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Author(s): Daisy Yan Du

Source: *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (FALL, 2010), pp. 130-160

Published by: Foreign Language Publications

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41491030>

Accessed: 08-05-2017 09:55 UTC

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Diffusion of Absence: The Official Appropriation of Yuan Zhen in Modern Tongzhou[†]

Daisy Yan Du

What his house is to the peasant, the city is to civilized man. As the house has its household gods, so has the city its protecting Deity, its local saint.

—Oswald Spengler (in Park/Burgess 1925: 1)

Yuan Zhen's Second Coming to Tongzhou

Current scholarship in modern Chinese studies is increasingly interdisciplinary, drawing on multiple fields, including urban studies, anthropology, folk culture, tourism, visual culture, (classical and modern) literature, and history. It is with this interdisciplinary consciousness in mind that I explore the official appropriation of the historical figure Yuan Zhen (779–831) to promote an official version of the Mountain-Climbing Festival in Tongzhou, a place now named Tongchuan, the capital city of the Dazhou Municipality in the mountainous northeast of Sichuan province (fig. 1).¹ Scholars such as Yingjie Guo and Beth Notar have examined the state's recent revival of past cultural heroes for the purposes of patriotic education and economic profit.² Others, including Ben Hillman and Pál Nyíri, have shown how the state often appropriates traditional rituals to spatially and culturally transform its cities.³ This essay straddles these two strands of scholarship:

[†] I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Professor Nicole Huang for her intellectual guidance and insightful comments. I am indebted to Professors William H. Nienhauser Jr., Mark Meulenbeld, and Yongming Zhou for their consultation and inspiration. My sincere gratitude also goes to Professor Kirk A. Denton and the two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable suggestions for further improvement.

¹ In the Xia dynasty, the city proper was called Liangzhou, and later it belonged to the state of Ba (Ba guo). From the Sui dynasty on, it was called Tongzhou. In the Ming dynasty, it was renamed Dazhou. From the Qing on, it was known as Daxian. In 1993, its name was



Figure 1: An aerial photograph of modern Tongzhou taken from the top of Cuiping Mountain. Phoenix Mountain appears in the background, with the city at its foot. It is said that Yuan Zhen took a boat downstream (from right to left in the picture) along the Zhou River and left Tongzhou on the ninth day of the Lunar New Year in 819. The inscription in the upper right corner is a poem by General Zhang Aiping (1910–2003), who was born in Dazhou. From Li Kaijie 2007.

first, by examining the local government's rehabilitation of the cultural hero Yuan Zhen within the context of the traditional Mountain-Climbing Festival; and second, by documenting the local government's geopolitical process as it undertakes the spatial and cultural renewal of modern Tongzhou. Ultimately, I argue that the sense of "tradition" represented by Yuan Zhen and the original Mountain-Climbing Festival is actually a creative invention of the government intended to serve the political and economic purposes of the modern present. The past, as Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001: 3) writes, "is an eternally unfinished project, constantly under construction and constantly being revised." In the city of modern Tongzhou, the past is being constructed specifically through the figure of Yuan Zhen.

A renowned yet controversial poet and politician during the Tang dynasty, Yuan Zhen, whose style name is Weizhi, was a "complex person with a complicated family background" (Palandri 1977: 20). For various political reasons, he was exiled as an "adjutant" (*sima*) to Tongzhou in the year 815;⁴ Yuan Zhen's period of exile there helped make a literary name

changed to Dachuan city, capital of the Dachuan District. In 2000, it was renamed Tongchuan, and it's currently the capital city of the Dazhou Municipality. The Dazhou Municipality has more than 6,460,000 people, and Tongchuan itself is home to around 500,000 inhabitants. Unless otherwise indicated, all of the information regarding modern Tongzhou is from its official website: <http://www.dzxw.net/>.

² In *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China: The Search for National Identity Under Reform*, Yingjie Guo (2004) studies the revival of Zeng Guofan and Confucius in contemporary China. In her article "Du Wenxiu and the Politics of the Muslim Past," Beth Notar (2001) examines the current state's glorification and commodification of Du Wenxiu, the Muslim leader of the "Yunnan Muslim Rebellion" in 1856.

³ Ben Hillman (2004) analyzes the recent revival of Islamic rituals among the Hui of Balong. Hillman (2003) also examines the politics of renaming in the local government's transformation of Zhongdian county into "Shangri-la County." In *Scenic Spots: Chinese Tourism, the State, and Cultural Authority*, Pál Nyíri (2006a) explores the state's spatial politics in interpreting and representing Chinese culture. Elsewhere, Nyíri (2008) also examines the spatial politics of tourist sites through a case study of Songpan, a town located in Sichuan.

⁴ The translation of official titles in the Tang Dynasty draws on Hucker 1985.

for the city. As Cao Xuequan (1574–1647), a famous Ming dynasty literatus, wrote: “Tongzhou is famous because it had Yuan Weizhi as its adjutant” (1984: *juan* 23). In turn, Yuan Zhen’s exile functioned as a springboard for a future political career in which he was rehabilitated and gradually promoted by the central government. In 819, Yuan Zhen left Tongzhou for Guozhou (today’s Lingbao in Henan) to assume the post of chief aide administrator (*zhangshi*). By 822, he became the Grand Councilor of the Tang court for a period of three months, reaching the high point of his political career.

Despite its role in launching this career, Yuan Zhen was eager to leave Tongzhou, which he considered a wretched place, for good. He could not, of course, have anticipated that more than a thousand years later, in the spring of 2007, his image would suddenly be omnipresent in this city as a symbol of the state-sponsored Mountain-Climbing Festival, a time-honored folk festival celebrated in Tongzhou prior to 2007. This controversial poet-politician was suddenly transformed into a cultural icon in this small yet densely populated city: a grand Yuan Zhen Museum was built; statues of the man were erected throughout the city; his poems were carved on city walls; his name appeared in posters and newspapers; he was discussed on local radio and television channels; and his name even appeared on the menus of famous restaurants. After a millennium of relative obscurity, Yuan Zhen had a spectacular second coming to Tongzhou that imposed his presence on every corner of the city.

