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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Wenchang Buildings in Late Imperial China: A Consideration of the Visual Record in Late Imperial Local Gazetteers

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Structures dedicated to the high god Wenchang and his subordinate Kuixing were a pervasive feature of cityscapes in late imperial China. Common in Daoist and Confucian temples as well as schools both public and private, the buildings also broke free from walled complexes as stand-alone attractions. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the practice of building a high structure as a geomantic intervention to improve the collective prospects of local candidates on the civil service examinations – first attested in the Southern Song – combined with devotional practices to the Daoist god Wenchang. The present article considers the range of visual sources available on these structures, the questions that can be asked of these images, and the written textual source that complement the visual record. A case study from Suzhou demonstrates the ways in which the visual materials in gazetteers on the Wenchang towers in a particular locality can shed light on urban spatial dynamics and contests for power among local elites.

供奉文昌帝君及其侍從魁星的建築在明清時期普遍可見。它們通常建在道觀、孔廟、公立書院或私塾中，也有的脫離圍牆獨立於城中而成爲景觀。據史料記載，通過修樓建閣祐助當地學子科考取得功名的習俗最早始於南宋，在明清時期與道教文昌神的祭祀結合了起來。對於目前收錄的相關視覺材料，本文考察了資料的規模、可以探討的問題以及內容上補充視覺記錄的文本資料，以蘇州某地的地方志爲案例，展示如何透過文昌閣的視覺圖像洞悉當地空間的發展演化與地方勢力的權力鬥爭。

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**Keywords:** Late Imperial period, local gazetteers, Daoism, Suzhou, Wenchang

**關鍵詞：** 中國明清時期，地方志，道教，蘇州，文昌

In the spring of 1897, in the pages of his journal *Shiwubao* 時務報 (Current Affairs), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) complained bitterly about the pervasive presence in educational institutions of the high god Wenchang 文昌 (fig. 1) and his fierce subordinate Kuixing 魁星 (fig. 2).<sup>1</sup> There was no classical sanction for the worship of either of these deities, Liang lamented, yet students throughout the realm propitiated them, while the proper sacrifices to Confucius were neglected. Icons of Wenchang and Kuixing in schools throughout the empire made a mockery of the transformational capability of pedagogy itself. Liang wrote:

The *[Book of] Rites* states: “When entering a place of learning, one must perform the *shi* and *dian* sacrifices before the former sages and former teachers,”<sup>2</sup> so that one unifies one’s intention and sets one’s course, so as to venerate the teachings and be guided to goodness. In today’s schools,<sup>3</sup> in addition to Confucius, sacrifices are also offered to Wenchang, Kuixing, and others. In Our Yue [Guangdong], Wenchang and Kuixing are situated in the place of honor to receive the offerings, while the [official] sacrifices to Confucius have died out. For Wenchang [is propitiated with] the *youliao* sacrifices<sup>4</sup> as the Commander of Fates and called a celestial deity or [the *Classic of Poetry* line] “Zhang Zhong is filial and amicable”<sup>5</sup> [is invoked] and [he] is regarded as a ghost.<sup>6</sup> Kuixing has inherited the appellation of the *kui* 奎 [lunar] lodge; relying on the shape of the *kui* 魁 character, an illusory form has been created for him, with the appearance of a bizarre demon: it is a flagrantly false conflation, [credence in which is] completely unfathomable. Those who promote and venerate them are followers of the demonic path that deludes the masses; those who follow along and serve them are also engaged in infelicitous illicit sacrifice. Upon entering school, [a pupil] venerates [Wenchang and Kuixing] as gods; however, regarding Confucius, Utmost Sage of Great Completion

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the fellow participants in the “Visual Materials in Chinese Local Gazetteers: Research Workshop and Conference” organized by Department III: Artefacts, Action, Knowledge of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. Chen Shih-pei convened the workshop; Calvin Yeh was generous with his expertise. Tristan Brown, Joseph Dennis, and Peter Lavelle shared ideas and references relating to Wenchang towers. Two anonymous readers provided stimulating suggestions that raised questions beyond what I have been able to address in this article. Vincent Goossaert, Terry Kleeman, and Susan Naquin provided helpful comments on earlier drafts. Joshua M. Seufert kindly assisted with bibliographical matters. Alexis Lycas corrected several errors.

