

> What I hate most is to have caged birds; we enjoy them while they are shut up in prison. [..] Now nature creates all things and nourishes them all. Even an ant or an insect comes from the combination of forces of the *yin* and *yang* and the five elements.

And a little further he continues:

> Generally the enjoyment of life should come from a view regarding the universe as a park, and the rivers and streams as a pond, so that all beings can live in accordance with their nature. Great indeed is such happiness![65]

In his *Daoqing shi shou* (*Ten Songs with Daoist Sentiments*), Zheng Banqiao further introduces an old fisherman, an old woodgatherer, an old monk, an old Daoist, an old scholar, and a beggar boy, all glorifying a plain and simple life. In the ninth song, he writes, 'Praise for Zhuangzi, homage to Laozi', and the last sentence of the *Ten Songs* glorifies the Daoist ideal of returning to nature: 'Singing these ten songs with Daoist sentiments, I return to the mountains'.[66]

With growing age, Zheng becomes more and more insusceptible to matters such as a successful official career, while he yearns to be free and unrestrained again. The non-ending difficulty of finding a balance between the unconventional, unruly and independent sides of his character, including a strong inclination towards Daoist and Buddhist spirituality, and his strong belief in Confucian ideals such as righteousness and benevolence were like a severe test to Zheng Banqiao – to the extent that, at the end of his life, he characterized himself in allusion to the three teachings as being 'no immortal, no Buddha, and not a wise men' (*bu xian bu fo bu shengxian* 不仙不佛不圣賢).[67] This phrase seems to betray some of the above-mentioned ideological influence by late Ming philosopher Li Zhi, who advocated himself to be skeptic from his youth, repelled by anything or anyone – Confucian, Buddhist or Daoist – identified with an organized creed. According to Li Zhi, the three teachings should be considered as one because they all originate in the 'expectation of "hearing the Way"', and the essential unity of the three teachings lies in 'their seeking for the Way in order to be delivered from this world, for only by escaping the world can they avoid the sufferings of wealth and

65 For both translations, see Lin, *The Wisdom of China*, pp. 492–493. For the original text, see Zheng Banqiao, *Banqiao jiashu*, pp. 101.

66 Qin Jin'gen, *Qing – Zheng Banqiao shu*, p. 226. For an extensive inquiry of Buddhist and Daoist elements in the *Daoqing shi shou*, see Wei Zhiyou, " Huanxing chilong, xiaochu fannao".

67 Ibid., p. 60.

rank'.[68] In many of his writings, Li Zhi's repeated critical, independent and individualistic thoughts correspond well with Zheng Banqiao's convictions and behavior.[69]

On a more abstract level, the factual *mélange* and threefold philosophical influence (*san jiao he yi* 三教合一) not only was a philosophical 'reality', but since long offered a mental framework to put life experiences in perspective, and as such served the Chinese pragmatic mind in facing life more easily. In this respect, the different schools of thought can be considered as 'moods of the Chinese mind which may be manifested in the same individual at different times or on different occasions'.[70] An example of the practical function of the *san jiao he yi* can be found in the phenomenon of 'Confucian in character but Daoist in appearance' (*nei ru wai dao* 内儒外道). This expression conveys the practice of being Confucian with regard to one's inner ambitions and strivings, and Daoist with regard to how one individually deals with life, and in particular with life's unpredictability and with fate (the Decree of Heaven).[71] As such, this aphorism denotes the Chinese practice of adhering to Confucianism as long as things go well and one – as a member of a Confucian society – manages to realize the Confucian ideals, but seeking relief in Daoist (or Buddhist) philosophy when things do not go as one would like or expect, when one encounters setbacks and feels frustrated, disappointed or angry. Lin Yutang nicely comments on this phenomenon as follows:

> Life under the Confucian code of decorum would be unbearable without the emotional relief. For Taoism is the playing mood of the Chinese people, as Confucianism is their working mood. That accounts for the fact that every Chinese is a Confucianist when he is successful and a Taoist when he is a failure. The naturalism of Taoism is the balm that soothes the wounded Chinese soul.[72]

Throughout history, many famous scholars testify of this particular attitude, among whom the poet and short-term official Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365–427),[73] and certainly also

68 De Bary, "Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought", p. 211.

69 Meng Zhen, "Zheng Banqiao de maodun renge", p. 61.

70 Clifford Plopper, *Chinese Religion seen through the Proverb* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Cooperation, 1969), p. 15.

71 A more literal translation would be: 'on the inside Confucian, on the outside Daoist'. Sometimes also *nei ru wai fo* 内儒外佛 ('on the inside Confucian, on the outside Buddhist') is used. In fact, the format of the saying is adapted to what the user wants to describe, and so there are different versions.

