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J. D. Schmidt

Excerpt

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# Part I

## Biography

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## 1

## The poet as a young man

## Youth

Nowadays, Huang Zunxian's 黃遵憲 birthplace, the city of Meizhou 梅州 (also called Meixian 梅縣), is best known in China for its champion soccer teams and large concentration of overseas Chinese retirees, but any traveler wishing to escape the twentieth-century glitter of office buildings and hotels can stroll down its narrow alleys to admire the many imposing old mansions with gray tile roofs, sturdy stone pillars, and intricately carved wooden doors (mostly in an advanced state of decay), all witnesses of a long and colorful history.<sup>1</sup>

Meizhou was first mentioned, by the name “Chengxiang” 程鄉, during the fifth century of our era and received its present name during the tenth century under the Song dynasty. Today it is the most populous city in China dominated by Hakkas (Mandarin, *Kejia* 客家, or “Strangers”), descendants of Chinese who migrated from northern China to the South during the upheavals at the end of the Tang dynasty, eventually settling in the marginal agricultural lands of Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian, Jiangxi, and Hunan provinces. Since they rarely intermarried with their neighbors, the Hakkas retained their own dialect of Chinese and many distinct customs, which gave them a strong sense of uniqueness.<sup>2</sup> They first settled in Meizhou during the Song dynasty, but the city became almost completely Hakka in population after large numbers of them fled from western Fujian province to escape the Mongol invasions during the thirteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

By that time, Meizhou had become the economic center of northeastern Guangdong province, largely due to its location on a broad plain at the confluence of three rivers, the most important being the turbulent Meijiang 梅江, which connects Meizhou directly with the coastal cities Chaozhou 潮州 and Shantou 汕頭 (formerly Swatow) and indirectly with Guangzhou (formerly Canton), the capital and largest city of Guangdong

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province. In spite of its excellent water transport, even today Meizhou lies in a fairly remote area, and most travelers go there by airplane from Guangzhou or endure a bone-rattling twenty-four-hour bus journey, compensated by glorious views of emerald mountains, clad with luxuriant ferns and stately pine trees, and interspersed with narrow valleys watered by fast-flowing streams, where peasants living in round, fortresslike villages scratch a meager living from the stony soil.

Life has always been so hard in northeastern Guangdong that its people have tended to look to the outside world to supplement their incomes. Even after the Mongol threat receded, the peasants of the region were frequently on the move, some of them settling in Taiwan during the seventeenth century, many more thousands abandoning their native land for Southeast Asia at the end of the last.<sup>4</sup> Nor were members of well-to-do families immune from this wanderlust; while their womenfolk worked at home, many of the men became traveling merchants or served as officials in the Chinese imperial government.

In their openness to the outside world and their spirit of adventure, the Hakkas resemble the other inhabitants of Guangdong province, who have been looked down upon by northern Chinese as “Southern Barbarians” (*Nanman*) for centuries, but who gradually grew in prosperity and began to blossom culturally by the eighteenth century. While the culture of the Qing imperial Court in its northern capital Beijing basked in the late afternoon sunshine of the classical tradition, much of China from the Yangzi Basin southward was more open to innovation, and over a century before Huang Zunxian’s birth formerly backward Guangdong became a center for artists who were willing to go beyond stale formulas and for literary figures who refused to be bound by orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup>

This cultural ferment in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Guangdong was further stimulated by contacts with Western countries, which became increasingly frequent as the nineteenth century progressed. Guangzhou was the only port open to European traders before the First Opium War (1841–2), and by the middle of the nineteenth century Guangdong had become the principal center for the transmission of foreign ideas to China. It is no coincidence that some of the most famous reformers and revolutionaries of late Qing China, such as Huang Zunxian, Kang Yuwei 康有為 (1858–1927), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), and Sun Yatsen (Mandarin, Sun Yixian 孫逸仙), (1855–1925), all hailed from Guangdong province and that two of these, Huang and Sun Yatsen, were of Hakka background.<sup>6</sup>

Huang Zunxian was born on the twenty-seventh day of the fourth lunar month (May 29), 1848, when Meizhou was called Jiayingzhou 嘉應州 and the Daoguang emperor had little more than two years left to his

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thirty-year reign.<sup>7</sup> Huang was born into a gentry family that had prospered through commercial activities and investment in land. His great-great-grandfather, Huang Run 黃潤, who is reported to have lived to be a hundred, eked out a living by writing livestock contracts at country markets and distinguishing authentic foreign money from counterfeit for local merchants, but by the time of Huang Zunxian's great-grandfather, Huang Xueshi 黃學詩, Hakka perseverance and frugality had greatly multiplied the family's wealth. Huang Xueshi's wife, Madame Li 李氏 (1774–1858), a woman who was to have a strong influence on Huang Zunxian's youth and in whose mansion he was born (room no. 4), was the first member of the Huang family to come from a scholar-official background. Huang's grandfather, Huang Jisheng 黃際昇 (1809–91), was a leading figure among the local gentry of Jiayingzhou. He assisted with relief efforts during a devastating famine in 1865, and, according to the local gazeteer of Jiayingzhou, the common people of the district continued to sing his praises long after his death.<sup>8</sup>