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<sup>2</sup> The original passage is from the “Wen wang shizi” 文王世子 chapter. It reads: 「凡始立學者，必釋奠於先聖先師。」 *Liji zhushu*, 20.13a. It is the *locus classicus* for the spring and autumn sacrifices.

<sup>3</sup> *Xueshu* 學塾, a term inclusive of academies (*shuyuan* 書院) and private (clan) schools (*sishu* 私塾).

<sup>4</sup> *Youliao* 標燎 was a fire sacrifice to asterisms—including the fifth and sixth ones named in the Wenchang constellation—attested in the “Offices of Spring” 春官 “Dazongbo” 大宗伯 chapter of the *Zhouli*: 以標燎祀司中，司命，鬻師，兩師. *Zhouli zhu shu*, 18.2b.

<sup>5</sup> An allusion to the *Shijing*: 《詩經·小雅·六月》「侯誰在矣，張仲孝友。」 The Mao commentary elaborates: “Zhang Zhong was a worthy minister.” 張仲，賢臣也。 Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 added: “Zhang Zhong was a friend of Jifu; by nature he was filial and amicable.” 張仲，吉甫之友，其性孝友。 (*Mao shi* 10.8a). Wenchang explains this connection in Chapter 23 of his spirit-written autobiography: Kleeman 1994, 23, 138–139.

<sup>6</sup> Here Liang alluded to two categories of supernatural being in play in the Wenchang cult. Wenchang devotees regarded him as a high god, whose status did not rely on previous human incarnations; simultaneously, he was considered a historically-attested figure who had been apotheosised as a filial paragon. It is the latter category that Liang termed “a ghost.”

Who Transmitted to the World and Established the Teachings, his memorial fire is running out of fuel, his sacrificial vessels almost empty, his dates of birth and death scarcely known by anyone.

《記》曰：「凡入學者，必釋奠於先聖先師」，所以一志趣，定嚮往，崇教而善道也。今之學塾於孔子之外，乃兼祀文昌魁星等。吾粵則文昌魁星，專席奪食，而祀孔子者殆絕矣。夫文昌者，樞燎司命，或稱為天神；「張仲孝友」，或指為人鬼。魁星者，襲奎宿之號；依魁字之形，造為幻相，狀彼奇鬼，矯誣荒誕，不可窮詰。倡而尊之者，當從左道惑眾之條；沿而奉之者，亦在淫祀無福之例。乃入學之始，奉為神明。而反於垂世立教大成至聖之孔子，薪火絕續，俎豆蕭條，生卒月日，幾無知者。<sup>7</sup>

