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Biography of a Buddhist Layman

Alan J. Berkowitz

In traditional "Confucian" China, while the customary path to achievement was through service to the state, from the earliest times certain individuals have been acclaimed for doing just the opposite, for repudiating an official career in state governance. These men fit a dictum of the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*); "He does not serve a king or lord; he loftily esteems his own affairs." Through time, this characterization came to serve as the byword of voluntary withdrawal, the image of the man whose lofty resolve could not be humbled for service to a temporal ruler.

Throughout the history of traditional China, men who eschewed official appointments in favor of the pursuit of their personal, lofty ideals were known as "men in reclusion" (*yinshi*), "high-minded men" (*gaoshi*), "disengaged persons" (*yimin*), "scholars-at-home" (*chushi*), or the like. Regardless of the attractions or dangers of service, and regardless of the motivations for avoiding it, they strove to maintain their autonomy and self-reliance. The distinction of these men was a particular strength of character that underlay their conduct; they maintained their resolve, their mettle, their integrity—their moral and/or religious values—in the face of adversity, threat, or temptation, and for this they received approbation.

For most civilizations, reclusion usually has indicated withdrawal from the world into a life of seclusion, most often within a religious context. In China this was not always the case; reclusion was typically secular and usually meant withdrawal from active participation in an official career in state governance. Men who chose to live outside of the traditional path for worldly success were said to be in reclusion (*yin*, lit. hidden or in hiding), hiding the jewel of their virtue from appropriation by their rulers. However, while recluses and hermits certainly have been present in all ages, they were not the norm of reclusion in traditional China. The actualization of lofty ideals did not necessarily imply aloof behavior, nor did renunciation necessarily imply ascetic self-denial, and those who withdrew most often played active roles within the world of men. In fact, the descriptive terminology of reclusion in China most often describes a self-conscious, highly moral,

well-educated elite that actively participated in some of the most engaging activities of the times. On the other hand, the fundamentally secular nature of reclusion notwithstanding, a sizable number of men who practiced reclusion were also ardent men of religion, and, at least since the suffusion of Buddhism into the Chinese intelligentsia during the fourth century, it is apparent that in certain cases religious motives were a factor in one's decision to remain outside of officialdom.

Since the early centuries of the common era, men who were esteemed above all for their lifelong lofty eschewal of positions in officialdom received biographical accounts in a special section of China's official dynastic histories, as well as in a host of separate biographical compilations. A number of such practitioners of reclusion achieved renown during the short-lived Qi dynasty, which lasted only twenty-three years from the fourth lunar month of 479 until the fourth month of 502, and Xiao Zixian (489–537) included their biographies in a section entitled "Lofty Disengagement" (*Gaoyi*) in his *History of the Southern Qi* (*Nan Qi shu*). Several of these practitioners of reclusion also were distinguished for their religious roles, being that they were instrumental in the formulation of Buddhist and Daoist theology, and in the propagation of those faiths. The biography of Ming Sengshao (d. 484), translated below, evinces a man whose family included generations of government officials and who himself was offered various occasions for success in worldly pursuits, but who chose instead to repudiate service to the state in favor of a life devoted to study and, especially, to his religion, Buddhism.

The biography is in many ways formulaic, reflecting the normative pattern of the worthy man in reclusion: the man's virtue and talent are noted by regional and state officials and he gains the esteem of the emperor himself, but he chooses to eschew honors and official appointments for the pursuit of his personal, lofty, ideals. A few factual situations are recounted in the biographical account, as well as several illustrations of conduct exemplifying the mettle of a man in reclusion. But much is left unsaid, perhaps because it was not deemed important, or perhaps because it was not seen as appropriate for inclusion in an official state history. Other sources can supply additional information about the man, further illuminating reasons for his esteem and providing a broader picture of his activities and legacy. Thus, in accordance with historiographical convention, the official portrayal of the life of Ming Sengshao depicts him primarily as a practitioner of reclusion; his own legacy, however, shows him foremost as a practitioner of religion.

Ming Sengshao's biography tells us that he was learned in the Confucian tradition and respected for his scholarly acumen, so much so that the emperor wished him to take up official teaching duties in the capital. And we read that he was an ardent devotee of Buddhism, a layman (*jushi*, *upāsaka* in Sanskrit; a pious initiate who practices Buddhism at home, who has taken certain vows but has not taken the full priestly vows to enter the clergy) who spent his years, particularly his mature years, in the outskirts of the capital Jiankang (modern Nanjing, Jiangsu Province), in dedication to his faith. However, the biography does not mention the scope of his scholarship, nor does it inform us of the range of his religious

activities. Through citation in other works we know of at least two of his writings on classical works that were transmitted for a number of centuries, of which only the briefest of excerpts now exist: his *Commentary on the "Great Appendix" of the Classic of Changes* (*Zhou Yi xici zhu*), and his *Commentary on the Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing zhu*). His religious activities are witnessed in much greater detail.

