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Fan Ye, Preface To "Accounts Of Disengaged Persons"

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FAN YE (398–446) included a separate biographical section in his *History of the Later Han* (*Hou Hanshu*) for “disengaged persons,” that is, practitioners of reclusion, virtuous men of integrity who decline offers of service in local or state administration, men who exalt their private pursuits over a life as a scholar-official. Fan’s section on reclusion is justifiably the most celebrated of early-medieval writings on reclusion, not only because of the richness of its accounts, but because of Fan Ye’s own comments. Fan’s discussion was the fullest to date concerning the nature of reclusion, the conduct of practitioners of reclusion, and criteria for delimiting entries in a compilation of notices of men-in-reclusion; thus, in great measure, Fan’s discussion went far in defining the parameters of substantive reclusion. Further, his pronouncements, and in particular his Preface, have retained a certain authority through the ages: most subsequent discussions, especially those found within the sections on reclusion in later dynastic histories, in great measure derived from Fan Ye their approach and reasoning, and to a certain extent even their imagery and manner of expression. Fan Ye’s prefatorial discussion, a model of poignant expression crafted in elegant language, was chosen for inclusion in the influential *Selections of Refined Writing* (*Wen xuan*), and as a result received particular attention since sometime during the late 520s, when compilation of *Wen xuan* was completed.

Fan Ye begins his preface to the section with a series of classical references to reclusion, then goes on to categorize the practice of reclusion as he saw it. In his view, “disengaged persons” from the Later Han (and earlier) did not willingly practice reclusion and accept resultant material duress because they eschewed human contact or rejoiced in the joys of the natural world. Reclusion was simply “where their innate nature led them.” Fan next says that men-in-reclusion were obstinate, and as such were not unlike Confucius, who would ply his talent only under the proper circumstances. And he expresses approval of all of these individuals who can cast off their worldly fetters in favor of life beyond the confinement of conventional conduct. He remarks emphatically that they differed from seekers after personal advancement. Fan Ye goes on to relate that Wang Mang’s usurpation (9–23 C.E., at the close of the Western Han dynasty) resulted in the withdrawal from public service of innumerable persons, while the first several Later Han emperors were deferential to the great hidden worthies of the day. Later, however, as the virtue of the emperors declined and the power of the eunuchs increased, a number of people considered it shameful to serve. Some were so indignant that they no longer felt constrained to a course of moderated conduct. Fan Ye ends his discussion by saying that the men whose accounts he has compiled were the match of preeminent men-in-reclusion from the distant past. His direct reference is to Confucius’s cryptic declaration, “Ones who took action were seven in number” (*Analects* 14.40).

Fan Ye’s section on reclusion contains the accounts of fourteen renowned “disengaged persons,” with appended mentions of several of their confederates and three anecdotes concerning anonymous Wise Rustic types. This section, however, contains notices of only a fraction of known Later Han practitioners of reclusion. In the *Hou Han shu* alone there are notices or men-

tions of at least a hundred other men who might fit Fan Ye’s own categorizations. Following the biographical accounts, Fan Ye closes the chapter with a rhymed “Encomium.”—AB

The [*Book of*] *Changes* proclaims “Great indeed is the significance of the timeliness of (the hexagram) Dun (Withdrawal).” It also says (in the hexagram Gu [Bane]), “He does not serve a king or lord; he elevates in priority his [own] affairs.” For this reason, although Yao was praised as “modeling Heaven,” he could not humble the lofty integrity of [Xu You from] north of the Ying (who lived unencumbered in the mountains). And while King Wu was “utterly praiseworthy,” still the purity of the [Lords of] Guzhu forever remains intact (referring to Bo Yi and Shu Qi, who starved to death in the mountains rather than compromise their principles).

From these examples on down, the influential current became increasingly prevalent. The path of prolonged departure has never varied, yet the tactics of those inspired to action are not single in kind. Some lived in seclusion, seeking to maintain their resolve. Some turned and fled to keep their inner principles intact. Some sought personal tranquility, thereby repressing their impatience. Some removed themselves from danger in pursuit of security. Some defiled themselves in the profane world and thereby stirred their mettle. Some condemned worldly things, thereby arousing their purity.

Nevertheless, in observing the way they gladly dwelt among the crosshatched cultivated fieldlands, or went worn and haggard out by the rivers and seas, must it necessarily be that they sought intimacy with fish and birds, and found pleasure in forests and plants? It might also be said that it simply was where their innate nature led them. Thus, a court appointee who had suffered disgrace, though repeatedly degraded would not depart from his state (referring to Liuxia Hui, a staunchly ethical man praised by Confucius), whereas one whose moral integrity would bring him to tread out on the sea could not be swayed by a ruler of a thousand-chariot state (referring to Lu Zhonglian, another paragon of morality lauded by Confucius). Even were one to try to convert or change their chosen course, one simply would be unable to affect them.

Although so obstinate they might be classed along with the one who would sell his name (only for the right price, referring to Confucius, in *Analects* 9.12), nevertheless, cicada-like they could cast off their slough amid the clamor and dust, and go off alone beyond the confines of the world. How different are they from those who would bedizen themselves with knowledge and craft in order to chase after fleeting gain! Xun Qing (i.e., Xun Zi) had a saying: “With will and purpose refined, one can be haughty before wealth and nobility; with the [proper] Way and justice exalted, one can slight kings and dukes.”

When the Han ruling house weakened in the middle of its rule and Wang Mang usurped the throne, the pent-up righteous indignation of the scholar-officials was brought to the extreme. At that time, those who rent their official caps and destroyed their ceremonial headgear, who went hand in hand bolstering each other, and who abandoned him, seem incalculable in number. Yang Xiong (53 B.C.E.–8 C.E.) said, “When the wild goose flies in the distant heights, how could the archer catch it there?” This bespeaks their distant removal from harm.

Emperor Guangwu treated with respect “Remote Ones,” seeking them out as if in fear of losing them. Plumed banners, bundled silk, and carriages with reed-padded wheels—the accoutrements of official summons—passed one another among the cliffs. Those such as Xue Fang and Pang Meng were invited to court yet declined to go, while Yan Guang, Zhou Dang, and Wang Ba went but were not to be humbled. Everyone in all directions acquiesced [to Guangwu’s rule], and men of conviction cherished his humaneness. He most certainly was one who befitted the dic-

tum “he called to office those who had retired into obscurity, so that throughout the kingdom the hearts of the people turned toward him” (referring to King Wu of Zhou, from *Analects* 20.1).

Emperor Suzong likewise was deferential to Zheng Jun and summoned to audience Gao Feng, whereby they fulfilled their resolve. But after that time the virtue of the emperors gradually declined, and the perverse and wicked [eunuchs] dominated the court. The gentlemen who remained at home [and did not serve] stolidly upheld their integrity, ashamed to be ranked and associated with the ministers and highest officials. When it reached the point where their indignation was so roused that they paid no regard to consequence, many became extremists (literally “lost their moderate course of action”). Herein by and large I have recorded (accounts of) those who severed ties with the dusty world never to return, equals of the “Ones Who Took Action” (*zhuo zhe*), arranging them in this section.

[The “Encomium” goes:]

By rivers and seas they went obscured, forgotten;
 In mountains and forests they went off forever.
 They ranged their spirit afar on distant winds;
 They freed their feelings beyond the clouds.
 Their Way drew near to Vacuity and Wholeness;
 Their deeds turned away from taint and perversion.

—AB