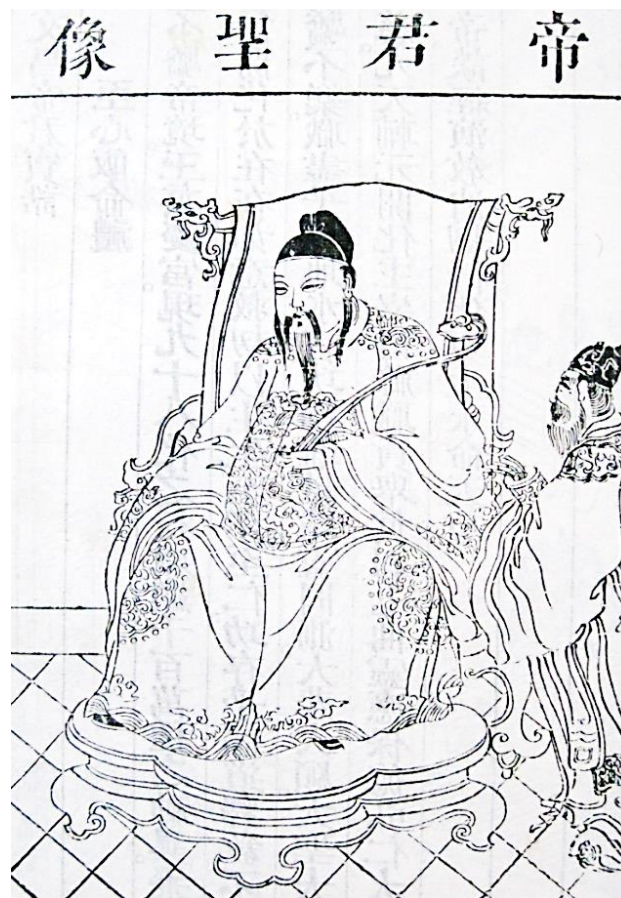


Fig. 1: Wenchang on his throne, flanked by an attendant. From Huang Zhengyuan 黃正元 (fl. 1734–55), editor, *Yinzhixun tushuo* 陰騭文圖說 (*The Composition on Hidden Virtue, Explicated and Illustrated*). Yuan 元: 1a. Courtesy of the East Asian Library, Princeton University Library.

Liang was a qualified observer of customs in schools during the late Qing; at this moment in his life, he had spent little time *outside* of educational institutions. Both his grandfather and father had grasped the bottom rung of the examination ladder by earning the *xiucai* 秀才 degree, and had become school teachers

<sup>7</sup> Liang Qichao, “Lun Xuexiao wu: Youxue” 论学校五：幼学 (On Educational Institutions [5]: Education for the Young) in Liang 2018, 61. This essay was first published 3 Jan.–3 March 1897 in Liang’s own periodical *Shiwubao*, then collected as “Bianfa tongyi” 變法通議. Huang Chin-shing frequently discusses portions of this passage; see Huang 2021, 123, 174, 205–06, 225.

(Huang 1972, 11). Liang himself had taken the raised scholar (*juren* 舉人) degree at the precocious age of seventeen.



Fig. 2: Kuixing, from Liu Tishu 劉體恕, editor, *Wendi quanshu* 文帝全書 (Complete Works of the Cultural Thearch), 1: 3a. Changjun 常郡: Yang yi miao Wenchang ge 陽邑廟文昌閣. 1876 edition. Courtesy of the East Asian Library, Princeton University Library.

Liang wrote these words at the beginning of his career as a public intellectual and less than two years before the fallout from the 100 Days Reforms would force him to flee Qing territory (Huang 1972, 45). Though he was on his way to becoming a pathbreaking figure in the intellectual and political creation of modern China, from the perspective of the history of Wenchang devotion, the most striking element of Liang's critique is its lack of originality. Officials first objected to the presence of Wenchang worship in school in the late fifteenth century, as part of a conservative reaction to imperial support for the cult (Zhao 2021, 68). This support continued throughout the remainder of the late imperial period: in 1801 Wenchang was confirmed as a "thearch" (*di* 帝) (Zhao 1997, j. 84 [v. 10: 2542]), while Confucius was only a "king" (*wang* 王) (Nylan and Wilson 2010, 153). What is interesting about Liang's complaint is not the content of the critique but its reiteration on the brink of the collapse of the imperial system.

This conservative Confucian critique of Wenchang devotion should not be confused with the impending anti-superstition discourse that would decimate much of Chinese communal life during the first half of the twentieth century (Goossaert 2006; Nedostup 2009; Katz and Goossaert 2021). But this well-established disdain for Wenchang devotion on the grounds of lack of support in canonical texts would inform the effort of Liang's teacher Kang Youwei to reformulate Confucianism as a world religion modelled on

Christianity. Kang's effort was doomed to failure in part, as Huang Chin-shing has perceived, because Kang sought to strip Wenchang devotion from Confucian praxis, leaving Kang's program with little popular appeal (Huang 2021, 180–82).

