

The Aphorisms of Yi Deok-mu

The Aphorisms of Yi Deok-mu:

Musings of a Grateful Reader

Original Text by

Yi Deok-mu

Compiled and Translated in Korean by

Jung Min

Translated in English by

Ji-yung Kim

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



The Aphorisms of Yi Deok-mu: Musings of a Grateful Reader

Original Text by Yi Deok-mu

Compiled and Translated in Korean by Jung Min

Translated in English by Ji-yung Kim

This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2018 by Yi Deok-mu, Jung Min and Ji-yung Kim

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-0389-5

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0389-2

The hermit who befriended himself (吾友我居士).

– Yi Deok-mu, *Firsthand Observations*

*Thus he named a man with his own self as his friend
as he remained infatuated with books and otherwise friendless.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	xiii
Introduction	1
<i>Seongyuldang nongso</i> (蟬橘堂濃笑: The Inexorable Glee	
of Master Seongyuldang)	9
The Perfect Moment	9
Spring Beach.....	9
Circumspection	10
Wishful Thinking	10
Mirage.....	10
On a Snowy Night.....	11
Idler.....	12
The Dung Beetle and the <i>Cintamani</i>	12
Beginning and End.....	12
Silverfish.....	13
Concentration.....	14
Countenance.....	14
A Deeper Resonance.....	15
A Charmed Life	15
A Diversion in the Vast Universe	16
Judgment.....	16
Blacksmithing and Clogs	17
Master	18
May	18
Bosom Friend.....	19
An Immaculate Heart.....	20
A Stream in Early Spring.....	20
Torment.....	21
The Company of a Good Friend	21
Woe Is Me.....	22
Bitter Sorrow.....	22
Men of Antiquity	23
Animated Goldfish.....	24
Someday	24

Middleman	25
A Bowl of Cold Water	25
Spring Rain and Autumn Frost	25
Glory	26
Gentleman.....	26
In the Shade of a Banana Tree	27
Timepiece	27
Exquisite Colours.....	28
A Mouthwatering Sight.....	28
Sunset.....	29
A Solitary Game	29
Divine Immortal (神仙)	30
Perspective	30
Good Reader	31
Mind's Eye.....	31
Autumn Sunlight.....	32
Feat	32
Those Unfortunate Ones	33
Appreciation.....	34
True Friend	34
Lost in a Painting	35
Consequences.....	35
A World at Peace	36
Composition.....	36
Great Accomplishment	36
Foolishness and Pride	37
Eccentricity and Stupidity.....	38
A Cherished Soul	39
Hypocrite	39
Artlessness	40
Autumn Night	40
Spider	41
The Contents of a Heart	41
Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow	42
Embellishing and Covering Up.....	42
Irrational Thoughts	43
Floodlike Vital Energy (浩然之氣)	43

<i>Imokgusimseo</i> (耳目口心書: Firsthand Observations).....	45
Autumn Meal	45
Forewarning	45
Mother.....	46
Moon Dust	47
The Meaning of Life	48
Rock	49
My <i>Book of Han</i> Coverlet and <i>Analects</i> Screen.....	50
Pestle.....	51
Red Light	51
Danballyeong Pass	52
An Imaginary Budget.....	52
Passion	53
Writing	54
Old Dross	54
Dreams	55
Studying and Writing	55
Study in the Dead of Winter	56
Delirium.....	57
The Mirror of My Mind	58
Conduct.....	58
Illness and Desire.....	59
Time (I)	60
Kleshas.....	60
What Truly Matters.....	61
Doing without Books	62
A Miraculous Elixir	63
A Gentleman's Process	63
A Fragrant Fantasy.....	64
Greed and Shame	64
Life.....	65
The Four Things beyond Me.....	65
Ease of Mind.....	66
Nursing a Broken Heart	66
Dedicated Perspectives	67
Epiphany	67
The Steadfastness of the Old Masters	68
Pluck and Wits.....	69
A Moment of Unity.....	70
The Ultimate Truth	71
Foolishness	72

Impediment	72
Gifts	72
Ruse	73
Prudence and Preciseness	74
Writing as a Reflection of the Times	74
The Humble	75
Shallowness and Inflexibility	75
The Felicity of Peace	76
Poverty	76
People Past and Present	77
Types of Laughter	77
Wily Tricks	78
Sunflower	79
Fatal Foolishness	80
True Feelings	81
How to Make a Crane Dance	82
A Worthwhile Pursuit	83
Behind Closed Eyes	84
Ambience	84
What Not to Do (I)	85
Kasaya Fish	85
A Subtle Distinction	86
Leisure	86
Fortunate Ones	87
Chatter and Quiet	87
Caution	88
Hidden Virtue	88
Heed	89
The Shape of Rain	89
Confusion	90
Child Education	90
A Fruitless Blossom	91
Qualities of a Gentleman	91
Integrity and Magnanimity	92
True Nobility	92
Time (II)	92
Greed	93
Discernment	94
Sword	94
Deception	95
A Good Man	95

