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J. D. Schmidt

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Part I

Biography and critical study

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1

The life of Fan Chengda

Family background and youth

Fan Chengda 范成大 was born on the fourth day of the sixth lunar month, 1126 (Western calendar, June 26, 1126) in Pingjiang 平江, Wu District 吳縣, near the city of Suzhou (Soochow) in modern Jiangsu Province.¹ By the twelfth century this region of China was already a land of watercourses and canals, which crisscrossed the flatlands between the low, mist-enshrouded hills, bringing the water essential for its rich wet paddy agriculture and for transporting its fine silk and renowned handicrafts to all parts of the Chinese empire. The city of Suzhou itself had been an important urban center for more than a millennium and a half, and although the capital city of the Southern Song dynasty was now located in Hangzhou, Suzhou attracted intellectuals from all over China and was well on its way to becoming one of the preeminent centers of Chinese literary and artistic culture.

Fan later claimed that he was a relative of the famous Northern Song statesman and reformer Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052), who happened to come from the same part of China, but later scholars have cast doubt on Fan Chengda's affiliation with Fan Zhongyan's family, and perhaps Fan Chengda's family made up a connection with the more illustrious clan of Fan Zhongyan in order to raise their prestige in the eyes of contemporaries.² However, both Fan Chengda's great-grandfather Fan Ze 范澤 and his grandfather Fan Shiyin 師尹 were granted posthumous titles, so it is possible that the family had belonged to the landed gentry class for several generations, in spite of the fact that Fan's father, Fan Yu 范萼, was probably the first ancestor of Fan Chengda who served as an official, obtaining the degree of metropolitan graduate (*jinshi*) in the year 1124 and finally rising to the relatively humble post of assistant in the palace library (*bishu lang*, rank 8a).³ Although Fan Yu's official career ensured that his sons would have received a thorough

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grounding in classical literature in preparation for the civil service examinations, the family does not seem to have been especially wealthy, and his later poetry tells us that Fan Chengda personally engaged in agricultural labor as a youth, an experience that may have been unpleasant at the time but helped to develop his great sensitivity for the beauties of the Chinese countryside and peasant folkways.⁴

The years immediately preceding Fan Chengda's birth witnessed political developments that had disastrous consequences for the next two centuries of Chinese history and that had a direct impact on Fan Chengda himself. Even under its first emperors, Song military might did not suffice to overawe its neighbors to the north and west, and the Song army had suffered a number of humiliating reverses at the hands of the Qidan, a nomadic people who inhabited the steppes to the north of China proper, a situation that did not improve even after the attempts of such great statesmen as Fan Zhongyan⁵ and Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086)⁶ to reform the Song government and military. The last effective emperor of the Northern Song, Huizong 徽宗 (reg. 1101–1126), was an excellent painter and a generous patron of the arts, but he seems to have had little taste or talent for matters of state,⁷ although by this time, the Liao dynasty of the Qidan was at an equally low ebb, its emperor as addicted to falconry as the Song ruler was to art.⁸

A new nomadic people, the Nüzhen, soon took advantage of the Qidan decline, and after the Nüzhen ruler won a great victory over the Qidan in 1114, he proclaimed himself the first emperor of the Jin (Golden) dynasty.⁹ The Song emperor Huizong must have rejoiced when he received news about the Jin defeat of the Qidan, for now he had an ally in the struggle with his dynasty's hereditary enemy, and in the year 1120 the Song and Jin governments formed a military alliance and then proceeded to attack the Qidan simultaneously from north and south.¹⁰ By 1122 the Qidan emperor had to flee his capital, and his territory was partitioned between the Song and the Jin. The Jin commanders had observed the incompetence of the Song armies and generals during the campaigns against the Qidan, and in 1125 the Jin launched a surprise assault against their former allies, during which they took the Song capital of Kaifeng and captured the emperor Huizong and his son Qinzong, to whom Huizong had just abdicated his throne, along with many other members of the imperial family, in effect terminating the Northern Song dynasty.¹¹