Huang's father, Huang Hongzao 黃鴻藻 (1828–91), was the first member of the family to succeed in the civil service examinations, and after obtaining the degree of Provincial Graduate (*ju ren*) in 1856, he began a long and distinguished official career, gaining praise for his skill in arranging the transport of supplies to the Chinese army in southern Guangdong and northern Vietnam during the Sino-French War. Huang Hongzao was also considered an accomplished poet during his lifetime, and his example must have encouraged Huang Zunxian's early endeavors in composing verse.<sup>9</sup>

Huang Zunxian grew up in a large household, which consisted of his great-grandmother, his grandparents, a host of uncles and aunts, as well as three younger brothers and two younger sisters by his father's first wife, along with one younger brother and two younger sisters born to his father's two concubines. His father's success in official life ensured that Huang would pursue a classical education in preparation for the civil service examinations, but the relative who exerted the strongest influence on his early education was his great-grandmother, Madame Li. At the age of seventy-five this remarkable woman took complete charge of Huang Zunxian's upbringing, after his younger brother Zunmo 遵模 (1849–1917) and his younger sister Zhenyu 珍玉 (born 1850) were born in quick succession, arousing concern that their mother's milk would not be sufficient for all three children. According to a poem written years later when Huang Zunxian made offerings at his great-grandmother's tomb, she

Plucked me from Mother's breast and carried me away.  
From that moment on I never left her side;

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And she cuddled me hundreds of times each day.  
 With her very own hands she cut damask and silk,  
 To tailor an outfit for her little great-grandson.  
 She mixed crystal sugar with snow-white flour  
 And baked sweet tarts for her baby to eat.  
 When my hair was disheveled, she combed it straight;  
 When my feet got dirty, she heated bathwater.  
 She bought rouge and makeup in the marketplace,  
 And then powdered my face until it became fragrant.  
 She coaxed my hair up into a little topknot  
 And then decked me with earrings that glowed like the moon.  
 She dressed me in a red skirt and a crimson blouse,  
 So I looked like a baby girl in every respect!<sup>10</sup>

Thankfully, Huang Zunxian's great-grandmother did not merely spoil him, for her own upbringing in a scholar-official family had impressed on her the importance of a literary education, and she began teaching Huang to sing Hakka folk songs and to chant poems from the widely read classical anthology, *Poems of the Thousand Masters* 千家詩, soon after he could talk. His great-grandmother's intuition that he would become a famous scholar-official some day instilled the self-confidence that enabled Huang to surmount the many hurdles lying in his path, and her efforts to teach him the rudiments of classical poetry formed the basis for his later endeavors in the field of literature.

Although Huang's great-grandmother arranged for him to begin his studies under a tutor soon after he could walk well, his formal education in the art of poetry commenced when he was about ten years old. According to Huang's later account, his teacher discovered the young boy's extraordinary literary talent when he asked him to compose a couplet in response to the famous concluding line of a poem by the Tang poet Du Fu (712–70) about an imagined ascent to the summit of the holy mountain Taishan:

I take one look down and all the other mountains become small.<sup>11</sup>

Huang wrote:

The *entire* world is really small after all;  
 Why do you just speak of the mountains around you?<sup>12</sup>

This couplet is a remarkable feat for a ten-year-old boy. On the purely literary level, it demonstrates Huang's skill at employing the poetic device known as *fan'an* 翻案 (literally, "turning over the table"), by which an

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author overturns the line of an earlier master.<sup>13</sup> Du Fu's original line evokes the feeling of transcendence that he would experience after ascending Mount Tai, but Huang chides Du for his failure to realize that Mount Tai and the mountains around it are really nothing remarkable when viewed in a larger world context. On the intellectual level, the line is even more noteworthy, for it suggests that as a young boy Huang already took delight in unconventional ideas and was beginning to formulate a broader view of the world that eventually developed into the internationalism of his mature literary creations.

Huang's precocity startled his teacher, and his neighbors began to predict a brilliant future for him. The young boy must have been stimulated to greater endeavors by all this praise, for by the age of seventeen he had composed a set of three satirical poems, entitled "Meditations," which he later deemed worthy of inclusion in his collected writings (see the translation of the first poem, on page 217). The verbal wit that Huang had displayed as a boy blossoms for the first time in these poems, and his intellect has already been honed sharp by extensive reading in Qing-dynasty philosophy.