Despite this thorough iconization, Yuan Zhen had never been closely associated with Tongzhou. I argue that his ubiquitous “presence” since 2007 was actually the result of the local government’s strategic appropriation of his image and name for various cultural, political, and economic purposes. In fact, his carefully manufactured presence paradoxically underscores this very absence. The tension between Yuan Zhen’s virtual “presence” and his *de facto* “absence” reveals a rupture that ironically subverts the official discourse that attempts to reconstruct him as an omnipresent, ideal, and

powerful local ruler. The appropriation of Yuan Zhen calls attention to what Eric Hobsbawm terms the “invention of tradition” (1983: 1) and simultaneously demonstrates how the state infiltrates culture to promote its ideological position. As Matei Calinescu (1987: 236) succinctly points out: “Propaganda can masquerade as ‘cultural’ entertainment and, conversely, entertainment can be directed toward subtle manipulative goals.” In the case of Tongzhou, the Yuan Zhen project both is the product of and reinforces the state’s political ideology.

The Officialization of the Mountain-Climbing Festival

The traditional Mountain-Climbing Festival in China is usually celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth month in the lunar calendar and involves activities such as mountain-climbing, memorializing ancestors, drinking chrysanthemum wine, and wearing dogwood. The festival, also called Double Ninth Festival (Chongyang jie), was officialized by the state in the late 1980s and renamed Senior Citizens’ Festival (Laoren jie) as a way to encourage respect for the elderly.

Why did the local officialization of the traditional Mountain-Climbing Festival in Dazhou occur in 2007? Although the answer to this question may be elusive, a number of converging forces contributed to the event. In the early 1980s, the local government established a small Yuan Zhen Museum on Phoenix Mountain, but the museum did not garner much attention from the public. The local government’s interest in Yuan Zhen intensified after a team of Japanese scholars interested in the poet-official visited the city in 1996 and again in 1998; this governmental attention gave rise to a collection of official documents entitled *Yuan Zhen and Tongzhou*, which was supervised, edited, and prefaced by Hu Wenlong, then Party Secretary of the Dachuan District.

In 2005, another incident that was particularly significant for Dazhou Municipality took place: natural gas was discovered in its suburbs, the largest deposit in China, surpassing that of Talimu Basin in Xinjiang and

⁵ See Wang 2006. The top four state projects were the Three Gorges Dam Project, the West-East Natural Gas Transmission Project, the Qinghai-Tibetan Railway Project, and the South-to-North Water Diversion Project.

Ordos Basin in Inner Mongolia. The State Council of China considered this discovery so important that it made Transferring Sichuan Natural Gas to the East (*Chuan qi dong shu*) the fifth-ranked state project. China National Petroleum and Chemical Corporation rushed to Dazhou, bringing unprecedented economic incentives and professional personnel to this area.⁵ Dazhou, a remote and obscure mountainous municipality, suddenly became famous throughout the country. Probably for the first time in its history, the city caught the attention of the central government in Beijing, making its people proud as never before of their local identity. In an attempt to mold Dazhou into a *Zhongguo qi du* (China's city of natural gas), the government believed it was imperative to connect this isolated place—economically, politically, and culturally—with the national center. The official promotion of Yuan Zhen and the Mountain-Climbing Festival was part of this multifaceted agenda.

At the same time, the cultural climate of contemporary China created an atmosphere favorable to Dazhou's rise to prominence. Other obscure regions of the country had begun connecting themselves with the outside world by reviving local festivals to promote political, economic, and cultural development; such festivals include the International Kite Festival in Weifang (Shandong), the Horse Running Festival in Kangding (Sichuan), the Water-Splashing Festival in Yunnan, and the Girls' Festival in Lugu Lake (Yunnan). Dazhou could draw from these successful examples to promote its own Mountain-Climbing Festival as part of a bid to attract both tourists and investors.

⁶ Although the term *denggao jie* literally means "climbing-high festival," this paper uses "Mountain-Climbing Festival" because this festival is associated with mountains. On April 3, 2009, the Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival was rated one of the ten most famous festivals in Sichuan.

The time was ripe: on June 20, 2006, the General Affairs Committee of the People's Congress of Dazhou approved the government's proposal to establish the *Zhongguo, Dazhou: yuanjiu denggao jie* (China, Dazhou: Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival) as an official annual event starting in 2007.⁶ Even the festival's name links it with the national context of China—suggesting that it was intended to be not merely a local affair, but an event with national significance. Unlike its traditional counterpart, which

was held on the ninth day of the first month, the official festival extended over three days from the eighth to the tenth day of the first month in the lunar calendar.⁷ To memorialize the inauguration of the official festival, the government published *Dazhou minsu fengqing zhi yuan jiu denggao* (Folk culture of Dazhou: the Mountain-Climbing Festival on the ninth day of the lunar new year) in the spring of 2007; Li Xiangzhi, the CCP Secretary of Dazhou Municipality, wrote the preface, and Kang Lianying, the Vice Party Secretary of Dazhou Municipality, and Li Kaijie, a member of Dazhou Municipal People's Congress, edited the volume.

According to this official collection, the term *yuanjiu* has two meanings. First, it refers to Yuan Zhen himself who, as the ninth child in his family, was also called Yuanjiu (*yuan* indicates his family name, and *jiu* means "nine") by his family and friends. This is substantiated by the poem "Yi Yuanjiu" (In memory of Yuanjiu), by Bai Juyi (772–846), who was Yuan Zhen's best friend. Second, *yuanjiu* denotes the date of the Mountain-Climbing Festival, the ninth day of the first month of the Lunar New Year; this date is significant because throughout China, the Mountain-Climbing Festival is usually celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth month instead of the first month.

Why is the Mountain-Climbing Festival celebrated at a different time in Tongzhou? According to the official explanation, the local people were admirers of Yuan Zhen's personal integrity and poetic talents, and they benefited greatly from the political and economic measures he adopted during his term of office in Tongzhou. Thus locals were deeply saddened when Yuan Zhen left Tongzhou on the ninth day of the first month in 819. To fully commemorate his departure, they climbed Cuiping Mountain to watch his boat as it drifted downstream and finally faded out of sight.⁸ Since then it has become customary for the Tongzhou people to climb Cuiping Mountain on the ninth day of the first month. It is said that the Tongzhou people practiced this tradition for more than one thousand years following Yuan Zhen's departure in 819 (Li 2007: 23, 64, 96).

⁷ The mountain-climbing festival in Dazhou takes place on the ninth day of the first month in the lunar calendar, whereas in other parts of China it takes place on the ninth day of the ninth month.

⁸ In the Tang Dynasty, Cuiping Mountain was known as Qing'ai shan (Green love mountain). Because of its vast bamboo tracts, Yuan Zhen called the mountain "Zhu shan" (Bamboo mountain). See Lu 1815: *juan* 46.