When Ming Sengshao took up residence on Qixia Mountain (also called She Mountain), approximately twenty kilometers northeast of the capital Jiankang, he gave his full attention to the precepts and practice of Buddhism. During this time there was a running scholarly debate on the relative merits of Buddhism and Daoism, and in particular on the origins of the faiths. Gu Huan (ca. 425–ca. 488), an eminent proponent of Daoism, had written a "Discussion on the Barbarians and the Chinese" (i.e., Buddhists vs. Daoists, "Yi Xia lun"), wherein he upheld Daoism as being superior to Buddhism. Among other arguments, he presented textual "evidence" that the two religions in fact were of a common origin, quoting a Daoist scripture that writes of the Buddha being none other than the venerable progenitor of Daoism, Laozi, who had gone west out of China to a miraculous rebirth as the Buddha. Ming Sengshao composed a "Treatise in Rectification of the Two Religions" ("Zheng er jiao lun") in rebuttal to Gu Huan, which has been preserved in full. In the treatise, Ming Sengshao addresses in refutation eight points of Gu Huan's discussion and adds a summary of his views on the relative merits of the two religions.

On the twenty-fifth day of the fourth month of 676 (June 11), the Tang emperor Gaozong (r. 649–683) had a stele erected at Ming Sengshao's former residence at Qixia Temple on Qixia Mountain in honor of Sengshao's sixth generation descendant, Ming Chongyan (d. 679). The stele, incised in beautiful running script and still to be seen today on the temple grounds as one of the earliest extant examples of this script, bears an epigraph composed personally by the emperor in commemoration of the life of Ming Sengshao. The epigraph tell us, among other things, that Ming Sengshao passed away in 484, a fact not recorded in any other account of Sengshao's life. The inscription also gives a literary recounting of the circumstances of the founding of the Qixia Temple, probably derived from an inscription written about the temple by Jiang Zong (519–594), who himself had spent considerable time at the temple. This latter text was inscribed on a stele erected at the temple; the original stele was destroyed in the mid-ninth century, but a number of reproductions were made throughout the years.

Jiang Zong's inscription tells us that when Ming Sengshao took up residence on the mountain (it says that Sengshao lived there for more than twenty years, but he did not move there until 480, just four years before his demise), it was known for its restorative herbs. Still, the local residents cautioned Sengshao against the ferocious tigers and poisonous snakes inhabiting the wild areas where Sengshao chose to reside. Sengshao answered that poisons were not as lethal as the Three Poisons of concupiscence, anger, and ignorance, and that a devoted believer would not find wild beasts menacing. He built his rustic residence and devoted himself to his religious pursuits, remaining detached from worldly affairs.

Sengshao often recited sūtras with a Buddhist monk called Fadu (d. 497 or 500 at age sixty-four), and once in the middle of the night when the two were chanting the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra* (*Wuliang shou jing*, *Sūtra of Boundless Life*, a central text of the Pure Land sect), a golden light suddenly illumined the room. The glow seemingly contained the image of a terraced pavilion, and for an instant the Human King shone on the incense burner cover, and streams and stones gleamed in the dark room (i.e., a representation of the contents of the sūtra, of the Amitābha Buddha and his Western Paradise). On account of this, the layman Sengshao donated his residence for the construction of the Qixia Temple, which was consecrated on February 18, 489. Sengshao also once saw in a dream the Tathāgata Buddha illumined on the cliff near his residence and wished to have religious statuary fashioned. His son Zhongzhang together with the monk Fadu later had sculpted into the cliff an imposing statue of the Amitābha Buddha accompanied by two slightly smaller statues of bodhisattvas. Many men of renown, including members of the imperial clan, donated pledges for further statuary to be carved into the cliff; the stone iconography, known as the "Cliff of the Thousand Buddhas" with its 515 Buddhist images sculpted into 294 hollows, still may be visited today.

The Qixia Temple, founded at the residence of Ming Sengshao through his religious ardor and the bequeathal of his estate, remains today as Sengshao's living legacy. Even when the armies of the Sui completely decimated the capital in 589, the temple was not harmed. Instead, in 601 the founder of the Sui, Emperor Wen, had erected on the grounds one of eighty-three wooden dagobas he had constructed throughout the empire to house Buddhist relics (the stone dagoba that today is the centerpiece of the temple dates from 945). The temple has been a center of Buddhist activity since its founding, as it still is today, but for several very brief periods. During the Tang it was one of the four greatest Buddhist temple complexes in China, and the temple halls have been continuously renovated through the centuries; the present halls date from early this century, after having burned down in 1856 during a battle between the imperial armies of the Qing and those of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (Taiping Tianguo, which had Nanjing as its capital from 1853 to 1864). In terms of the Buddhist faith, the Qixia Temple perhaps is most memorable for being the place where the Three Treatises (*San lun*) school, the Mahāyāna philosophical school (known as *Mādhyamika*, Middle Way, in Sanskrit) that flourished in medieval China and spread also to Korea and Japan, began to achieve prominence and formalization with the teachings of the monk Senglang. Senglang was, according to several medieval sources, a student of Ming Sengshao's companion in religion, Fadu.