The Jin quickly occupied the remainder of north China and set up a Chinese official as a puppet emperor, but in the meantime the ninth son of Huizong, known in history as the emperor Gaozong 高宗 (reg. 1127–1163), had ascended the imperial throne at Nanjing, inaugurating the

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Southern Song dynasty (1127–1280).¹² The Jin Tartars did not let Gaozong rest easily and soon drove him from Nanjing into the south of China until at one point he was forced to take refuge with his navy off the Chinese coast.¹³ Just when it seemed that a foreign power was to conquer all of China for the first time, the Southern Song dynasty was rescued by the brilliant campaigns of a number of new military leaders, the most renowned of whom was Yue Fei 岳飛 (1003–1141), who repelled the enemy assaults in 1133 and 1134, until in 1135 the now confident Song army was in a position to recover all of north China from the Jin.¹⁴

Gaozong began to have doubts about the wisdom of such a policy, for he had fallen under the influence of the prime minister Qin Gui 秦檜 (1090–1155), who advised the immediate signing of a peace treaty with the Jin. Historians are divided over Gaozong's motives for restraining his generals at this critical juncture in Chinese history, but it is conceivable that in addition to being wary about a possible defeat at the hands of the enemy, Gaozong did not desire a complete victory over the Jin, for it would have resulted in the return of his father Huizong and his elder brother Qinzong, necessitating his own descent from the throne.¹⁵

Nonetheless, Gaozong did need his new generals for a while, because the government was plagued by widespread banditry in the south, and the generals were commanded to suppress all local rebellions. These mopping-up operations in the south were so successful that in 1140 Yue Fei initiated a general counterattack against the Jin, defeating one enemy army after another until he bivouacked within range of the Northern Song dynasty's old capital city, Kaifeng, in preparation for the final assault against the enemy. Yet in the same year Qin Gui ordered Yue Fei to abandon his campaign, and in 1141 Yue was summoned back to the Southern Song capital, where he was murdered at Qin Gui's instigation.¹⁶ In the same year Qin Gui encouraged Gaozong to submit to one of the most demeaning treaties in Chinese history, requiring the Song government to pay a huge indemnity to the Jin every year and recognize the Jin state as its superior.¹⁷ During the fifteen odd years of Qin Gui's control of the Southern Song government, most of the other generals who had fought alongside Yue Fei were eliminated, and the scholar officials favoring war against the Jin were exiled from court and removed from office.

The area around Fan Chengda's birthplace was devastated in the warfare between the Southern Song and Jin dynasties, and Fan's family must have suffered considerable hardship during the first years of the dynasty.¹⁸ Nonetheless, events closer to home probably had an even deeper impression on Fan Chengda's youth, for in the year 1143, when Fan was seventeen years old, his father passed away, and shortly after-

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ward his mother (surnamed Cai 蔡) followed her husband in death.¹⁹ Fan had been a precocious child, able to recognize Chinese characters on the painted screens in his nursery shortly after he was one year old, and he had begun his formal education at the age of four, reading widely in Chinese history and the classics by eleven and composing classical poetry with fluency at thirteen,²⁰ but after the death of his parents, he abandoned all plans for an official career and busied himself with managing the family's remaining property, supervising the education of his two younger brothers, and finding suitable husbands for his two sisters.²¹ At the same time, he pursued his own studies at the Jianyan Monastery 薦嚴寺 in Kunshan 崑山 (between modern Suzhou and Shanghai), where he may have had his first contact with the Buddhist faith that inspired much of his finest poetry and gave him much solace during the prolonged illnesses he suffered as a young man and later in life.²²

Shortly before his parents' death, Fan married a certain Miss Wei 魏, niece of Wei Liang-chen 魏良臣 (metropolitan graduate in 1121), who was a prominent official under the emperor Gaozong and who highly appreciated Fan Chengda's literary talents.²³ Although the full name of Fan's wife is not known, the marriage, which produced two sons and two daughters, seems to have been a happy one, for his wife usually traveled with Fan during his long journeys on official business, and Fan's poetry does not mention affairs with courtesans, a normal and accepted practice for the elite of his time.²⁴