At the time Liang was writing, it would have been more remarkable for an official school (*ruxue* 儒學 and associated terms at the prefectural and county level) or private academy (*shuyuan* 書院) *not* to have had a structure devoted to Wenchang than to have had one. Indeed, if one wishes to view the built infrastructure of Confucian education without the presence of Wenchang veneration, one must turn to the Korean peninsula rather than China.<sup>8</sup> According to the *Ming shi* 明史 (Ming History), by the mid-fifteenth century, “instructional institutions throughout the realm ... have shrines to propitiate him” (天下學校亦有祠祀者).<sup>9</sup> How did this state of affairs come to pass?

Structures dedicated to Wenchang and Kuixing were a pervasive feature of cityscapes in late imperial China. Common in Daoist and Confucian temples as well as schools both public and private, the buildings also broke free from walled complexes as stand-alone attractions. Ranging from two to four stories tall, they went by a number of different names for both the astral deity propitiated—e.g., “Cultural Star” (Wenxing 文星) as well as “Cultural Splendor” (Wenchang)—and the type of structure: “pavilions” (*ge* 閣), “towers” (*lou* 樓), and “palaces” (*gong* 宮). They were not Wenchang shrines (*ci* 祠) or temples (*miao* 廟), though there could be overlapping ritual uses between the two types of structures. In light of this special issue's focus on visual materials in local gazetteers, the current article considers: 1) the range of visual sources available on these structures in and beyond local gazetteers; 2) what questions can be asked of such materials regarding the distribution of these structures and the intention of those who constructed, renovated, and depicted them;<sup>10</sup> and 3) the written textual sources that complement the visual record.

The article is organized as follows: I provide a brief user-centred overview of the two sources of digitised late imperial local gazetteers to which the Local Gazetteers Research Tools (LoGaRT) interface provides access.<sup>11</sup> I then discuss the origin of late imperial Wenchang towers, positing a coming together of structures initially devoted to two distinct purposes: buildings propitiating the Daoist god Wenchang and towers built by officials at the behest of local elites seeking a geomantic intervention in order to improve the collective prospects of the locality in the civil service examinations. In order to show the ways in which the visual materials in gazetteers can be used in a particular locality, I provide a case study from Ming-Qing Suzhou.

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<sup>8</sup> The twenty-four gazetteers of Korean academies reproduced in Hangug Inmungwahagwon Pyeonjipbu 1998 reveal no trace of Wenchang devotion. On the surviving material culture of Joseon academies, see *Seowon, cojin i reul nopigo seonbi reul gireuda 2020*.

<sup>9</sup> Zhang *et al.* 1308; Zhao 2021, 67–69.

<sup>10</sup> A dramatic illustration of the amount of information available in a detailed field survey compared to that provided in the illustration in a late imperial gazetteer is the pioneering study Liang 2001. At the time of its writing, the Guanyin Pavilion at the Dule Temple 獨樂寺 was the earliest known surviving wooden structure in China. The article includes a hand copy by Liang of the illustration from the Kangxi period *Jizhou zhi* 薊州志 (p. 170), in which there is little to visually differentiate the Guanyin Pavilion from another two story structure of much later provenance (the Qiao lou 樵樓). A Wenchang gong appears among 18 single-storied buildings represented almost identically.

<sup>11</sup> On LoGaRT itself, see Chen *et al.* 2020. For the user guide prepared by Calvin Yeh, see <https://logart.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/lg-user-guide/#/>.

## Gazetteer Databases and the LoGaRT Interface

The numerous printed collections of facsimile reproductions of gazetteers remain invaluable resources.<sup>12</sup> Here I will limit my remarks to the two electronic databases that the Local Gazetteers Research Tools (LoGaRT) content is based upon: the approximately five hundred gazetteers held by the Harvard Yenching Library and another four thousand or so available through the Erudition (Airusheng 愛如生) Series I and II databases.