A Life Devoid of Feelings	96
Correspondence	96
Order	96
Generosity	97
Rumours and Renown.....	97
Sowing Mishap	97
Proper Conduct and the Art of War	98
False Name	98
Good Deeds.....	98
Autumn Sky	99
Baseless Slander	99
Discipline and Tolerance	100
Loyalty and Generosity.....	100
Beyond My Reach	100
Pigeon	101
Poise.....	102
Presentation.....	102
Words and Practice	103
Teachers and Friends	103
Compassion.....	104
What Not to Do (II)	104
If We Did Not Read	104
The Field of My Mind.....	105
Limited Learning	106
The Keys to Speech	106
Reciprocity.....	106
Truthful Words	107
Body and Heart	107
Tolerance and Overconfidence	107
I Am But a Reader	108
Power and Wiles	108
Gentleman and Judgment.....	108
Tolerance	109
My Shallow Mind	110
How People Used to Handle Matters	110
A Devious Mindset.....	110
Moral and Dietary Discipline.....	111
True Judgment	112
Hunger	112
Reading and Lechery	113
How to Address Criticism.....	114

Forgiveness	114
Riches	114
Inebriated State	115
Why We Read	115
Fury	116
My Mentors	116
Nature and Artifice	116
Mother Monkey	117
Wrongdoer	118
Conceit	118
Steadiness	118
Pax Sinica	118
Resolve and Modesty	119
A Steady Mind	120
Formality	120
The Human Character	120
Loose Talk	121
Idle Talk	121
Dream	121
The Problem with Obstinacy	122
Caught off Guard	122
Corner	122
Point	123
An Unexpected Encounter	123
Idle Pastime	123
A Devious Man	124
Partiality and Distrust	124
Vice	124
Vermin	125
Work and Reading	125
Critique	125
Order of Things	126
A Single Hair	126
Conflict	126
Why Live Alone?	127
Recognition	127
Warning against Fighting	128
Sharing Books	128
Seal	129
Insight	129
Peace of Mind	130

PREFACE

We often find our bodies in the here and now, while our minds are looking to a time and place removed. The life of the here and now is a constant source of emptiness and hunger, while the time I spend with old writings fills me with an inner contentment and vitality.

This book is a collection of short and aesthetic essays (清言小品) by scholar Yi Deok-mu (李德懋, 1741–1793) of the late Joseon Dynasty. I have translated the *Seongyuldang nongso* (蟬橘堂濃笑: The Inexorable Glee of Master Seongyuldang) into Korean in its entirety and *Imokgusimseo* (耳目口心書: Firsthand Observations) in part, and added comments. As I was reading Yi's words, I felt that it would be a shame to keep them to myself. I thought it was only right to share my relish with others, given how much I enjoyed the experience. But because a mere translation of the original would have fallen short of communicating the whole picture, I added a title for each essay and some notes.

Those words are a window into the mind of the writer as he laid down each stroke of every character in a frigid room, blowing on his fingers numbed by the cold. This was a man who embodied the anguish of his time, who had not a shadow of a doubt about where he was headed, despite a dire destitution that had already taken his consumptive and malnourished mother and sister from him. Could there be anyone else who lived his life with such commitment? The pages he left behind are of a heartbreaking beauty.

The cultural chasm is ever deepening, and old writing just feels dated. I teach classical Chinese to college students, who throw up their hands at the sight of a Chinese character. However, a brave new world of words opens up once they step out of the bog of Chinese literature and read the same writings in their native tongue instead. This is a world with a booming voice, living language, and wisdom that are nowhere to be found in the oceans of information on the internet. Therein lies its power, which in turn rouses the reader.

If the loss of tradition is an inescapable fact of life, it is up to the scholars of our time to bridge the past and the present and facilitate a meeting of the minds. I did most of the work on this book on my commute on the subway. I am heartened by the memory of those and other snippets

of time that were enriched in such delightful company, some of which are tinged with the aroma of the lush tea plants and exotic flora that would sometimes tickle my nose on my solitary strolls through the Muzha Tea Plantations during my year as a visiting professor at National Chengchi University, Taiwan. The thought alone gives my heart a stir.

On an early spring day in 2000, from the Hanyang University campus
Jung Min

INTRODUCTION

The Fish of Jirisan Mountain: On Yi Deok-mu

With the everyday being such a drudgery, we sometimes feel a sudden hankering for the pristine spirit of previous generations. Life speeds up with every passing day, so that even the latest invention becomes obsolete upon its release. At the same time, we nurse an insatiable, hunger-like void. And we sometimes yearn for a bosom friend who shares our thoughts; even the promise of a single encounter from a distance is enough to warm the heart.