Although he may have wished otherwise, a young man with Fan Chengda's talents could hardly have been expected to live in retirement for the rest of his life, and after a friend of the family, Wang Bao 王葆 (1098–1167), who himself led a distinguished official career,²⁵ reminded Fan of his father's wishes for his son's advancement in the civil service, Fan submitted himself to Wang's tutelage and finally ended his long isolation by obtaining the degree of metropolitan graduate in 1154 at the age of twenty-eight.²⁶

The years of study that prepared the way for Fan's success in the civil service examinations were critical for the development of his poetry, too. As we shall see later, much of Fan's earliest verse was modeled on the work of Tang (618–907) dynasty and even more ancient authors, whose creations he undoubtedly read with great care during his years of relative inactivity at home. Although such imitation enabled him to master the poetic techniques that he utilized so brilliantly in later years, the travels that Fan undertook to attend preliminary examinations probably had an equal influence on the development of his poetry. Since Fan resembled many other Chinese intellectuals in his aversion to leaving his native

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village to pursue a political career, the unwelcome travels that his participation in these examinations necessitated increased his awareness of the contradictions between material success and the spiritual well-being he had cultivated up to this time, as can be seen from the following poem written before 1153:

On the road to Nanxu²⁷

I despise these travels, so contrary to my heart's desires:
 Again I speed on a lone sailboat that cleaves the waves in its flight.
 I strain eyes to spy Wu's peaks behind the roiling clouds;
 The moon that bobs on Chu's River²⁸ chills my traveling robe.
 My long song is more mournful than the dripping of tears;
 A short-lived dream rushes me back home in a daze.
 If I only had a plot of land and a gate I could shut,
 I wouldn't exchange a hermit's hut for this bamboo boat!²⁹

Of course, many earlier poets had written on the same theme, and although one may suspect the sincerity of authors who, nonetheless, strove to pass the examinations and then rise to high office, Fan Chengda seems to have had a real antipathy for public service, an attitude that would seem to account for the small role his public life plays in most of his poetry, in contrast to such earlier Song authors as Su Shi (1037–1101) 蘇軾 or Huang Tingjian (1045–1105) 黃庭堅, not to speak of the favorite Tang dynasty poet during Song times, Du Fu (712–770) 杜甫, most of whose poems can be related to his political career in one way or another. In Fan's case, one feels that if he had not been pressured by Wang Bao and economic necessity, he probably would have been satisfied to remain at home and continue his literary activities and Buddhist studies without interruption.

However, Fan's early travels had another influence upon his development as a poet, which was even more important than increasing his awareness of the hardships of official life:

Walking through the fields at Tang Village on an exquisite sunny day

The hot sun bakes the flourishing plum trees,
 Whose dense perfume assails my horse's halter.
 Hues of springtide are brewed from clouds and mist,
 Calming and freeing both mind and eye.
 The willows' brows are brushed with emerald;
 Green eyes of the mulberries³⁰ remain unopened.
 This journey I undertake is on no account vulgar –
 Just ahead the road climbs atop eight thousand mountains!³¹

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This time Fan's journey is not an occasion for a complaint about the frustrations of the scholar's life, and this poem demonstrates how Fan Chengda became ever more sensitive to the beauties of the Chinese countryside through his early travels. As we shall see, much of Fan Chengda's greatest nature poetry was directly inspired by the journeys he had to undertake on the public service that he found so onerous.

Early official career

Fan Chengda's official career commenced in 1155 when he was appointed administrator of revenue (*sihucanjun*) for Huizhou 徽州 (Xin'an 新安) in modern Anhui Province, a minor local post, which he assumed the following year, leaving his native place for the first extended period in his life.³² Fan's talents went unrecognized by his superiors for a long time, and the poetry that he wrote in Huizhou is replete with grumbling over his irksome life there. In a work addressed to a certain Tang Wenbo 湯文伯, who was contemplating retirement from public service, Fan wrote, "Racing along official life's road, one break one's arm easily / A government office anywhere is a citadel of sorrow."³³ Fan summarized his attitude toward his career and his superiors in Huizhou in the following:

After I return from the office at night I use the same rhyme for this poem, which I present to Ziuwen