Ming Sengshao's biography in the *History of the Southern Qi* was appropriated and revised during the Tang dynasty by Li Yanshou (fl. 625) and included in the official *History of the Southern Dynasties* (*Nan shi*). There it was no longer placed in the section of collective accounts of men in reclusion so that the biography of Sengshao's son Shanbin, who held a number of high official posts during the Liang dynasty (which followed the Southern Qi), could be appended to it.

The biography of Ming Sengshao translated below is that included in the *History of the Southern Dynasties*, with additions from the *History of the Southern Qi* included in double angle brackets << >>. Li Yanshou (fl. 625), comp., *Nan shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 50.1241–44. Bracketed additions from Xiao Zixian (489–537), comp., *Nan Qi shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 54.927–28.

Further Reading

On the special character of reclusion in China, see Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice of Reclusion in Early Medieval China and Its Portrayal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming); Aat Vervoor, *Men of the Cliffs and Caves: The Development of the Chinese Eremic Tradition to the End of the Han Dynasty* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1990). On Buddhism and the Chinese gentry, see E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959); Arthur F. Wright, "Buddhism in Chinese Culture: Phases of Interaction," *Journal of Asian Studies* 16.1 (1957): 17–42; reprinted in his *Studies in Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Robert M. Somers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

The Biography of Ming Sengshao

Ming Sengshao, whose byname was Xiulie, was a man of Li District (approximately seventy-five kilometers northeast of modern Jinan City, Shandong) in Pingyuan Commandery. One source gives his byname as Chenglie. His ancestor Mengming, son of Baili Xi of the lineage of Taibo of Wu (an ancestor of the Zhou), took his given name as his surname; Sengshao was his descendant. Sengshao's grandfather Wan was a Regional Retainer, and his father Lüe was a Supervising Secretary.

Sengshao was learned in the classics and proficient in the Confucian arts. During the Yuanjia period (424–453) of the Song dynasty he was repeatedly nominated as a "Flourishing Talent," and during the Yongguang period (465) the Garrison of the Commander of the North appointed him to its Personnel Evaluation Section; in no case did he accede. He lived in reclusion at Lao Mountain in Changguang Commandery (just northeast of modern Qingdao City, Shandong), where he assembled disciples and set up his practice of instruction. When the Wei [armies] overcame the area north of the Huai River (ca. late 466), he crossed the river [to the south].

<<During the sixth year of the Taishi reign-period of Emperor Ming (470) he was summoned for the position of Court Gentleman for Comprehensive Duty, but he did not accede.>> During the Shenming period (477–479) when [Xiao Daocheng, who would shortly become] Emperor Gao of the Qi was acting

as Grand Mentor, he instructed that appointment be granted to Sengshao along with [two other men in reclusion,] Gu Huan and Zang Rongxu. Sengshao was summoned for the position of Secretarial Aid with the ceremony of pennants and bestowal of silks but did not go. When Sengshao's younger brother Qingfu was [Regional Inspector] of Qing Province (he was appointed to this post in 477), Sengshao was lacking in grain and comestibles and followed Qingfu to Yuzhou (modern Lianyungang City, Jiangsu), where he resided at Yanyu Mountain, roosting in the clouds in a cottage for contemplation, delighting in the waters and rocks; in the end he never once entered the walls of the regional command.

Toward the end of the Taishi reign (465–471), when mountainslides occurred in Min and Yi (mountain locales around modern Chengdu, Sichuan), and the Huai River dried up in Qi Commandery (here meaning modern north-eastern Jiangsu), Sengshao addressed his younger brother in confidence, saying, "The ethereal cosmic forces (*qi*) of Heaven and Earth do not deviate from their [natural] order. If the yang is being repressed and is not released, and the yin is pressing and is not given vent, then under these conditions occur the aberrations of mountains collapsing and rivers going dry. Of old, when the Yi and Luo rivers went dry, the Xia was lost. When the [Yellow] River went dry, the Yin was lost. When the Three Rivers went dry and Ji Mountain collapsed, the Zhou was lost. And when five mountains (actually three) collapsed, the Han was lost. Now, for a state to exist, it must rely on mountains and rivers for stability; when mountains and rivers produce aberrations, what could be attendant but demise? At present the virtue of the Song is comparable to that of the final years of the four eras [just mentioned]. Record my words, but do not divulge them." In the end, it was just as he had said [i.e., the Song soon demised].