To win a bosom friend, I would grow a mulberry tree for ten years, keep silkworms for a year, and dye the silk threads myself, working on one colour for ten days each, so that I would have five colours in fifty days. I would then dry them under the warm spring sun, have my frail wife embroider the face of my friend with a golden needle tempered a hundred times, decorate it with precious silk and attach a toggle made of ancient jade to it, so that I may unroll and admire it wordlessly against towering mountains in the distance and a bubbling stream. I would only return home after sunset, with my bosom friend clasped close to my heart.

This passage is from Yi Deok-mu's *Imokgusimseo*, where he writes he would grow mulberry trees for ten years and tend silkworms for a year for the thread, which he would then dye strand by strand in five different hues. He would dry the yarns under the spring sun, have his wife embroider his friend's face, and gaze at it by a rolling river among towering mountains, much like those where Boya (俞伯牙) and Ziqi (鍾子期) communicated by the sound of Boya's zither. He would return home only when the sun set. Perhaps Yi fretted over not having a friendship like that of Boya and Ziqi.

A picture comes to mind when I think of Yi—a man with a lanky build and an emaciated frame, with hollow, but nevertheless luminous eyes. Here was someone who barely fought off hypothermia on a freezing floor in the dead of winter with a single-layer blanket by shielding himself from biting drafts with his copy of the *Analects*, and by lining up volumes of the *Book of Han* (漢書) like fish scales over his blanket.

There was a foolish man living at the foot of Mongmyeoksan Mountain. He was inarticulate, had a lazy disposition, was petty, and had no knowledge of the world and even less of the game of *go* or *janggi* [Korean chess]. He did not object when others criticised him, did not boast when others praised him, and took pleasure solely in reading so that he was unaware of whether he felt cold, hot, hungry, or ill.

From his childhood to the age of twenty-one, he never was without an old book. His room was tiny, but equipped with windows to the east, south, and west, so that he could read by the light of the moving sun. He would rejoice and smile if he encountered a book he had not previously read. His family would mistake his mirth for happiness over an outlandish discovery.

He was especially fond of Du Fu's (杜甫) five-character regulated verses (五言律詩) and recited them intensely, as if seized by a fever. If he happened upon a profound truth, he would be so overjoyed that he would get up and walk around, making a sound that resembled the call of a crow. He would at times stare intently in silence, or mumble to himself as if in a trance. People called him Ganseochi (看書痴), that is, a fool with his nose in his books, but even this nickname he happily embraced. Because no one was writing his biography, I picked up my brush to write about him in *Ganseochijeon* (看書痴傳: Life of Ganseochi). I will not reveal his name and family name.

Ganseochijeon is a record by Yi Deok-mu of his younger self. He states that he wrote it because no one was writing it. A measure of self-deprecation and bravado intermingle in this passage. He was a diehard bookworm who read through barely opened eyes even when he had difficulty keeping his feverish eyes open. He once wrote a letter requesting the loan of a book, even when all ten of his fingers were frostbitten and his fingertips swelled to the size of small chestnuts and filled with blood. He read as if driven by an insatiable hunger and thirst. He was always borrowing books, because he could not afford to buy any. He would happily read any book he could get his hands on and jotted down notable passages. Thus he read tens of thousands of books, and his notes, with letters as small as the head of a fly, filled hundreds of volumes.

Why was he so obsessed with reading? He was the son of a concubine. Regardless of his aspirations, there were limits to what he was allowed to pursue. He had nowhere to put his extensive reading to use. There were ways he could have made a living. But because they were either something outside his reach or ability or something illicit that entailed breaking the law, he accepted that desperate poverty and the yoke of fate as his lot. Many were the crises that seemed insurmountable.

The only items of value in my house were the seven chapters of the *Mencius*. Unable to bear starvation any longer, I sold them for 200 *jeon*,

which I used to feed and fill myself. Giddy, I ran over to Yu Deukgong's and boasted with gusto. He had been starving himself for as long, and upon hearing my story, he went and sold the *Commentary of Zuo* (左傳) and traded the remaining money for wine in my behalf. How is this not Mencius himself cooking and feeding me, and Zuo pouring wine for me in person? We sang the praises of Mencius and Zuo to the skies. But had we simply been reading these two books until the day wore out, how could we have spared ourselves even a sliver of that hunger? Thus I finally realised that it was but a trick of luck to seek wealth through study, and that although it may be vulgar to sell those books off on the spot to get roaring drunk and fill our bellies, it was by no means an affectation. What is your opinion?