Home from mounds of paperwork, I unsaddle my horse:
I, too, should neigh like a charger released from its reins!
The curled, antique script of my censor's smoke rises straight in windless air;³⁴
The moon hangs on a branch in my courtyard, its rays chilling the dew.
I idly muse about the fairy magpies that fill the Milky Way's river,³⁵
And peacefully count fireflies that flutter around my well's railing.
Tomorrow morning I must drive myself back to the office,
And force a free-spirited egret to befriend mighty red phoenixes!³⁶

Finally, only after three prefects had governed Huizhou did the "free-spirited egret" Fan Chengda find a patron among the class of "mighty red phoenixes" in the person of Hong Gua 洪适 (1117–1184), who was appointed prefect of Huizhou in 1159. Fan was particularly fortunate to have been discovered by a man with Hong Gua's background, for not only had Hong occupied important positions in the central government, but he was also a noted literary figure of the age, one of the so-called Three Hong, who also included his two brothers Hong Zun 洪遵 (1120–1174) and Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202).³⁷ Hong Gua took particular

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pains in developing his subordinates' administrative skills, and whenever he handed legal documents over to Fan, he always asked Fan how many people were involved and what their names were. Unlike the two previous prefects, Hong did not remain aloof from the lower officials and spent much time with Fan discussing ancient history and current affairs and encouraging him to advance in his political career. It is impossible to determine what Hong thought of Fan's early poetry, but he must have been impressed by Fan Chengda's administrative ability, for he was largely responsible for Fan being granted the title gentleman for attendance (*congshi lang*) in 1160.³⁸

Fan Chengda's term of office in Huizhou was important for more than the patronage he received from Hong Gua, because in spite of his many complaints about life there, Fan's poetry underwent a major transformation in Huizhou. The social conventions of the age dictated that Fan had to exchange poetry with both his equals and superiors, and although before Hong Gua arrived on the scene no major literary figure resided in Huizhou, the necessity to conform with the prevailing style of poetry in his social verse ended Fan's relative isolation from contemporary literature, with an incalculable effect on the poetry he wrote from this time on. Although we shall see that many of the characteristics of Fan's mature poetry were already developing before he arrived in Huizhou, his literary relations with other officials helped to consolidate his earlier literary achievements and resulted in the creation of a poetic style that he cultivated with few major changes for the rest of his life.³⁹

In the year 1160 Fan returned to his native village, since his term in the prefectural government had expired, but here he encountered Hong Zun, Hong Gua's brother, who had been appointed prefect of the area. Fan's stay at home was to be brief this time, because through the Hong brothers' influence, he was appointed to the Revenue Section of Lin'an (*Lin'an hucao*) in 1162, his first post in the capital city of Hangzhou (at that time called Lin'an 臨安).⁴⁰ Fan Chengda's poetry is mute about urban life in what was probably the most populous and cosmopolitan city in the world at the time, but it tells us about the many new friends he made in Hangzhou among whom was Hong Mai, another of the Hong brothers. Fan Chengda's exposure to the court in Hangzhou certainly influenced his attitude toward the politics of the age, and when Hong Mai was dispatched on a diplomatic mission to the Jin in the fourth month of the same year, Fan Chengda presented Hong poems that suggest that Fan was already coming under the influence of those officials who were dissatisfied with the Song government's subservience to the Jin.⁴¹