The Mythic Origin of the Mountain-Climbing Festival

The notion of commemorating extraordinary government officials has historical roots in China. Francis L. K. Hsu (1955: 99) observes that “in many parts of China it was a custom for the people of many a city to honor an official who was loved and who had to depart with a temple in which the official’s living image in the form of clay or wood was worshipped before and after his death.” This kind of ritualistic practice was so important for Chinese people that it assumed almost religious proportions, becoming what C. K. Yang (1970: 161, 163) calls an “ethicopolitical cult”:

Chinese community had a number of cults dedicated to local leaders and officials who in their lifetime had prominently served the public interest, sometimes by sacrificing their lives and fortunes. These were the men . . . who served as virtuous examples for later generations because of their great deeds, and who acquired a sacred character in the eyes of the public by being enshrined in a temple. . . . Practically no locality was without one or more temples or sanctuaries dedicated individually or collectively to departed officials.⁹

⁹ C. K. Yang (1970: 294–295) distinguishes between two kinds of religion: diffused religion and institutional religion. In China, institutional religion is best represented by “major universal religions such as Buddhism and Taoism and by religious or sectarian societies,” and diffused religion includes “ancestor worship, the worship of community deities, and the ethicopolitical cults.”



Figure 2: The Mountain-Climbing Festival in the late 1970s. From Li Kaijie 2007.

Although honoring a departed official is not unusual in China, the collective commemoration of Yuan Zhen in modern Tongzhou is unique. Even when the festival was officially banned during the Mao era, from 1950 to 1978, some people continued to climb the mountain to celebrate this festival. After the Cultural Revolution, the festival was revived and nearly the entire city participated in this local ritual (figs. 2, 3, 4). In 2007, for instance, there were an estimated 150,000 climbers, most of whom were local residents. There were also outside tourists, including professional personnel from China National Petroleum and China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation who were in the area working on the extraction of natural gas.

The official story that the Mountain-Climbing Festival originated with Yuan Zhen is controversial. There are historical inconsistencies in the story, and it is contested by alternate narratives of the festival’s origins. First of

all, the exact date of Yuan Zhen's departure from Tongzhou is unknown. Although official documents state that Yuan Zhen left Tongzhou on the ninth day of the Lunar New Year, research from renowned scholars such as Liu Weichong (1977: 60) and Bian Xiaoxuan (1980: 307) indicates that we can be certain only that Yuan Zhen departed Tongzhou sometime during the spring of 819. He traveled downstream along the Zhou River to the Three Gorges.¹⁰ In Yining, he happened to meet his best friend, Bai Juyi, who was on his way to assume the post of *cishi* (prefect) in Zhongzhou (today's Zhongxian). Bai Juyi recorded the exact date of their encounter, the tenth day of the third month in the lunar calendar, in his poem "Sanyou dong xu" (On the three travelers cave).¹¹ In fact, no historical evidence exists to prove that Yuan Zhen left Tongzhou exactly on the ninth day of the first month. Local scholar Zhang Wenyi speculates that Yuan Zhen probably left Tongzhou between late February and early March, given that it takes only a few days to travel downstream from Tongzhou to Yining. Coming from distant Jiangzhou, Bai Juyi would have needed to set out one or two months earlier than Yuan Zhen in order to reach Yining at the same time. Because Bai Juyi traveled upstream and Yuan Zhen traveled downstream, Yuan Zhen would have moved much faster than Bai Juyi. This timeline suggests that Bai Juyi left Jiangzhou around January and Yuan Zhen left Tongzhou in February or March (Zhang 1990: 34).

Even the date of the first Mountain-Climbing Festival is uncertain. Official records assert that this unique festival has been celebrated by local residents for more than one thousand years following Yuan Zhen's departure. Because of the lack of historical evidence, however, we are unable to ascertain exactly when the festival first took place. The earliest reference to this event was made in the *Gazetteer of Dazhou*, which was compiled by County Magistrate Chen Qingmen in 1742 and further edited by the next County Magistrate, Song Mingli, in 1747. In a section on local customs, this document states: "On one particular sunny day of the Lunar New Year, all people will climb up Cuiping Mountain, singing, drinking,

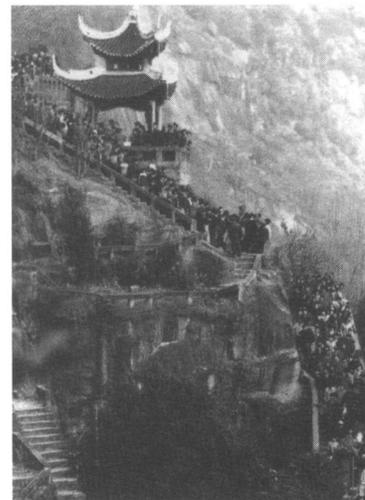


Figure 3: The Mountain-Climbing Festival in the 1980s. From Li Kaijie 2007.



Figure 4: The Mountain-Climbing Festival in 2006. From Li Kaijie 2007.

¹⁰ Zhouhe (Zhou River) joins Bahe (Ba River) and collectively becomes Qujiang (Qu River) at Sanhui in Dazhou Municipality. The Qu River runs into Jialingjiang (Jialing River), which joins the Yangtze River in Chongqing.

¹¹ The eponymous "three travelers" were Bai Juyi, Yuan Zhen, and Bai Juyi's younger brother, Bai Xingjian.

and sightseeing for the whole day" (Chen/Song 1742: *juan* 1). The Customs section of the *Gazetteer of Daxian*, compiled by County Magistrate Lu Fenghui in 1815, includes the same reference to this festival (1815: *juan* 19); Lu Fenghui probably quoted verbatim from Chen Qingmen. However, the two gazetteers specified neither the exact date of the first event nor whether the memory of Yuan Zhen prompted the festival. Historical records suggest that this particular climb was a communal spring outing connected to new year's celebrations and unrelated to Yuan Zhen.