This is from a letter to Yi Seogu (1754–1825). No longer able to stand his hunger, Yi Deok-mu pawned off his well-worn copy of the *Mencius* and the entire family finally ate their fill. “My dear fellow! Today Mencius fed me,” he blurted out after racing off to his friend Yu's. Yu, who had run out of provisions days ago, sold his cherished *Commentary of Zuo*, and poured out for his friend some rice wine he bought with the balance from his rice purchase. What made Yi so giddy? What was such a point of pride that he had to rush off to his friend? I can no more fathom the state of mind of Yu, who showed so little regard to his own circumstances as to treat his friend to a jug of wine.

Indeed, it was hopeless to dream of riches from reading in a world so squalid. One was better off trading those books for food to soothe one's hunger. Such occasional self-loathing was inevitable. But I do know that Yi was probably stalking the same bookseller every single day out of fear that his well-worn *Mencius* might fall into someone else's hands.

His mother died of consumption brought on by malnutrition. Yi did not have the means to fill the doctor's prescription for her. If he did manage to get the ingredients, he would prepare the medicine himself, and he compared the sound of the brew boiling and reducing to that of his organs being eaten away. As he sat impassively after his mother passed, he wrote, “Even now as I sit aggrieved listening in silence, I can still hear the faint sound of my mother's coughs. Yet as I look around in my trance, her shadow is nowhere to be found. The thought brings to my eyes tears, which bathe my face.”

His sister, who had married into another poor family after a life of hardship, also came down with malnutrition-induced consumption. He brought her home and cared for her, but when she too succumbed to the illness, he wrote the following address through bitter tears:

[...] On the third day of the sixth month, it poured down and went dark. The entire family had gone without food from the evening before until that morning. Upon learning this, you were displeased and frowned, and turned worse. When I sent the child back home, you suddenly breathed your last breath. Our aged father sobbed and wailed three times with our brothers. It was the most heart-wrenching sound under the sun. Has it reached you in your eternal slumber? [...]

When asked how many siblings I had, I used to say that I had four, which is true no longer. My body is so stiff, I feel as if my flesh and bones were being eaten away. Elder brothers grieve their younger siblings' passing, and the younger siblings grieve having to bury their elder siblings. Natural law dictates an inviolate order, and yet having borne witness to both your birth and your death, I could not feel more embittered and wretched. You may now rest in peace, but who shall mourn my passing? How could I bury my darling in this dark hole in the ground? My heart breaks.

This elegy cannot be read without tears. But I also detect a sneaking sense of bitterness toward his impotent reading. Who and what was he reading for? What use was his study, when he could not afford medicine for his own mother or protect his own sister from malnutrition?

It was at thirty-nine years of age that he finally entered government service. He was appointed the first editor–compiler (檢書官) of the Gyujeongguk Royal Library, established by King Jeongjo to promote scholarship and to consolidate his power. Strong recommendations from his friends, who prized his learning and character, contributed to this appointment. The work was routine: it involved organizing library documents and conducting research. He edited publications as well. It was demanding work that left his fingers numb after scribbling over 5,000 characters a day.

Yi had a special appetite for pen names (號). He went by Yeongcheo (嬰處) in his youth. He professed a blushing maiden's embarrassment at revealing to the world his thoughts through his writing, which was as devoid of artifice as a child's, all the while taking an irrepressible pride in expressing such an innocent and earnest mind. He also used the name Seongyuldang (蟬橘堂) out of admiration for the purity and cleanliness of the cicada and the citrus. He named his home Cheongjanggwan (靑莊館), after Cheongjang (靑莊), or the albatross, which only eats fish that it happens upon and lives in nature without taking undue advantage.

The extensive writings he left behind are even more impressive than the many names he went by. *Imokgusimseo* [Firsthand Observations], so entitled because it was a collection of what he saw, heard, said, and thought, was repeatedly loaned to renowned Neo-Confucianists Park

Jiwon and Park Jega, who quoted it copiously in their own works. His informed reading, wide-ranging knowledge, and penetrating observation of the world around him are unmistakable. The writing overwhelms the reader with a sense of awe. Yi also penned *Sasojeol* (士小節), which describes the proper disposition of a scholar in the form of adages; *Cheongbirok* (淸脾錄), which brings together poems and anecdotes about poets of the past and present; the history *Ginyeonaram* (紀年兒覽); and *Cheongnyeonggukji* (蜻蛉國志), a geography of Japan. During his tenure at the Royal Library, he participated in the compilation of *Gukjobogam* (國朝寶鑑: Precious Mirror for Succeeding Reigns), *Gaengjangnok* (羹牆錄), *Munwonbobul* (文苑黼黻: Exemplar of Documents and Letters of State), and *Daejeontongpyeon* (大典通編: Comprehensive National Code). Other government publications, such as *Eojeongsongsajeon* (御定宋史筌), *Yeojiji* (輿地誌), and *Muye dobo tongji* (武藝圖譜通志: Comprehensive Illustrated Manual of Martial Arts), also bear the mark of his meticulous style.