The third poem of the series, which contains a brief history of Confucianism from the death of its founder down to the beginning years of the nineteenth century allows us to form a reasonably clear picture of Huang's intellectual affiliations. Huang pokes fun at a number of post-Zhou-dynasty Confucian thinkers in the work, but he reserves special scorn for Song-dynasty neo-Confucianism, which culminated in the grand synthesis of the Southern Song thinker, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).<sup>14</sup> Zhu's commentaries on the Confucian classics had been elevated to the status of official orthodoxy by the Qing Court, but the pragmatically minded Huang Zunxian had little use for Zhu's mysticism and metaphysical speculation:

The Song Confucians came along a thousand years later  
And rummaged around in the cavern of Principle.  
They boasted to everyone that they had revived lost doctrines,  
Which they really had stolen from Zisi and Mencius!  
Their lectures on the Way were eccentric and far-fetched;  
Their discussions of affairs especially impractical.  
A thousand heads swarmed after position and fame;  
All those fellows ever thought about was currying favor!<sup>15</sup>

Huang Zunxian owed both his pragmatism and his dislike of Zhu Xi's metaphysics to his study of earlier Qing-dynasty thinkers belonging to the so-called Han Learning, especially its founder Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–82), who advocated practical learning aimed at solving political and social problems and favored a systematic, philologically based study of

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the Confucian classics along the lines initiated by Han-dynasty scholars.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is no coincidence that Huang's condemnation of Zhu Xi is followed by a passage praising the efforts of Gu and his followers Yan Ruoqu 閻若璩 (1696–1704), Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), and Wang Niansun 王念孫 (1744–1832) to explicate the Confucian classics:

Gu and Yan first blazed the new trail,  
Which Duan and Wang brought to a glorious conclusion.  
By careful study they interpreted the ancient commentaries,  
Making all the obscure passages crystal clear!<sup>17</sup>

In spite of his admiration for Gu Yanwu and his followers, Huang's praise of Han Learning is not without qualifications, for he felt that their philological studies sometimes led them to ignore the practical applications of Confucius' thought:

These thinkers only serve to occupy space on your bookshelf;  
There's nothing useful you could do with their works.  
Yes, the Way of Confucius is truly great,  
For it embraces the thought of all schools of philosophy!<sup>18</sup>

Huang's criticisms of both Song neo-Confucianism and the school of Han Learning are closely related to the satire of the first poem (translated on page 217), the series' masterpiece, which pokes fun at the many impractical nineteenth-century scholars who slavishly followed ancient models when attempting to solve contemporary problems. We shall look closely at Huang's hilarious portrait of a late Qing pedant in this poem when we examine the development of his early satirical technique in Chapter 9, but at this point we should note the debt that his biting wit owes to the revival of literary satire led by the poets Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792–1841) and Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857) in the first half of the nineteenth century. Huang owed a particularly large debt to Gong Zizhen's verse, but during this early period he drew inspiration from Wei Yuan's writings too, and his later interest in foreign cultures must have owed a good deal to Wei's well-known research on foreign geography.<sup>19</sup>

The second poem of the series is quite different from the other two, for its satire is more restrained, probably because it treats the highly sensitive topic of the Qing dynasty's decline. In the first four lines, Huang describes the dynasty's founding in glowing terms:

After the Qing house answered Heaven's call to rule,  
Its love and grace lasted two hundred years.

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A half dozen wise rulers ascended the throne,  
Equal in virtue to our ancient sages.<sup>20</sup>

But the golden age of the Qing dynasty had drawn to a close:

Recently rebels have spread throughout our marshlands;  
Holy China has been sullied by foreign filth.  
When a government lasts long, disorder follows;  
Laws have defects, none are perfect.<sup>21</sup>

In the passage that follows, Huang blames lazy officials and conservative scholars for the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion and China's defeat during the Opium War and then concludes the poem with an announcement of his determination to help reform the Qing political system:

But I never stop yearning to end these disorders;  
It is my duty to repair our dynasty's defects.  
I will moisten my finest brush from Wu Creek  
And draft a proclamation to celebrate our revival!<sup>22</sup>

Already at the age of seventeen Huang Zunxian possessed a strong sense of mission, which was to motivate most of his actions for the rest of his life and inspire much of his best poetry.

In the tenth month of 1865, when he was eighteen years old, Huang Zunxian married a young woman surnamed "Ye" 葉. Perhaps, Huang was recollecting his wedding day when he composed a series of charming quatrains about the private thoughts of a bashful bride some years later:

*The newly married bride (one quatrain of fifty-one)*

I'm so shy my young passions seem locked between my brows,  
Although I've arrived at the ripe age of sixteen.  
When people come to gossip about my new groom's family,  
I bow my head, stitch my bride's shoes, and just play dumb.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, nineteenth-century China did not tolerate young lovers' dreams for long, and only a few days after Huang's marriage disaster struck the family.