The earliest reference to when in the annual calendar the festival was held was recorded in the *Gazetteer of Daxian*, compiled by County Head Yuan Ji'an in 1938. This document, however, associated the festival not with Yuan Zhen, but with the Jade Emperor: "The ninth day of the Lunar New Year is called *shangjiu* [Prime Nine, the Jade Emperor's birthday]. All women in the city will climb up Cuiping Mountain to make offerings to him. They will bring food and wine and stay on top of the mountain, and they will not go back home until it is twilight" (Yuan 1938: *juan* 9). This celebration of the Jade Emperor's birthday was a common custom in neighboring areas as well. Gazetteers of nearby towns such as Wanyuan referenced these celebrations: "The ninth day of the Lunar New Year, which is called *shangjiu*, is the birthday of the Jade Emperor. People usually climb mountains and visit ancestral tombs to celebrate this festival" (Ding 1991: 321). It is quite possible, then, that the Mountain-Climbing Festival in modern Tongzhou is linked with the tradition of memorializing the Jade Emperor. *The Folk Culture of Dazhou* has acknowledged this Taoist connection, explaining that from 126 to 818 the festival commemorated the birthday of the Jade Emperor, but after 819 it gradually lost its religious connotation and became instead a remembrance of Yuan Zhen (Li 2007: 95).

The first recorded association of the Mountain-Climbing Festival with Yuan Zhen was made by Liu Cunhou (1885–1960), a local warlord who represented the Guomindang (GMD) in Daxian from 1924 to 1933. Commanding the 23rd branch of the GMD Army in the campaign to

exterminate the Communists in northern Sichuan in 1933, Liu Cunhou was defeated by the Red Army under the leadership of Xu Xiangqian (Liu 1991: 87). In his long poem “Zheng yue jiu ri you Cuiping shan ji shi” (Climbing Cuiping Mountain on the ninth day of the Lunar New Year), composed in the 1920s, Liu Cunhou attributed the origin of the Mountain-Climbing Festival to Yuan Zhen:

On the ninth day of the Lunar New Year, all the people went out for a spring outing in groups. Yuan Zhen was once an official of Daxian. On that day he took a boat and departed. All the people went out to see him off. Bringing food and wine, they climbed Cuiping Mountain. Although it has been one thousand years since his departure, the yearly climb never stops. On this particular day every year, the mountain looks even greener because of the mountain-climbers. (Yuan 1938: colophon)

Highlighting the political significance of this cultural festival, Zhang Wenyi (1990: 34) points out that Liu Cunhou purposely attributed its origin to Yuan Zhen to conceal his own brutalities as a cruel warlord. Yuan Zhen, a revered and honest figure, functioned as a symbolic stand-in to promote Liu Cunhou’s own image as a benign ruler of Daxian.¹²

A different legend associates the event not with Yuan Zhen but with an obscure official named Chen Xichang. Chen was an upright and incorruptible county magistrate who succeeded in bringing prosperity to the area, which he ruled from 1891 to 1899. When he left Daxian in 1899, he began the journey on the ninth day of the Lunar New Year because it had an auspicious connotation for his political ascent.¹³ As he was leaving, all the people climbed up Cuiping Mountain to bid him farewell and watched him sail away. After Chen’s departure, climbing the mountain became an annual folk festival for the people (Chen 1996: 5).

Why would the government of modern Tongzhou want to promote Yuan Zhen instead of Chen Xichang? For one thing, whereas Chen’s name is now largely forgotten, Yuan Zhen is still well known, as both a political

¹² Li Bingru (1897–1976), known as the Plebian Poet of Northern Sichuan (*Chuanbei pingmin shiren*), also attributed the festival to Yuan Zhen in his poem (1923): “On the ninth day of the Lunar New Year, Yuanjiu (Yuan Zhen) happened to leave Daxian. The local people brought wine and climbed up the mountain. This good custom has been passed on from generation to generation.” In 1945, Li Bingru reasserted his claim about the origin of the Mountain-Climbing Festival, writing that this festival “was to commemorate Weizhi (Yuan Zhen) according to the legend, or it might have been initiated by Yuan Zhen himself” (Ren 1998: 101, 171).

¹³ According to the local legend, a man named Zhang Youren enjoyed doing good deeds for the people. By dint of his virtue, he finally became a god, and the day he ascended to heaven was the ninth day of the Lunar New Year. He was then elected as the Jade Emperor, and the day he ascended to the throne was again the ninth day of the Lunar New Year. Every year on that day he inspects the world, and the people have the opportunity to offer sacrifices so that he will bless them.

and a literary figure. Chen Xichang was a resolutely local figure, but Yuan Zhen had ties to the political center as a famous poet who later became the Grand Councilor of the Tang court. By attributing this festival to Yuan Zhen, the local government could assert a place for Tongzhou within the larger framework of national historical narratives. Furthermore, because Chen Xichang governed during the late Qing and Yuan Zhen in the Tang, linking the festival with Yuan Zhen allowed the government to invoke a sense of antiquity essential to its cultural campaign.

Motivations for Officializing the Mountain-Climbing Festival

What motivated the local government to officialize the traditional Mountain-Climbing Festival? As anthropologist Gao Bingzhong points out, the state often appropriates folk rituals to take advantage of the political and economic opportunities these events represent (2000: 327). The official rhetoric in the proposal (no. 45) of the Second Session of the People's Congress of Dazhou in 2006 is telling in its desire to establish a grand-scale "Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival" that caters to both local residents and outside tourists: "The Mountain-Climbing Festival has already been popular among the local people. It is necessary and probable for the government to take this opportunity and elevate this festival into a grand political, economic, and cultural fiesta" (Li 2007: 26).

In political terms, the officialization of the festival is aimed at using the example of Yuan Zhen as a model to improve the quality of local officials, thus generating trust and unity between the government and the people. As the official document states: "Yuan Zhen is a beloved poet and *fumu guan* (parental official) of Dazhou. The official establishment of the 'Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival' can promote the spirit of uprightness, honesty, diligence, and incorruptibility of the officials of Dazhou." If the quality of officials improves, the local people will trust the government and be more apt to follow its leadership. "Establishing the 'Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival,'" the document claims, "can promote the image of a benevolent

government that cares for the people, loves the people, and follows the will of the people. In this way, the local people will feel encouraged. As a result, they will be more willingly united under our leadership" (Li 2007: 26–27).

In economic terms, an official Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival would endow the city with civility, historical lineage, and cultural taste, thus attracting tourism and business investments; this smaller city would then be linked with Chengdu and Chongqing, the two largest and most prominent cities in Sichuan. According to the official document: "Establishing the 'Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival' is part of our agenda to build a *wenhua qiangshi* (big cultural municipality). It can bring us enormous incentives for developing our economy and culture. The government can make the most of this festival by incorporating economic and trade opportunities. In this way Dazhou can be integrated with Chengdu and Chongqing" (Li 2007: 26). This need to be connected with the outside world for economic development became even more urgent after the discovery of natural gas in the area.