King Jeongjo cherished the sound of Yi's reading, often demanding that he raise his voice instead of reading softly in the presence of the monarch; he also delighted Yi by encouraging him to spend time on his own writing over his editorial duties. During Yi's fifteen-year tenure from the age of thirty-nine, King Jeongjo bestowed gifts on him on some 520 occasions. Upon his passing, Jeongjo had Yi's writings compiled, using state funds, and had Yi's son succeed his father in the same capacity. All things considered, Yi's reading may not have been so useless.

What astounds me about Yi is by no means his voluminous reading or his extensive writing. I am in awe of his unwavering stance as he strove to lead a pristine life in the midst of such desperate want. The objects of my envy are not his impractical achievements or the many gifts from his king. I am shaken by his faith, which betrayed no doubt of his way forward, despite the hopelessness of his circumstances, with no recognition, tangible or prospective, from anyone. On the other hand, I am brought to tears by the excruciating pain that permeates each and every one of those pages, the frostbite that blistered all his fingers, his starvation, and his helplessness and self-ridicule over the loss of his mother and his sister to malnutrition and consumption. The following poem, by Song poet Du Junzhi (杜濬之), is found in Yi's *Songyumin bojeon* (宋遺民補傳: An Annotated Anthology of Song Writing):

However wearisome a distance,	寧枉百里步
One cannot rest under a bowed tree;	曲木不可息
Though one may starve for three days,	寧忍三日飢
One cannot eat droopy greens.	邪蒿不可食

Yi writes that he braced himself by reading such poems. I find his foolhardy endurance and self-confidence frightening.

In one of his letters, he writes, “It used to be that I knew everything under the sun even as I secluded myself in my room and read.” I find people today even harder to understand. Even though we have a world of information at our fingertips in this age of the internet, we do not know ourselves, let alone the world out there. In fact, we are flailing in an ever-chaotic sea of information. Why should that be? It is because there is no self; there is only information out there. As a result, the more information we have in our possession, the greater the void inside. Information without a grounded identity only worsens the chaos.

That is why people crumble so easily before the merest adversity. Their despair is much too prompt and hasty in the face of a grim reality that suddenly descends upon them as they dream of a rosy future in a so-called economic bubble. The intellectual base of university education is swiftly being eroded in the name of pragmatism, and culture is being obliterated. Koreans now live in a society where finding a job, making a living, and speaking English have become their ultimate goal. Young people are lost, labelling themselves the cursed generation. They seem ready to completely throw away their self-respect and the values that they have thus far cherished for the sole purpose of earning money or making it in the world. But is that really how life works?

I envy the blind self-confidence of our forebears, who did not lose faith, despite such desperate need and the fetters of caste. I revere the intellectual platform where study did not end in an intellectual monoculture or paranoid desire, but extended to an informed insight into the world. I miss the inner landscape of those who wholeheartedly devoted themselves to living out life without a shred of doubt.

Wearing a *wujin* (烏巾: black ceremonial hat) on my head and a white jacket on an autumn day, I was critiquing a seascape while waving around a lacquered bamboo brush, when the papered window lit up and revealed the drooping shadow of a white chrysanthemum. After I dipped my brush in thin ink and happily traced the shape, a pair of large butterflies chasing the scent alighted on the flower. Because their feelers were as distinct as copper wires, I added them in. All of a sudden, a sparrow came and clung to the stem. I traced it as well, hurriedly, lest it should be startled into flight,

and then let the brush clatter onto the floor and bellowed, “Nicely done! I already had butterflies, and now I have a sparrow!”

This is a passage from the *Seongyuldang nongso*. The autumn sunlight crashes through the white paper of the window. He is looking at a painting of fish in the sea with his brush in hand. All of a sudden, the outline of a chrysanthemum emerges, upon which a pair of butterflies alight, and a sparrow hangs onto the stem. He dashes off a sketch. Soon the butterflies fly away and the shadows fade, but the tracing in thin ink of the flower, butterflies, and the bird remain to keep him company during the drawn-out winter.

There is a pool in Jirisan Mountain that is always covered with the reflection of a row of pine trees. The fish in the pool are heavily spotted, much like the kasaya robe of a monk, and are therefore called kasaya fish. The patterns mimic the reflections of the pine trees. This fish is very difficult to catch. It is said, however, to guarantee a long, healthy life when eaten.

The fish in the deep pool of Jirisan Mountain has spent so much time admiring the reflections of pine trees day by day that the pattern on its skin has morphed into those same shapes. It has also modelled its spirit after the pine trees, green year-round, so that it is a panacea for longevity and health. I, too, wish to live by that pool and have those patterns on my body. In our ever-hurting, screeching breakneck world, I think such thoughts, hoping to pace my life.