**Family misfortunes**

The China into which Huang Zunxian had been born in the year 1848 was a nation on the brink of catastrophic and revolutionary change. The



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Qing dynasty had been founded by Manchu warriors in 1644, and during the next century and a half it provided one of the most efficient and stable governments China or any other nation of comparable size had ever enjoyed.<sup>24</sup> More than a century of peace and prosperity lulled the majority of Chinese into a false sense of security, but by the end of the reign of the Qianlong emperor (reg. 1736–96), signs of decay were evident to a minority of concerned intellectuals.

The first major disaster did not strike the Qing empire until 1839, when the English humiliated the Chinese army and navy during the First Opium War.<sup>25</sup> But the war was only a minor, transitory blow compared to the Taiping Rebellion, a popular uprising that shook the traditional imperial order to its very foundations. The armies of the Taiping were crushed only after fourteen years of bitter warfare, by which time large areas of southern China lay in ruins and millions of Chinese had perished in battle and in the ensuing famines.<sup>26</sup> European aggression continued, and in 1858 and 1860 the Western powers launched the Second Opium War, burning the Chinese emperor's Summer Palace outside of Beijing. To most outside observers it seemed that the once glorious Qing empire was drawing its last breaths.<sup>27</sup>

Jiayingzhou did not suffer as badly as some other areas of southern China during the early years of the Taiping Rebellion, but in 1864 Qing forces drove the rebels from their capital at Nanjing, and Taiping soldiers fled south into Guangdong, burning and looting everything in their path.<sup>28</sup> In the fourth month of 1865, a serious famine had ravaged the region surrounding Jiayingzhou, so when rebel forces occupied the town at the end of the tenth month, few people were able to offer resistance, and some of the poorer members of society were attracted to the Taiping side by rebel propaganda against the old regime. Caught up in the midst of this upheaval, the Huang family fled down the river in a small boat to the town of Sanhe 三河, about 50 kilometers east of Jiayingzhou, but when Sanhe itself came under threat of attack they were forced to travel farther downriver to the city of Chaozhou 潮州 (now known as Chao'an 潮安). On the way to Chaozhou they were nearly murdered by river pirates, who stole the few possessions they had managed to take with them (see "Ballad of Chaozhou," translated on page 219).

When the Taiping soldiers retreated in 1865 and the family set out for Jiayingzhou, they were keen to consign the preceding year's horrors to oblivion. During the journey home, Huang Zunxian wrote:

*Returning home after the disorder*

Finally we experience the joy of homecoming;  
The vicious rebels are now totally subdued.

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Our mouths open wide, cheek to cheek, with grins;  
 One stroke of the oar, and we've left Chaozhou port.  
 We brothers and sisters sit around in a circle,  
 Traveling at ease midst wind and wave.  
 Our nerves are on edge, we haven't settled down,  
 So in the middle of the night, please, no talk of war!<sup>29</sup>

When the Huangs arrived back in Jiayingzhou, they discovered that their ancestral home lay in ruins:

One torch reduced everything to a heap of scorched earth;  
 Here stood the humble dwelling my grandfather built.  
 We do have a home, but only the walls stand now;  
 There aren't any trees left to sleep in at night.  
 My young wife weeps when she opens her trunk,  
 But the boys are still glad to shoulder their hoes.  
 The moss and flowers flourish after a rain –  
 Loose pages of books flutter all around the house.<sup>30</sup>

The family had survived the uprising, but now it experienced straitened circumstances never known to its younger members. A poem that Huang addressed to his younger sister on the occasion of her wedding, shortly after the family's return to Jiayingzhou, describes his family's economic difficulties:

My family was prosperous in days gone by,  
 But year after year we met with disorder.  
 For generations we collected gems and pearls,  
 But nothing remains after all these disasters.  
 Formerly, the storerooms in our family pawnshops  
 Glittered with piles of other people's clothes.  
 Now we must pawn our personal wardrobes;  
 I wonder who owns those storerooms now!  
 We sweep up leaves to make do for firewood  
 And cook coarse grains instead of rice.  
 A few yards of cloth remain for sewing,  
 But now Mother must do the labor herself.<sup>31</sup>

But the Taiping Rebellion did not just force Huang Zunxian to experience economic deprivation; it also compelled him to think more carefully about the political and social problems that bedeviled the Qing dynasty in the middle of the nineteenth century. Huang's earliest surviving poetry, the "Meditations" series, expressed his profound dissatisfaction with prevailing intellectual and political tendencies, but in spite of the three