In the winter of the inaugural year of the Jianyuan reign of the Qi (early 480), [the emperor] decreed: <<"We are duly solicitous toward learned men of conscience, and hold in Our heart [those who] live beyond the mundane. Ming Sengshao of Qi Commandery manifests his resolve and stays loftily aloof, indulging his predilection for the worthy writings of the ancients; for his adherence to Remoteness and Inviolability, it is befitting to confer honorific adornments.">> Sengshao was summoned for the position of Regular Gentleman Cavalier Attendant, but on the pretext of illness he did not accede. The emperor subsequently wrote to Cui Zusi, saying: <<"Ming the lay Buddhist manifests his will with great measure; could it be that my former directive will not be successful? The minor and less privileged wish to have the services of an Expositor, and you should have him arrive. State my aims fully, and order him to return [to the capital] together with [his brother] Qingfu.">> The emperor further said, "Not to eat the grain of the Zhou, yet to eat the bracken of the Zhou (as had the two renowned brothers in reclusion Boyi and Shuqi of old): for this, criticism also was expressed in the past. In the present, how could it be that talk would cease? It is simply a matter for ridicule."

Qingfu left his post [in the third month of 480], and Sengshao accompanied him back [to the capital] where he took up lodging at She Mountain in Jiangcheng [just outside the capital]. Sengshao heard of the long-standing virtue of the Buddhist monk Sengyuan (414–484) and went to pay his respects to him at the Dinglin Temple [at Zhong Mountain, just east of the capital]. When Emperor Gao wished to go out to the temple to see him (Sengshao), Sengyuan asked Sengshao, “Should the Son of Heaven [i.e., the emperor] come, what would you, the lay Buddhist, have as response for him?” Sengshao said, “Men of the mountains and moors (i.e., men in reclusion) ought but bore a hole through the wall to escape [when faced with government service]. If I were to decline [appointment], I would not be able to secure my life; it would be better to follow the precedent of Master Dai.” He then withdrew and returned to She Mountain, where he had the Qixia Temple constructed and took up residence. Emperor Gao was deeply regretful. In the past, Dai Yong had lain aloof below his window, his body dressed in the clothes of a man of the mountains; this is what was referred to by Sengshao.

Emperor Gao later addressed Qingfu, saying, “Your elder brother ‘loftily esteems his own affairs’ and might be counted among the ‘extramundane officials’ under Yao [who repudiated official service]. <<Although We cannot meet with him, at times we meet in my dreams.>> We think in Our dreams about that Remote One, and long have been ardently looking forward [to our meeting]. This is what is called ‘paths and roadways cut off, but wind and rain pass through.’” He then bestowed Sengshao with a *ruyi* (“as-you-wish”) scepter of bamboo root and a cap of bamboo shoot husks, things in which men in reclusion take honor. A certain Feng Yanbo of Bohai, a gentleman of lofty conduct, heard of this and sighed, “Ming the Buddhist layman keeps himself in the background, yet his reputation is always to the fore. He is rightly the Ruzhong (i.e., Wang Ba, a renowned practitioner of reclusion of the Later Han) of the Song and the Qi.” <<In the inaugural year of the Yongming reign (483), Shizu [i.e., Emperor Wu] issued Sengshao an imperial edict of summons, but pleading illness he (Sengshao) did not agree to go to an audience. Sengshao was summoned by imperial proclamation>> for the position of Erudite of the National University, but he did not accede; he later demised.

Sengshao’s eldest brother Sengyin was proficient in discussing the occult. When he served the Song as Adjutant to the King of Jiangxia, Liu Yigong, the king prepared a couch especially for him, comparing him to Xu Ruzi [i.e., Xu Zhi, a renowned practitioner of reclusion of the Later Han who was treated with special courtesy by the Grand Administrator of the commandery where he lived]. He rose to the rank of Regional Inspector of Ji zhou. During the Yuanhui reign-period (473–477), his (Sengyin’s) son Huizhao served as Registrar for the Arbiter of the South under [Xiao Daocheng, who would shortly become] Emperor Gao of the Qi, whom he accompanied in the [successful] resistance campaign at Guiyang [in 474]. He accumulated official ranks, reaching Calvary Adjutant of the Inner Troops, where he was paired for concurrent

duties with Xun Boyu (d. 483). In the inaugural year of the Jianyuan reign (479) he held the position of Regional Inspector of Ba zhou. He paid solicitous attention to the Man and Yan [minority peoples of the southwest], and the emperor approved his appointment as Regional Inspector of Yizhou; however, before he transferred he demised. . . .

Sengshao's own sons Yuanlin, <<whose byname was>> Zhongzhang, and Shanbin both continued the family undertakings; Shanbin received the most acclaim. . . . Although the Ming clan crossed to the south late, its members had both fame and position. From the Song through the Liang, six of them attained the office of Regional Inspector.