The primary differences between the two sources of digitised gazetteers for the LoGaRT interface are as follows:

- 1) The Harvard material is open access. The gazetteers are available as high resolution scans of individual pages directly on the Harvard website free of charge and without registration requirements.<sup>13</sup> Harvard's open access policy allows a greater degree of coordination and planning with the LoGaRT system. This content can be searched through LoGaRT without affiliation with a German institution. In contrast, the Erudition database material is licensed and only available through LoGaRT to scholars registered with the Cross Asia platform run by the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin for the benefit of scholars affiliated with German institutions.<sup>14</sup>
- 2) The cartouches on the diagrams in the Harvard gazetteers have been transcribed, while those from Erudition have not.
- 3) There is a reliable printed bibliographic catalogue describing the Harvard gazetteers (Li 2013), in addition to the Harvard Library system's impressive online catalogue Hollis. The editions and exemplars (individual copies of an edition) of the Harvard materials are stable: each has a Hollis catalogue number, rare book number, and number assigned within the LoGaRT database. In contrast, the Erudition database provides dates for the gazetteers they provide, but these dates can be erroneous. Even when correct, the data fields for each gazetteer do not provide a means of addressing the complex question of what constitutes an edition in the late imperial Chinese context: e.g., actual date of printing versus date of prefaces; the way in which woodblock printing enabled supplementing or subtracting some materials while retaining others without necessarily indicating the date of these changes; and the degree of involvement of the credited compiler(s).<sup>15</sup> In Joseph Dennis' words, gazetteers were "living documents";<sup>16</sup> as such, they often struggle against efforts to contain them in boxes such as data fields. There is no means of communicating with the vendor in order to correct errors or develop a more complex rubric for dating. There is a notation function within LoGaRT for users to remark on inaccurate metadata, but it is not systematic, and it requires an extra step to investigate (contested or erroneous dates are not automatically

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<sup>12</sup> For an overview of the contents of the major collections, see Li 2013, 287–535.

<sup>13</sup> Chinese Local Gazetteers 中國珍稀舊方志 <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/yenchinglib/galleries/chinese-local-gazetteers-中國珍稀舊方志>. The link to the gazetteers in the Hollis catalog was broken as of 23 July 2021, but the link for "Chinese Old Local Gazetteers 中國舊方志" in the following site works: <https://guides.library.harvard.edu/Chinese>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://crossasia.org>.

<sup>15</sup> On the last of these issues, see the discussion of editorial personnel in Dennis 2015, 129–139.

<sup>16</sup> Dennis 2015, 121–126.

flagged in the LoGaRT search results). In practice, this means that some of the most impressive data processing features of LoGaRT—such as enabling the user to view the chronological distribution of relevant works in tabular form—presents information that needs to be confirmed through the contents of the database (as opposed to in the accompanying metadata).

More problematically, Erudition does not identify the exemplar provided. Even if a user identifies the edition and exemplar properly (through collection seals), the vendor reserves the right to remove content without notice. In rare cases, the five-digit number assigned to an Erudition text in LoGaRT has been reassigned to another work without notice. For the purposes of citation in published work, such numbers cannot substitute for clearly identifiable editions and exemplars.

In addition to full bibliographic information on the source gazetteer, constructing a full dataset of this material would entail the following fields: section of the gazetteer in which the image appears; title of the image; person who composed or carved the image; position of tower in relation to cardinal directions; relation of tower to other built structures; and other works in which the image was reproduced or adapted.

A full rubric for a survey of late imperial Wenchang towers—rather than only the images available in gazetteers—would entail the following information: structure name (followed by alternative names); name of administrative division in which it is located; date of construction and renovations; and current status of structure (if not extant, last attested date). The commemorative compositions available on many towers can provide the following broadly comparable information: composition title; composition author; examination status or occupation of composition author; other sources in which the composition appears (e.g., literary anthology); variorum in the case of significant variants; other individuals mentioned as significant in fundraising and renovation campaigns; and other structures mentioned. The last significant category would be secondary sources relevant to particular towers.

While the number of Wenchang Towers makes them a daunting subject, the Table provides an example of the type of results made possible through the LoGaRT search of transcribed diagram cartouches from the Harvard-Yenching Library gazetteer collection.