The Tongzhou government's appropriation of Yuan Zhen, an ancient cultural figure, for its current political and economic exigencies needs to be understood in the larger context of the country's "socialist spiritual civilization" program. The official discourse of "socialist spiritual civilization" can be traced back to the early 1980s. The program became even more imperative after the 16th Congress of the CCP tellingly claimed in 2002 that "the construction of a socialist spiritual civilization is a precondition for achieving the goal of a *xiaokang shehui* (well-off society)" (in Nyiri 2006b: 88). The central government stressed the importance of "spiritual civilization" not only as a political means to "[maintain] ideological control over emerging social inequalities" (Flower 2004: 651), but also because of a Marxist belief that the "superstructure" can boost the "economic base" and thus accelerate the country's progress toward modernization. Traditional culture therefore plays a vital role in the construction of a socialist spiritual

civilization. Increasing efforts to emulate/copy the antique, seen in the revitalization of the Confucian temple in Nanjing (or the revival of Yuan Zhen in Dazhou), demonstrate how such civilizing practices have “taken on the momentum of a major trend in local efforts to promote the expansion of a commodity economy” (Anagnost 1997: 167).

As part of the spiritual civilization campaign, the CCP especially emphasized the importance of improving the *suzhi* (quality) of the population, which emerged as a prominent national project after 1976. The *suzhi* discourse, according to Ann Anagnost, marks “a shift in state policy focus from regulating births to raising the quality of the population as a whole,” namely “a shift from quantity to quality” (2004: 190). In line with this rhetoric, the population’s *suzhi* determines the economic development of the country, to the extent that the poverty and backwardness of China can be explained only by the “low quality” of its population, especially in rural areas. The discourse of *suzhi* thus maps a direct link between the quality of its individual citizens and the economic prowess of the whole nation.

The official view is that modern Tongzhou is particularly lacking in spiritual civilization and population quality: its citizens are regarded as people with inadequate *suzhi* who, for instance, neglect their duty to keep the city clean. This lack of quality becomes even more evident during public events such as the yearly Mountain-Climbing Festival. As the official news laments: “The yearly Mountain-Climbing Festival on the ninth day of the Lunar New Year is a big test for Dazhou citizens’ quality. However, the outcome of this test was always embarrassing and disappointing. After the citizens climbed up the mountain, they littered trash on the ground, making the green mountain a big trash bin” (“Yuanjiu denggao” 2008).

According to the same news report, however, the official installation of the Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival in 2007 marked a turning point. Now proud of their local identity, the people were inspired to improve their quality in line with the central government’s advocacy of spiritual

civilization: “To our great joy, during this year’s Mountain-Climbing Festival, Dazhou citizens’ quality has been greatly improved, fitting in well with our theme: ‘climbing-up the mountain every year; everybody makes progress’” (“Yuanjiu denggao” 2008). Local residents were said to have made this progress during the 2008 festival by being “more civilized” than ever before (“Jinnian denggao” 2008). According to this official report, most of the citizens brought their own trash bags and refrained from littering. In fact, the government offered small rewards such as bars of soap and toothpaste for citizens who voluntarily collected their own trash. The government believes that improved population quality will make Dazhou more attractive to the outside world and will accelerate its progress toward economic prosperity.

Yuan Zhen’s “Absence” in the Official Literature

The local government spared no effort in molding Yuan Zhen into a “cultural calling card” that represents the face of a civilized modern Tongzhou. In government documents, he is described as a faultless poet. Even his controversial *yan shi* (poems of seductive allure) are extolled: the official collection maintains that far from being indecent, Yuan Zhen’s poems of seductive allure “break the taboo of erotic writing in Chinese literature and even make a ground-breaking contribution to the world’s literature” (Ren 1998: 238). According to Qing scholar Zhao Yi (1727–1814), Yuan Zhen was second to Bai Juyi in poetic talent (1981: 36); Zhao Yi’s view was the standard evaluation of Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi in Chinese literary history. The Tongzhou local government’s collection argues that Yuan Zhen’s poems are actually far superior to Bai Juyi’s. Yuan Zhen was originally more famous than Bai Juyi; during the Tang “people would usually mention Yuan Zhen first by saying *yuan bai*, not Bai Juyi first by saying *bai yuan*. It is in later history that Bai Juyi became more famous than Yuan Zhen” (Ren 1998: 249).

Furthermore, the official representation of Yuan Zhen glorifies him as

a virtuous politician with impeccable personal integrity. He is regarded as “a sage who is devoted to the prosperity of the country, an incorruptible official concerned with the weal and woe of his people, and a vigorous fighter against government corruption” (Ren 1998: 231). Contrary to this official depiction, representations of Yuan Zhen in histories such as the *Jiu Tang shu* (Old book of Tang) and the *Xin Tang shu* (New book of Tang) are less than positive. As the *Old Book of Tang* states: “When Yuan Zhen was in Yuezhou [today’s Shaoxing], he was notorious for acts of corruption” (Liu 1975: 4336). Yuan Zhen became especially controversial after his apparent involvement with eunuchs: suffering from the bitterness of exile, according to the *New Book of Tang*, Yuan Zhen finally “gave up his principles and licked the boots of the eunuchs” in order to become Grand Councilor of the Tang court (Ouyang/Song 1975: 5229).

Yuan Zhen is also lauded by the government for his economic contribution to Tongzhou. He is regarded as Tongzhou’s greatest benefactor because he ended the “barbarism” of the people and brought about “the great economic prosperity of this city” (Li 2007: 94). Actually, as the Adjutant of Tongzhou, Yuan Zhen worked under the Chief Aide Administrator and did not have the political power to transform the local economy. Bai Juyi, who was the Adjutant of Jiangzhou around the same time, made reference to the relative political impotence of this position in his poem “Jiangzhou sima ting ji” (On being the adjutant of Jiangzhou): “Only those old, weak, and incompetent officials who nevertheless hold high ranks or have many years of working experience can be appointed adjutant, which is a position of leisure. If the local people prosper, he will not enjoy the credit; if the local area degenerates, he will not shoulder any responsibility” (Bai 1999: 627). It is no surprise, then, that Yuan Zhen’s own poem “Gao she Sanyang shen wen” (Sacrificial document to notify the Sanyang Deity before burning and tilling the land) notes that “there are many problems in Tongzhou, but as the Adjutant my power is limited and I cannot rectify the wrongs of Tongzhou” (Yuan 2000: 619). In his poem “Tongzhou,” he also revealed that