SEONGYULDANG NONGSO
(蟬橘堂濃笑: THE INEXORABLE GLEE
OF MASTER SEONGYULDANG)

The Perfect Moment

There may be no greater pleasure than meeting a friend of one's liking at a time of one's liking to talk about things of one's liking and read poems and writings of one's liking. However, such occasions are rare in the extreme, and at best few and far between in a lifetime.

值會心時節，逢會心友生。作會心言語，讀會心詩文，此至樂而何其至稀也。一生凡幾許番。

A meeting of the minds is not something we can plan. It does not happen by intent or artifice. Such a moment materialises unforeseen, when no one is expecting it, and restores the strength to savour it on long days as we wait for the next such moment to happen by.

Spring Beach

On the beach, a duck buoyed by the spring air is smoothing its feathers; up over the mountain, a sprightly falcon stares into the distance while stropping its talons and beak.

暖沙輕鳧，意得三春，護惜毛羽；遙峯快鵲，眼空萬里，矜厲爪吻。

The duck keeps coiling its neck at the constant itching, smoothing its glistening feathers under the warm spring sun. The swift falcon high over the mountain is stropping its nails and sharpening its beak, readying itself for that one moment when it will have to shoot up into the sky and snatch up its prey. The duck basks in peace, while the falcon dutifully bides its time.

Circumspection

The finest ramie thread can cut through an amber bead, while a thin piece of wood may slice through a bull's horn. To fend off troubles, a gentleman is to mind the trivial.

細苧絲虎魄截，薄板片牛角割。君子防患，慎所忽。

A fine ramie thread may not be strong, but it can cut through an amber bead. And a hard bull's horn can be split by a thin piece of wood. The moral is not to let our guard down. The trivial should not be ignored, as catastrophes may have humble beginnings. A gentleman has insight into the big picture, and sees things that others overlook.

Wishful Thinking

Even if I were to emulate Zhou Dunyi (周敦頤), strolling around under the bright moon in the fresh breeze, I would not be able to ponder the *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate* (太極圖) in peace. Then how could I follow in the footsteps of Xiang Chang (向長) and visit the Five Sacred Mountains (五嶽), wearing a dark angular hat, a red leaf robe, and a black horned belt and riding a white donkey, with a dishevelled child in tow carrying a hexagonal fan, a conical hat, and a steel ball?

如早不得從周濂溪先生，遊霽月光風中，抱太極圖靜玩，何不隨向子平，服烏方帽紅蕉衣黑犀帶，跨白驢，使鬍頭童子，負六角扇垂雲笠鐵如意，去遊五嶽名山耶？

I long to reflect in peace on the profound mysteries of the universe while idling in the moonlight shining through the clouds in the crisp wind, Zhou Dunyi's *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate* before me. If that cannot be arranged, I would like to do away with all formalities, like Xiang Chang of old, and spend the remainder of my days visiting great sights on the back of a white donkey, with a dishevelled child as my scout. Alas, what exorbitant wishes are those in this muddy world of ours?

Mirage

The most dishevelled passenger with a bushy beard in a boat as small as a pea pod, pushing through a bed of reeds with a tiny sail,

may look to an onlooker standing on the banks like the hermit Lu Guimeng (陸龜蒙).¹

荳殼船載魚網，夕陽澄江懸二幅帆，拂拂入蘆葦中，舟中人，雖皆拳鬚突鬢，然遵渚而望，疑其高士陸魯望先生。

A tiny boat carrying a fishing net sets its small sail through reed beds around sunset. It looks like the subject of a beautiful painting. Onboard may be an undistinguished fisherman with a bushy beard and sideburns, but as I stand watching him from a distance, he could very well be a sage that lives at one with nature, having grasped the larger picture of life.

On a Snowy Night

In a snow-covered house deep in the woods, a reclusive scholar annotates the *Book of Changes* (周易) with fresh-ground red ink by the light of a lantern. A blue pillar of fragrant smoke rises from the old brazier, curling up into colourful orbs in the air. The scholar gazes at them for a moment or two, and breaks into a smile upon realizing a profound truth. The plum to his right is in full bloom, while the tea to his left bubbles up with a sound reminiscent of the wind in a pine forest or raindrops falling on pine branches.

有超世先生，萬峰中雪屋燈明，研朱點易，古鑪香烟，嫋嫋青立，空中結綵毬狀。靜玩一二刻，悟妙，忽發笑。右看梅花，齊綻萼；左聞茶沸響，作松風檜雨，澎湃瀾浩。

One night deep in the woods, copious snow falls upon the thatched roof of a hut. A man is staying up at night by the light of a lantern. He grinds red ink onto his inkstone and marks notable passages in the *Book of Changes*. Blue smoke billows from the old brazier before dissolving into the air. Aha, so it was: life is just like that smoke—balling up into the air and disappearing without a trace. The lesson is not to have vain expectations, but to live with a clean and humble mindset instead.