- A. Title of Gazetteer (and province) and Book Identification Number (LoGaRT if preceded by “H”; Harvard Rare Book if preceded by “T”)
- B. Place of illustration in gazetteer
- C. Wenchang tower in same illustration? (Yes/No). If no, other immediately relevant structures identified in parentheses.
- D. Reign period or year of publication; edition details (if available)

A.	B.	C.	D.
<i>Xianning County Gazetteer</i> 鹹寧縣志 (Hubei) H00C9	Illustration of the official schools 廟學圖	N (Cultural Peak 文峰 column)	1668/82
<i>Wukang County Gazetteer</i> 武康縣志 (Zhejiang) H0070	Illustration of the county seat 縣治之圖	Y	1672
<i>Nangong County Gazetteer</i> 南宮縣志 (Hebei) H0134	Illustration of county seat 縣城圖	Y	1673

<i>Rizhao County Gazetteer</i> 日照縣志 (Shandong) H0196	Illustration of the official school 儒學圖		1673/1715
<i>Taiping County Gazetteer</i> 太平縣志 (Huangshan 黃山, Anhui) H007B	Illustration 圖	Y	1683
<i>Pingshun County Gazetteer</i> 平順縣志 (Shanxi) H00B3	Illustration of the newly constructed walled city 新城圖	Y	1693
<i>Jia County Gazetteer</i> 郟縣志 (Henan) H00EB	Illustration of the Jia county official school 郟縣學宮圖		1694 <sup>17</sup>
<i>Xuanhua County Gazetteer</i> 宣化縣志 (Zhangjiakou municipality 張家口市, Hebei) H012D	Xuanhua prefectural seat 宣化府	N	1711/37
Yunlong Department Gazetteer 雲龍 州志 H00D2 (Xuzhou 徐州 county, Yunnan)	Illustration	N (Dipper Mother Pavilion)	1716
<i>Xijiang Gazetteer</i> 西江志 (i.e., Jiangxi provincial gazetteer) H0053	Map of Ganzhou Prefectural Seat 贛州府治圖	N	1720
<i>Taishun County Gazetteer</i> 泰順縣志 (Wenzhou 溫州, Zhejiang) H007D	Illustration	Y	1728/29
<i>Jiangxi Province Comprehensive Gazetteer</i> 江西通志 H0051	Map of Ganzhou Prefectural Seat 贛州府治圖 (based on H0053 above)	N	1732
<i>Yanqing Departmental Gazetteer</i> 延 慶州志 (T 3269 1004.83; LoGaRT contains only Erudition Series II exemplar [93062])	Illustration of the departmental seat 州城圖	N (Cultural Peak Pagoda 文峰塔; Wenchang Palace)	1742
<i>Wanquan County Gazetteer</i> 萬全縣 志 (Zhangjiakou municipality 張家口市, Hebei) H00CE	Illustration of walls and moats 城 池圖; Illustration of the walled town of Zhangjiakou 張家口下堡 圖 (two different illustrations)	N (first illustration); Y (second illustration)	1742
<i>Jing Departmental Gazetteer</i> 景州志 (Hengshui municipality 衡水市, Hebei) H0160	Illustration of the departmental seat	Y	1745
<i>Queshan County Gazetteer</i> 確山縣 志 (Henan) H0093	Illustration of the Cultural Temple 文廟圖	Y	1745
<i>Sishui County Gazetteer</i> 汜水縣志 (Henan) H00E3	Illustration of county seat	Y	1745/69
<i>Heng Departmental Gazetteer</i> 橫州 志 (Guangxi) H0097	Illustration of walls and moats of the Heng departmental seat 橫州 城池圖	N	1746 (reprinted in 1899)

<sup>17</sup> contained in same case 函 as 1743 *Continued Gazetteer* 續志 of same county