“with a monthly salary of 30,000, I have much leisure time and can sleep until twilight” (2000: 28).¹⁴ No wonder Yuan Zhen was able to compose so many poems during his stay in Tongzhou, including his famous “Lianchang gong ci” (On the Lianchang Palace). It was also during his tenure as adjutant that he frequently exchanged poems with Bai Juyi, who was then in exile in Jiangzhou. In fact, their poetic exchange during this period has historically been termed the *Tong Jiang chang he* (Poetic exchange between Tongzhou and Jiangzhou). Although there is no denying that Yuan Zhen made great literary achievements while in Tongzhou, it is far-fetched to say that he brought economic prosperity to the county. In reality, his contribution to Tongzhou was confined to the many poems he composed as offerings to local gods for the benefit of the local people.¹⁵

The strong attachment that official documents describe between Yuan Zhen and the local people is a cultural construct. Despite the sadness people allegedly felt about his departure, Yuan Zhen never expressed a favorable impression of Tongzhou. Harboring a strong sense of displacement, he desired to leave the place from the moment he arrived, making himself symbolically “absent” from the very beginning of his residence. In his poems, Tongzhou is portrayed as a remote and barbaric place plagued by poisonous snakes, mosquitoes, wasps, and spiders, and its people are uncivilized and superstitious.¹⁶ In his “Qianxing shishou” (Ten poems for entertainment), he depicts the local people as “barbarians who were different from the orthodox Han people” and who “spoke a primitive language that was hard to decipher” (Yuan 2000: 172). In the poem “Chou Letian dongnan xing shi yibai yun” (To Bai Juyi: on a south-eastern journey), he writes: “The local people were so uncivilized and illiterate that I can find no one with whom to discuss poems” (2000: 135). It is no surprise then that his poem “Chou Letian yuhou jianyi” (To Bai Juyi: remembrance after the rain) likened Tongzhou to Hell, unquestioningly expressing his disgust for the place (2000: 231). Bai Juyi also regarded Tongzhou as barbaric and was upset about Yuan Zhen’s being exiled there. Bai expressed these negative

¹⁴ For more information on the practice of burning and tilling the land in the Tang, see Daze Zhengzhao 2000. For the salary of Tang officials, see Chen Yingke 1935.

¹⁵ These poems include “Bao Sanyang shen wen” (Offering sacrifices to Sanyang deity), “Gao she Sanyang shen wen” (Sacrificial document to notify Sanyang deity before burning and tilling the land), and “Gao she Zhu shan shen wen” (Sacrificial document to notify the deity of Bamboo Mountain before burning and tilling the land).

¹⁶ These poems include “Ba she” (The snakes of Ba), “Luofeng” (Hornets), “Zhizhu” (Spiders), “Yizi” (Ants), “Mazi” (Lasiohelea), “Fuchenzi” (Leafhoppers), and “Meng” (Gadflies).

sentiments in his poem “De Weizhi daoguan hou shu beizhi Tongzhou zhi shi changran yougan yincheng sizhang” (Thoughts on Yuan Zhen’s appointment to Tongzhou) (Bai 1999: 209). From another perspective, Yuan Zhen’s and Bai Juyi’s negative views of Tongzhou perhaps explain the urgency that leaders of modern Tongzhou felt to connect this obscure place with the grandness of national history.

Yuan Zhen’s Absence in Space

In addition to endorsing Yuan Zhen in its official literature, the local government went to great lengths to promote him to its people, emblazoning his image around the city to advertise the first Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival: a new and grander museum was built to memorialize Yuan Zhen; statues of him were erected around the city; and his poems were published in local newspapers and magazines (fig. 5). However, the excessive visibility of Yuan Zhen paradoxically betrayed his very invisibility. In fact, this was a dazzling display of the government’s own “presence” and its power to dictate meaning in the city space. The government’s display demonstrated Michel Foucault’s (1999: 140) claim that “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power.”

The government’s assertion of power over the city space is evident in its capacity to divest the space of its original meaning and impose a new one. The only spatial trace Yuan Zhen left in Tongzhou is the Jiayun Pavilion (fig. 6) located atop Cuiping Mountain, where the first Mountain-Climbing Festival supposedly took place more than one thousand years ago. Built by Yuan Zhen during his tenure in Tongzhou, it was later demolished during the Ming dynasty and rebuilt in 1797. Because of the political unrest from 1950 to 1979, the Jiayun Pavilion was damaged and the celebration of the Mountain-Climbing Festival on Cuiping Mountain was interrupted. Although the Jiayun Pavilion is the only place in Tongzhou definitively associated with Yuan Zhen, remarkably the government showed little

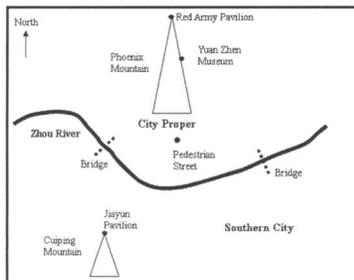


Figure 5: The spatial layout of modern Tongzhou. Courtesy of Alex Jianzhong Chen.



Figure 6: The dilapidated Jiayun Pavillion on top of Cuiping Mountain (Jan. 2007).

interest in it in the official cultural campaign it launched in 2007. Rather than making the pavilion the focus of Yuan Zhen's resurrection, the

government ignored the site, which languished among the farmlands on top of Cuiping Mountain. Instead, the government developed Phoenix Mountain, which is located across the Zhou River directly facing Cuiping Mountain. With the government's backing, the main venue for the Mountain-Climbing Festival was shifted to Phoenix Mountain because it was fully developed and could host more mountain climbers than the smaller Cuiping Mountain (Li 2007: 97). This spatial movement across the river demonstrates the distancing of the Mountain-Climbing Festival from its supposed original site and from the symbolic meanings associated with that particular site.