His eyes are increasingly drawn from the book to the smoke. Next to him, the plum blossoms as if in acknowledgement of his epiphany, while on the other side, tea is bubbling away, making noises like the wind and raindrops falling onto large leaves. Those are perhaps the sounds of an overflowing brook.

¹ Tang Chinese poet, nicknamed Jianghu Shanren (江湖散人: free spirit) for his love of life on the water. Luwang (魯望) was his courtesy name (字).

Idler

A man with all his pores clogged from only loving to eat and lie around is unable to feel even the fresh air in the middle of a breezy bamboo grove. There is no helping him.

只噉飯而好臥，毛孔舉壅，雖置篠叢中，清風颼颼然鳴，殊不知其爽爽，不可奈何。

Some only eat and sleep without doing anything useful. Their sloth closes off all the pores that breathe in the outer air, so that they do not feel refreshed even by a clear wind. They remain unmoved even in the face of a breathtaking view. Such idlers cannot be helped.

The Dung Beetle and the *Cintamani*

The dung beetle values dung and does not envy the dragon king of the sea its *cintamani*. Likewise, the dragon, proud and vain as it may be of its *cintamani*, does not scorn dung.

蟣蜋自愛滾丸，不羨驪龍之如意珠。驪龍亦不以如意珠，自矜驕而笑彼蜋丸。

The dung beetle has no use for the *cintamani*. Similarly, dung is of absolutely no use to the dragon king of the sea. Everything has a purpose. Dung is more valuable to the dung beetle than the *cintamani*, which is of greater value than dung to the dragon king. Dung and the *cintamani* are each of equal significance to each. Yet people dismiss dung as dirty and only view the *cintamani* as an object of value. They only prize those things of value to them and do not even grace anything else with a look. They spit on the crow for its dark coat and regard the white heron as a noble bird.

Beginning and End

A painter rolls up his sleeves and sits comfortably with his legs outstretched; this is his mindset as he sets to work. A butcher storing his knife with care exemplifies the mindset of one completing a task.

畫史之解衣盤礴，始條理也；庖丁之善刀以藏，終條理也。

Lord Yuan of Song (宋元君) was recruiting a painter. While all others were properly attired, adjusted their posture, and had a solemn look on

their faces, one painter strode into a room, took off his shirt, and made himself at home. Art breathes in a mind that is completely open and free of restraints. A good painting cannot be produced if the painter confines himself to a certain composition or colour palette. Some tasks call for just such an unfettered mindset at the outset.

A butcher may use the same knife for decades for his trade and still manage to keep the blade intact, as he only sticks it between tendons and muscles. After butchering an animal, he wipes the blade clean, inspects it for any nicks, and puts it away for his next job. The end to any work cannot be sloppy. The tools must be readied so that they may be put to use again at any time.

Silverfish

A white silverfish has gnawed away the words “autumn chrysanthemum (秋菊),” “magnolia (木蘭),” “red seaweed (江籬),” and “herb (揭車)” from my copy of “Li Sao” (離騷: Encountering Sorrow). I was initially so enraged that I meant to kill it. Then I realised to my amazement that it had somehow only eaten names of fragrant plants. Eager to examine its head and feelers to check if those unique scents had been infused in them, I hired a boy to search my room for half a day. A silverfish crawled out, but when I tried to catch it, it scampered away with the speed of a flowing river. Only its silvery dust remained on the paper, but the silverfish evaded my capture in the end.

有一白蟬，食我離騷經秋菊木蘭江籬揭車字。我始大怒，欲捕磔之。少焉，亦奇其能食香草也。欲檢其異香，溢于頭鬚，購童子，大索半日，忽見一蟬，脈脈而來，手掩之，疾如流水，迺逝。只銀粉閃爍，墜之于紙也。蟬終負我耳。

The silverfish has a bizarre taste, only feeding on those letters corresponding to fragrant herbs. This book owner is an odd character, too, raising such a fuss over a single silverfish, rather than letting it gnaw away. What did he intend to do if the search had been successful? Would he have put that silverfish in his nose? The silverfish disappeared without a trace, other than that silvery residue.

Concentration

When a fisherman uses his long fishing pole to drop his fine fishing line over the still water, and without a word or a smile, fixes his mind between the quivering pole and the line, even the earth-shattering rumble of thunder out of the blue fails to reach his ears and a beautiful woman dancing around like a breeze fails to catch his eye. He is in the same state as Bodhidharma's while he sat facing a wall meditating.