<i>Shanyang County Gazetteer</i> 山陽縣志 (Huai'an 淮安, Jiangsu) H005E	Illustration of walls and moats of Shanyang 山陽城池	N (includes Wenchang Palace)	1748/49
<i>Zhenhai County Gazetteer</i> 鎮海縣志 (Ningbo 寧波, Zhejiang) H0081	Illustration of the official school 學宮圖	Y	1751/52
<i>Suning County Gazetteer</i> 肅甯縣志 (Cangzhou 滄州, Hebei) H0136	Illustration of the official school	N (Wenchang shrine 祠)	1754
<i>Yi County Gazetteer</i> 嶧縣志 (Zaozhuang 棗莊, Shandong) H018C	N/A (no section name in central woodblock column 版心)	N	1761
<i>Boxiang County Gazetteer</i> 柏鄉縣志 (Xingtai 刑臺, Hebei) H0132	Illustration	Y	1766
<i>Fenghua County Gazetteer</i> 奉化縣志 (Zhejiang) H007E	Illustration of the official school; Illustration of Jinxi Academy 錦溪書院圖 (two different illustrations)	Y (for both illustrations)	1772/73
<i>Huimin County Gazetteer</i> 惠民縣志 (Binzhou shi 濱州市, Shandong) H0195	Illustration of the Huimin county seat 惠民縣城圖	N (Cultural Platform 文臺)	1782
<i>Jining Direct Administration District Gazetteer</i> 濟寧直隸州志 H0187	Illustration of the Cultural Temple	Y	1785
<i>Yuxiang County Gazetteer</i> 虞鄉縣志 (Yuncheng 運城, Shanxi) H00B7	Illustration of the county seat	N	1789
<i>Changning County Gazetteer</i> 長寧縣志 (Ganzhou 贛州, Jiangxi) H003D	Illustration of county seat 縣治圖	Y	1851/60
<i>Yanqing Departmental Gazetteer</i> 延慶州志 (Beijing) H00CD	Illustration of the departmental seat	Y (and Wenchang Palace)	1879 (1921 reprint 覆)

Table: Illustrations of Towers Dedicated to Kuixing in Qing Dynasty Gazetteers Held by Harvard-Yenching Library (search terms 魁星閣 and 魁星樓). Arranged chronologically by date of publication of gazetteer exemplar.

Using the search terms Kuixing ge 魁星閣 and Kuixing lou 魁星樓, I list thirty-one images in twenty-nine distinct gazetteer editions dating from 1668 to 1879 (there were no earlier hits, though the search could have been extended into the Republican period). The placement of the images containing the Kuixing towers was consistently in gazetteers either for administrative seats or for the official schools in those walled cities.

## Dual Origins: Wenchang Devotion and Geomantic Intervention

This article focuses on buildings devoted to Wenchang: either the classically-attested star name or the Daoist deity. Indeed, I argue that these structures became so widespread because of the space for cultural negotiation provided by these two uses of the term “Wenchang”: an official could devote funds to a

structure named after the astral deity while local examination candidates and degree holders could use the same building to pray to the Daoist deity Wenchang. Due to the productive ambiguity of the terminology, some background on the term and the Zitong 梓潼-Wenchang cult is necessary. As evident in the following discussion, this article is located in the overlapping space between Confucian Studies, Daoist Studies, and Architectural History. Buddhist Studies looms in the background because the Wenchang towers that had mushroomed around south China by the sixteenth century were Confucio-Daoist appropriations of the pagoda. In his pioneering survey of the architecture of China, written in the 1940s, Liang Sicheng 梁思成 (1901-1972; son of the above-quoted Liang Qichao) discussed these structures in the section on pagodas and referred to them as *wenfangta* 文方塔 (“cultural square pagodas”).<sup>18</sup> For more than a century scholars have devoted much attention to combinatory discourse in Chinese religions, but many have concentrated on textual sources while ignoring that an inter-credal competition occurred at the level of the built environment.