Although Hong Mai's mission to the Jin was singularly unsuccessful

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in promoting the Song cause, it took place at a time when Song-Jin relations had just passed through a crisis and were about to take an even more dramatic turn for the worse. In 1161, while Fan Chengda was residing at home, the Jin attacked Song forces stationed on the border and suffered an unexpectedly disastrous defeat at the hands of the Song army at Caishi 采石.⁴² Two months after Hong Mai's mission to the north, the emperor Gaozong abdicated to his crown prince, the emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (reg. 1163–1190), who in the following year encouraged a debate among court officials about the advisability of holding to the peace agreement with the Jin,⁴³ with the result that the war party came back into favor, and Yue Fei's old comrade, the general Zhang Jun 張俊 (1096–1164), was summoned to command a counterattack against the enemy.⁴⁴ The Song general, Li Xianzhong 李獻忠 (1109–1177), was successful in the first few encounters with the Jin, but in the end, conflicts between Li and another general led to disarray among the Song armies, and in the fifth month of 1163 the Song forces were annihilated at the Battle of Fuli 符離.⁴⁵ Zhang Jun was demoted the next year, and the emperor made Tang Situi 湯思退, an adherent of Qin Gui's pacifistic policies, prime minister, signaling an end to any ambitions for reconquering the north.⁴⁶ The defeat of the Song army did not precipitate a violent purge of the war party in the capital along the lines of what had occurred after the murder of Yue Fei during Gaozong's reign, but the peace the Song government signed in 1165 with the Jin brought an end to major hostilities between the two states for the next forty some years.

Although the poems Fan Chengda addressed to Hong Mai suggest that he was sympathetic to the war party, Fan's official career was not stymied by the sudden shifts in Song foreign policy during these years, and he rose gradually through the central government bureaucracy to assistant editorial director (*zhuzuo zuolang*, rank 8a), in which position he was responsible for compiling the state-issued calendar, among other duties, until in 1166 he was promoted to vice-director of the Ministry of Personnel (*libu yuanwai lang*, rank 6b), the first position of real authority he was offered. However, enemies at court attacked this promotion as irregular, because of his sudden rise in rank from 8a to 6b, and, realizing the futility of defending himself, Fan Chengda requested that he be relieved of official duties, after which he returned home again.⁴⁷ It is also quite possible that Fan's problems were related to the fall from favor of his mentor Hong Gua, who had been serving as prime minister at the time.⁴⁸

However, Fan Chengda was probably relieved to be rid of his time-consuming duties as a central government official, which had made it difficult for him to pursue his literary activities. Although Fan did write

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some good poetry during the four years of his service in Hangzhou, both the quantity and quality of his verse suffered in comparison with other periods of his life. Most of the poetry composed at Hangzhou is stiff and formal and consists largely of occasional pieces he was obliged to write in response to fellow officials or superiors, including an unusually large number of funeral eulogies.

Moreover, Fan's removal from the central government did not signify that he had actually fallen from imperial favor, because in the year 1167 he was appointed prefect of Chuzhou 處州 (Lishui 麗水 of modern Zhejiang Province). Fan's biographers assure us that he was a model prefect, initiating irrigation and flood-control projects, limiting the exploitation of the people by subordinate officials and clerks, and lessening the tax burden of the prefecture, and although one should take account of the usual tendency to praise famous intellectuals for their devotion to the people, it is quite clear from Fan's poetry on rural themes that he was always deeply concerned with the welfare of the lower classes in society (see the discussion of this question at the end of Chapter 6).⁴⁹

Mission to the north

In the year 1169 Fan was once again summoned back to the capital, and when he reported to the emperor about the reforms he had initiated in Chuzhou, Xiaozong was so pleased that he ordered similar reforms to be carried out throughout the empire. Fan also enjoyed the patronage of the prime minister Chen Junqing 陳俊卿 (1113–1186), who had him promoted to hold three positions concurrently, imperial diarist (*qiju sheren*), expositor-in-waiting (*shijiang*), and junior compiler in the History Institute (*guoshih yuan bianxiu guan*). Although none of these positions involved any real power, Fan had enough influence in court to promote the elimination of certain inhumane punishments for criminals and the further lightening of the tax burden for the area where he had served in Zhejiang.⁵⁰

The most famous event in Fan Chengda's official career took place in the year 1170, when he was appointed grand academician of the Hall for Aid in Governance (*zizheng dian daxueshi*) to head a delegation to the capital of the Jin dynasty. Although the emperor had no desire to engage the Jin armies in battle again, he was particularly keen on having the Jin return the site of the Northern Song imperial tombs at Gongxian 鞏縣 (modern Henan province) to Song control because of the desecration of his ancestors' tombs after the Jin conquest,⁵¹ and he also hoped to eliminate the demeaning ritual in which the Song emperor had to stand