漁翁長竿弱絲，投平鋪水，不言不笑，寓心於嫋嫋竿絲之間，疾雷破山而不聞，曼秀都雅之姝，舞如旋風而不見。是達摩面壁時也。

A fisherman with a line in the water only has eyes for the float. He remains fixated on that one spot, without a glance to spare for the clouds floating by or for the occasional breeze that skims the water. This has nothing to do with greed. His is a profound concentration, an immersion with the heft of a mountain that cannot be shaken. Would this not be the exact look as that of the blue-eyed Bodhidharma when he went to a cave at the Shaolin Monastery in Mount Song (嵩山) and spent nine years staring at the wall? I sometimes yearn for just such a moment of disinterested absorption.

Countenance

A countenance with the understated look of pure and placid water and the air of lofty mountains is ripe for a conversation about august refinement. The mind of such a man is free of avarice.

眉宇間隱然帶出澹沱水平遠山氣色，方可與語雅致，而胸中無錢癖。

Our faces are the expression of our minds. Some carry around their greed on their faces, and others, anger and contempt. Our faces completely betray what we conceal in our hearts. When we sit across from someone, we may picture a gentle and pristine river and the distant outline of soaring mountains. I would love to meet such people and discuss the finer points of life. I want to sit wordlessly looking, as if into a mirror, at them, whose minds are free of calculations, greed, thirst for glory, and obsessions.

A Deeper Resonance

An unplayed game of *go* is considered dignified, an unplayed zither nuanced, an unrecited poem unique, and undrunk wine exhilarating. I always think on that state of mind when no game or instrument has been played, no poem has been recited, and no wine has been imbibed.

棋以不着爲高，琴以不彈爲妙，詩以不吟爲奇，酒以不飲爲趣。
每想其不着不彈不吟不飲之意思何如耳。

A game of *go* does not become exciting only when the black and the white stones are set against each other and one side wins. Our ears need to be tuned to the deeper resonance of an unplayed instrument. Recitation is not the only means to appreciate a poem, and it is no good to become intoxicated by drinking. How wonderful would it be to fill our hearts with lyricism, to become drunk on nature, bask in its delights, and be able to hear the music of the universe? Those are my thoughts whenever I see a board of *go* or a zither. I sometimes startle myself as I am about to recite a poem or to raise a glass. How can we capture those feelings that evaporate the moment we are about to put them into words? Where can we experience that state in which we become roaring drunk without consuming a single drop of alcohol?

A Charmed Life

I mend my broken umbrella under the dripping eaves, and put an old mortar to use as a stepping stone. I welcome birds as my pupils, and clouds and the mist as old friends. Ha, what a comfortable life I have!

敗雨傘承雷而補，古藥臼逮堦而安。以鳥雀爲門生，以雲烟爲舊契。炯菴一生，占便宜人。呵呵呵。

I am about to go out in the rain, only to find my umbrella broken. I repair the broken umbrella under the dripping eaves. It would be a shame to throw away this overused mortar, so I repurpose it as a stepping stone. What a charmed life I have! Twittering sparrows throng to this empty house clamouring to become my pupils, and even the clouds and mist outside insist they are old friends.

A Diversion in the Vast Universe

As I reflect on my lifetime, I find myself emitting crazed shrieks and loudly clapping while brandishing my critic's brush whenever I come across an insightful piece of writing by another. Such activity is another source of delight in the vast universe.

照吾平生之服，讀人得意之文，狂叫大拍，評筆掀翻，亦宇宙間一遊戲。

My heart fills with joy when I encounter a sentence that strikes a chord or a phrase that transports me. The writer may have left this world a long time ago, but I feel as if he were standing across from me. Overjoyed, I howl, clap, emit deep sighs into the void like a distracted person, and pace around the room. When I can no longer contain my overflowing exhilaration, I pick up my brush and write a critique. I write, not because I want to, but because I cannot help it. In doing so, I discover in this vast universe a delightful game that I play across space and time with writers that have gone before.

Judgment

It was because Huizi (惠子) and Zhuangzi (莊子) still had mechanical minds (機心) that they were bickering as they gazed at fish from a bridge over the Hao (濠). It would have been better if those words had been left unsaid.

濠梁觀魚，惠莊詰難，却有機心，不如無言。

The following is an anecdote from the chapter "Floods of Autumn (秋水)" of the *Zhuangzi* (莊子). As they stood watching fish in water, Zhuangzi noted their pleasure at being in the water. Huizi asked, "How would you know what fish take pleasure in, when you are not a fish yourself?" Zhuangzi retorted, "How would you know whether I know the fish's pleasure, when you are not I?"

They are both alike. They should have simply watched the fish in the water as they stood on the bridge; what purpose did it serve to nitpick and quibble? They had not let go of the mechanical mind (機心), that is, the need to judge and measure. They were unaware of conversations that could be held wordlessly.