Because the festival site was shifted to the other side of the river, the Yuan Zhen Museum was also built, in the early 1980s, on Phoenix Mountain. When the government decided to establish the new Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival in June 2006, the old museum was torn down and replaced by a grander one. Visiting the new museum is a point of pilgrimage for the climbers: as they ascend the long and monumental stairway flanked by stone-carved railings, the sense of awe and solemnity is gradually heightened until the climbers reach the sculpted wooden arches engraved with five Chinese characters: "Yuan Zhen jinianguan" (Yuan Zhen memorial hall). The wooden arches lead to an immense square that covers 2,000 square meters. This massive structure is especially remarkable given its precarious location on the side of a steep mountain. Differing from Mao-era political squares and the contemporary commercial plazas of the market reform era, Yuan Zhen Memorial Hall and its square are tucked away in the depths of the mountain.¹⁷ Secluded from the hustle and bustle of the city below, the museum's square is almost always empty, except during the festival. Detached from the urban space of the city, the museum, like a temple, exudes a spirit of seclusion and timelessness. The Yuan Zhen Memorial Hall building itself, 1,400 square meters in area, is located across the square from the entrance arches. Fashioned in the Tang dynasty style with symmetrical lines, white walls, trellis windows, couplets

¹⁷ For a discussion of Tian'anmen Square, see Wu Hung 2005. For a discussion of commercial plazas in contemporary China, see Jinhua Dai 1999.

on the door columns, and upturned eaves, the memorial hall resembles a place of worship. To underscore its association with *denggao* (climbing high), the building was actually designed to visually mimic the Chinese character *gao* (fig. 7).



Figure 7: The Square and the Yuan Zhen Museum on Phoenix Mountain (Feb 26, 2007).

Although the memorial hall may look like the character *gao*, it is not the highest building on Phoenix Mountain, because it is situated only about halfway up the mountain. The highest building, located on top of the mountain, is the Red Army Pavilion, which was erected in 1982 to memorialize the 60,000 people who died fighting against the local GMD army led by Liu Cunhou (fig. 8). The pavilion was renovated in 2006 to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the victory of the Long March as well as the first Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival. The Red Army Pavilion was designed to encourage local people to commemorate revolutionary martyrs, carry on their honorable tradition, and foster patriotism. With



Figure 8: The Red Army Pavilion at the summit of Phoenix Mountain. The city of Tongzhou stretches out below it. From the official website of Dazhou: <http://www.dzxw.net/>.

four levels and four angles, it is symbolically associated with the Fourth Branch of the Red Army led by Xu Xiangqian (1901–1990) and Li Xiannian (1909–1992), who liberated modern Tongzhou. On top of the mountain and at thirty-three meters tall, the Red Army Pavilion is more visually impressive than the Yuan Zhen Memorial Hall and looms over the city proper.

A huge red star, a symbol of communism and its revolutionary spirit, adorns the top of the Red Army Pavilion. With a diameter of two meters, this star is positioned like a god's eye with an omniscient view of the city. Its dominating presence demonstrates the symbolic power of the color red to punctuate the visual signifying system of everyday life in modern Tongzhou. The red star's dominating presence is underscored by neon lights that make it visible even at night; in this way, the red star radiates a "red" aura under which the entire city basks day and night. The Red Army Pavilion's symbolic value in modern Tongzhou parallels that of the Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai, with its height serving as a cultural icon for the city. Whereas the Oriental Pearl Tower signifies Shanghai's status as a highly commercialized metropolis, the Red Army Pavilion embodies the spirit of the "revolutionary base area."¹⁸

¹⁸ Dazhou (Tongzhou) was part of the Sichuan-Shaanxi Revolutionary Base Area (ChuanShan geming genjudi) in the 1930s.

The Red Army Pavilion represents a spatial power hierarchy. In his analysis of "On the Collapse of the Leifeng Tower" and "The Collapse of the Tower of the Sage" written respectively by Lu Xun and Chen Fang, David Wang (1988) demonstrates that in Chinese culture the tower is often a symbol for an oppressive ethical code and ossified political tradition. A tower's collapse, Wang argues, implies the liberation of the oppressed from below (1988: 187). In other words, the tower itself and what is symbolically repressed underneath its foundation constitute the confrontation between the orthodox and the heterodox, the mainstream and the marginalized, the oppressor and the oppressed. The Red Army Pavilion, which looks more like a monumental tower than a pavilion, can be read as a cultural symbol that assimilates the "non-red heretics," such as Yuan Zhen and Liu Cunhou, situated below it.

The vertical relationship between the Red Army Pavilion and the Yuan Zhen Museum thus insinuates a disguised power relationship. The Red Army Pavilion visually dominates the Yuan Zhen Museum, which, tucked away in the mountainside, lacks a panoramic visual perspective. During the first Yuanjiu Mountain-Climbing Festival, the government held an official mountain-climbing contest. One might have expected the Yuan Zhen Memorial Hall to be the destination of this contest, but because of its dominant spatial and political position, the Red Army Pavilion was given that distinction.

This spatial layout symbolically integrates the local government's Yuan Zhen project with the national "red" master narrative. This has to be understood in the larger context of contemporary Chinese history. After the June Fourth movement in 1989, the CCP government launched various cultural campaigns as remedies to the "cultural nihilism" it considered the root of the "chaos." One such state project involved reviving traditional culture (Guo 2007: 6), and another aimed to develop and promote "sites for patriotic education." In Nanjing, for instance, all primary and secondary school students have been required since 1996 to visit forty compulsory and optional "sites" before they can finally graduate (Guo 2004: 25–26). Modern Tongzhou's government combined the two approaches by simultaneously promoting Yuan Zhen and red tourism.¹⁹ However, the hierarchical spatial relationship between the Yuan Zhen Museum and the Red Army Pavilion suggests that the red discourse still dominates cultural rhetoric. Even in terms of the climb route itself, the Yuan Zhen Museum functions as a cultural *means* that ultimately leads to the "red" *end* at the Red Army Pavilion. The tradition represented by Yuan Zhen can be seen as a kind of foundation for the revolution represented by the Red Army Pavilion. Unlike the Mao era, when tradition was denounced, in today's Tongzhou the interrelationship between tradition and revolution is intertwined in more complex ways.