72 Lin Yutang, *My Country and my People* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2007 [1998]), p. 115.

73 Already at a young age Tao Yuanming (365–427) was torn between ambition and a desire to retreat into solitude. He later served in several minor posts, but his dissatisfaction with the corruption of the Jin Court (317–420) prompted him to resign. He refused to bow to powerful but corrupt officials just for

Zheng Banqiao. As a reaction to failure in their career as an official and in realizing their Confucian ideals, these men turned towards a simple life close to nature and retreated from public service. Somewhat paradoxically, since in Confucian thinking neglecting one's social responsibilities was wrong and selfish,[74] their retreat turned them into even more 'failed' Confucian scholars.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show why a successful scholar like Zheng Banqiao would write such provocative criticism on his 'own kind' as in the *Family Letter* quoted at the beginning of this article. I also tried to demonstrate how Zheng Banqiao, with his unconventional, eccentric and upright character, combined many contradictory aspects in life.

First, there is the specific *Zeitgeist* with which Zheng Banqiao grew up. The socio-political context was one in which corruption flourished, the poor and underprivileged were suppressed, and the moral degeneration of the scholar-officials was poignant. This situation became unbearable for an upright mind like his, up to the point that he left officialdom behind. On the other hand, the cultural environment provided room for 'unorthodox' philosophical and religious convictions, to which artistic innovation, a 'revision' of philosophical theories, and the influence of Ming individualist thinking testify. Zheng Banqiao's writings and deeds reflect both the orthodox socio-political context and the cultural openness for change, either in agreement or disagreement.

Secondly, his own life experiences in the given setting – the many difficulties he had to cope with as a child, then as a young and poor bohemian, and later as a well-positioned official amidst a money-driven scholar class and greedy merchants – and his upright character continuously strengthened his empathy for the weak and his resentment against corrupt men of letters. Especially during his time as an official, his feelings of indignation towards the degenerating Confucian literati grew in parallel with his disapproval of officialdom. Being anything but submissive (as for instance the story about the measures he took during the catastrophic famine illustrates) and not willing to compromise, he embodied his own criticism towards scholar-officials, which he vented in his Daoist and Buddhist inspired writings and personal philosophy of life.

Thirdly, Zheng Banqiao's contradictory and complex life-choices and his often nonconformist behavior can also be considered as a practical expression of the 'syncretism of the

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the sake of convenience, position and material gain. As the many allusions to Tao Yuanming in Zheng's writings show, he greatly admired him.

74 De Bary, "Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought", p. 16.

three teachings'. This threefold sphere of influence was officially reinforced by the philosophical and religious tolerance of the Manchu rulers, which enabled a strong Daoist and Buddhist influence on Zheng. Zheng in theory certainly was a great adherent of the Confucian ideals, but his individualistic and unconventional character and strong social consciousness made him discontent with clinging to the old-fashioned way and accepting the hypocrisy of officialdom. In this respect, the actual meaning of Zheng's own words for defining his relation with the three teachings '*bu xian bu fo bu jiansheng*' lies in his inability to stick and commit himself to just one 'philosophy' (of life), and his eagerness to maintain a carefree, authentic and independent life-style, even if this meant letting go of his high position. Throughout his public life, Zheng gave priority to Confucianism, while heavily relying on Daoism and also Buddhism for developing his personal philosophy of life.[75] In one of his later lyrical poems, Zheng Banqiao describes the poetic development reflecting his inner life as follows:

> When I was young and indulged in the pursuit of pleasures, I studied the style of Ch'in [Kuan] (1049–1100) and Liu [Yung] (fl. 1034). In my middle years, when I was filled with strong emotions, I studied the style of Hsin [Ch'i-chi] (1140–1207) and Su [Shih] (1036–1101). Now that I am old, without worldly desires and unmindful of emotions, I study the style of Liu [Kuo] (1154–1206). Everybody changes with the times and does not notice it. Who can ever escape destiny?[76]

Having passed all stages of a traditional Confucian career and having lost or renounced most of his lofty Confucian ideals, only the free and unrestrained artist remained, well-settled in the artistic tradition of the early Qing dynasty.

75 Zheng Dekai, "Zheng Banqiao yu ru shi dao", 28.

76 Translation by Pohl in his *Cheng Pan-ch'iao*, p. 230. All of the mentioned men are Song (960–1279) poets. Qin Guan 秦觀 was a student of Su Shi 蘇軾 (also called Su Dongpo 蘇東坡), excelling in *ci* 詞 song-lyrics. Liu Yong 柳永 was also well-versed in that genre and known for his ability to render the sublime accessible in the vernacular, a quality which some critics called 'vulgarity'. Xin Qiji 辛棄疾 was, apart from being a poet, a famous military leader. Su Shi was a celebrated writer and excellent statesman, famous for his independent and rebellious character. Liu Guo 劉過 called himself *Longzhou daoren* 龍洲道人 ('Longzhou Daoist Master'), which betrays his Daoist inclination.