Yuan Zhen's absent "presence" is further visualized in a bas-relief

¹⁹ This is typical of red tourism; red tourists to Yan'an, for example, usually also visit the Yellow Emperor Mausoleum. My thanks to Kirk Denton for pointing this out.

carving that appears on the wall of a residential building at the entrance to the Pedestrian Street in the city proper (fig. 9); his visual presence is thus shifted from the sacred mountain to the secular and commercial world below it. As an everyday spectacle for shoppers, Yuan Zhen becomes even more dissociated from the ritualistic meaning of the festival that is held at a specific place (mountain) and time (the ninth day of the Lunar New Year). The carving was commissioned by the government and a real estate company in 2006. Yuan Zhen's image appears at the center of this large rectangular carving. The book in his right hand symbolizes his poetic talents, and his attire alludes to his time as an official in Tongzhou. He is depicted with a very serious visage, as if he is deeply concerned about his people's lives. To Yuan Zhen's left is an inscription of his poem to Bai Juyi, and to his right is Liu Cunhou's poem "Climbing Cuiping Mountain on the



Figure 9: The relief carving of Yuan Zhen on the Pedestrian Street. Liu Cunhou's poem appears on the left side (Feb 25, 2007).

Ninth Day of the Lunar New Year," in which Liu attributed the origin of the festival to Yuan Zhen.

Here on the Pedestrian Street, in the shadow of the Red Army Pavilion, the GMD general Liu Cunhou is allowed a public "presence." Local official documents defend Liu Cunhou precisely because he linked the festival to Yuan Zhen: "We cannot deny Liu Cunhou's cultural tastes because of his status as a GMD general. Liu Cunhou's explanation of the origin of the Mountain-Climbing Festival is more valid because during the Republican era there were probably a greater number of historical materials for him to trace the origin of the festival" (Ren 1998: 257). The case of Liu Cunhou demonstrates the government's power to impose meaning on different spaces. In exhibitions inside the sacred Red Army Pavilion, Liu Cunhou is represented as an enemy of the local people, but on the Pedestrian Street he assumes a kind of cultural authority reinforced by his ties to Yuan Zhen. Like Yuan Zhen's resurrection, Liu Cunhou's revival can take "place" (spatially and symbolically) only when it is located securely within the Red Army Pavilion's ideological supremacy.

Conclusion: Yuan Zhen as the Profitable Absence

In the spring of 2007, the government of modern Tongzhou officialized the traditional Mountain-Climbing Festival in an attempt to connect this relatively obscure region with the national center. The government not only attributed the origin of this festival to Yuan Zhen, but also constructed him in official literature as a faultless poet-politician who brought prosperity to Tongzhou. At the same time, the government went to extravagant lengths to saturate the city space with Yuan Zhen's image. The government's choice of Yuan Zhen was expedient: the city had few other significant cultural resources to draw on. Tongzhou is no center of handicraft like Weifang, nor does it have Yunnan's exotic customs. Although choosing this historical figure has its risks, Yuan Zhen provides the much needed, yet precarious link to traditional culture in the sense that the tradition he represents is a

strategically constructed one, and the Yuan Zhen project actually has less to do with honoring the man himself than with using his name and image to exert political, economic, and cultural influence over the area in the urgent pursuit of modernity and progress. In this Yuan Zhen project, the past is creatively reinvented, historical accuracy is strategically abandoned, and Yuan Zhen becomes absent. It should be noted, however, that the Yuan Zhen project is not a unidirectional movement imposed from above by the government, but is marked by a complicity between the official and the populace, who, for various purposes, willingly participate in this profitable cultural fiesta. While the government benefits politically and economically from the Yuan Zhen project, the people can also enjoy the sense of pride in their local identity and the economic incentives and employment opportunities the project brings about. The revival of Yuan Zhen, together with the officialization of the traditional Mountain-Climbing Festival, thus allows for the possibility that the government, local residents, entrepreneurs, and a gradually growing number of local and outside tourists can benefit—in political, commercial, cultural, symbolic, or simply emotional terms—from the “absence” of Yuan Zhen in modern Tongzhou.

Glossary

Ba guo	巴國
Bahe	巴河
"Bao Sanyang shen wen"	報三陽神文
"Bashe"	巴蛇
Chen Fang	陳放
Chen Xichang	陳錫鬯
Chongyang jie	重陽節
"Chou Letian dongnan xing shi yibai yun"	酬樂天東南行詩一百韻
"Chou Letian yuhou jianyi"	酬樂天雨後見憶
Chuanbei pingmin shiren	川北平民詩人
Chuan Shan geming genjudi	川陝革命根據地
Chuan qi dong shu	川氣東輸
cishi	刺史
Cuiping shan	翠屏山
Dachuan	達川
Daxian	達縣
Dazhou	達州
"De Weizhi daoguan hou shu beizhi Tongzhou zhi shi changran yougan yincheng sizhang"	得微之到官後書備知 通州之事悵然有感 因成四章
Du Wenxiu	杜文秀
"Fuchenzi"	浮塵子
fumu guan	父母官
"Gao she Sanyang shen wen"	告畚三陽神文
"Gao she Zhushan shen wen"	告畚竹山神文
Guozhou	虢州
Jialingjiang	嘉陵江
Jiangzhou	江州
Jiayun ting	戛云亭
Kangding	康定
Liangzhou	梁州
Laoren jie	老人節
"Jiangzhou Sima ting ji"	江州司馬亭記
"Lianchang gong ci"	連昌宮詞
Li Bingru	李冰如
Lingbao	靈寶
Liu Cunhou	劉存厚
Li Xiannian	李先念
Lugu hu	瀘沽湖
"Luofeng"	蝮蜂

"Mazi"	蟻子
"Meng"	虻
"Qianxing shishou"	遣興十首
Qing'ai shan	青愛山
Qujiang	渠江
Quxian	渠縣
Sanhui	三匯
"Sanyoudong xu"	三游洞序
shangjiu	上九
sima	司馬
suzhi	素質
Tong Jiang changhe	通江唱和
Tongchuan	通川
Tongzhou	通州
Wanyuan	萬源
Weifang	濉坊
Weizhi	微之
wenhua qiangshi	文化強市
xiaokang shehui	小康社會
"Xushi ji Letian shu"	叙詩寄樂天書
Xu Xiangqian	徐向前
yan shi	艷詩
Yiling	夷陵
"Yi Yuanjiu"	憶元九
"Yizi"	蟻子
Yuanjiu denggao jie	元九登高節
Yuan Zhen jinianguan	元稹紀念館
Yuezhou	越州 (today's Shaoxing 紹興)
Zeng Guofan	曾國藩
Zhang Aiping	張愛萍
zhangshi	長史
Zhang Youren	張有仁
"Zheng yue jiu ri you Cuiping shan ji shi"	正月九日游翠屏山即事
"Zhizhu"	蜘蛛
Zhongguo qi du	中國氣都
Zhongxian	忠縣
Zhongzhou	忠州
Zhouhe	州河
Zhu shan	竹山

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