The phrase “Wenchang” is first attested in the poem “Far off journey” (Yuanyou 遠遊) attributed to Qu Yuan 屈原 (traditionally 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) and preserved in *Lyrics of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭). The “Cultural Splendour Palace” (Wenchang gong 文昌宮) is first described in the “Treatise on the Celestial Offices” (“Tianguan shu” 天官書) chapter of Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (ca. 145-86 BCE) *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記).<sup>19</sup> In the twelfth century these astral figures merged with a Daoist cult originating in Zitong 梓潼 in northeastern Sichuan, resulting in a deity named Wenchang whose duties included overseeing the civil service examination system (Kleeman 1995). The complex history of the Zitong cult—including the filial exemplar with the surname Zhang alluded in the above passage by Liang—made it a target for orthodox Confucians. They contended that none of the available origins for the phrase “Wenchang” or the past lives the god himself related in his twelfth century spirit-written autobiography represented a legitimate object of sacrifice, so the cult deserved to be prohibited as “illicit sacrifice” (*yinsi* 淫祀). As with the complaint by Liang Qichao discussed above, these protests attest to the pervasiveness of these structures. The above-quoted passage from the *Ming History* was in the context of an empire-wide prohibition of shrines to Wenchang in official schools. The prohibition was apparently impotent: Chen Qiyuan 陳其元 (1812-1881) claimed that there were more such orders by the Board of Rites during the Kangxi (1662-1722) and Yongzheng (1723-1735) reigns (Chen 1989, 149-150; discussed in Gao 2008, 29-30).

Just as Wenchang devotion came about through the merging of diverse cultic practices, the towers devoted to Wenchang had different sources, not all of which were the same as the Wenchang cult itself. Most significantly, the Ming and Qing towers fulfilled the function of towers that first began to be constructed in the Southern Song period as geomantic interventions intended to improve the civil examination prospects of the candidates of a particular locality. In his survey of records attesting to these towers in the eleventh century, Liu Hsiang-kuang discusses ones in which the rationale was the same as in Ming and Qing Wenchang towers—e.g., constructing a hill in the southern portion of the administrative unit in the

<sup>18</sup> Liang 2005, 154. Liang left *wenfangta* untranslated in this book, which he composed in English.

<sup>19</sup> The entire “Treatise” is translated in Pankenier 2013, 444-511; Pankenier translated “Wenchang” as “Promotion of Civic Virtue” (p. 460).

shape of a writing brush (*wenbi* 文筆)—without any mention of Wenchang (Liu 2006, 29). Indeed, as Ronald G. Knapp pointed out in his study of the self-consciously pedagogical use of built environments, village structures intended to imitate the “four treasures of the studio” (*wenfang sibao* 文房四寶) are first attested in the twelfth century in southern China (Knapp 1998).<sup>20</sup>

Daoist Wenchang temples reached the Yangzi Delta region in the twelfth century, and Kuixing towers are attested in schools in the Southern Song (1127–1276) (Chien 2015, 49). The 1316 promotion of Wenchang to “thearch-lord” (*dijun* 帝君) by the Yuan court consolidated the cult and bolstered its legitimacy.<sup>21</sup> A detailed architectural analysis of what may be the oldest Wenchang pavilion still standing—that in the Five Dragons Temple (Wulong miao 五龍廟) in Langzhong 閬中 county, Sichuan<sup>22</sup>—places it in the Yuan. However, the study does not examine the written records on the uses to which the structure was put (Ma *et al.* 2020):<sup>23</sup> an issue that must be investigated given that one and the same structure could—and often did—change names and uses.<sup>24</sup> The Yuan promotion was the highest Wenchang ever received. In 1370, the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang struck Wenchang from the official sacrifices. He remained off the register of sacrifices until 1801, but by the mid-Ming the deity’s position had improved, in practice if not as policy. Wenchang pavilions became common on the county level by the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>25</sup>

Ample textual and physical material exists for an empire-wide survey of the development and diffusion of these structures: there are thousands of relevant entries in gazetteers, overlapping epigraphic sources, and a significant number of surviving structures.<sup>26</sup> No one has yet attempted such a venture, though Chien Iching has provided the most sustained studies of these structures and the purpose to which they were put, with particular attention to Taiwan from the 1720s to the present (Chien 2013, 2015, 2020).<sup>27</sup> Taiwanese structures have received by far the most attention in secondary scholarship. Studies also exist for these towers in Shandong province from the Yongle reign (1402–24) to the late Qing (Zhao 2021) and Pushi 浦市, Luxi 濼溪 county, Hunan, from the late seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century (Shi and Lu 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Knapp includes a photo of a tower in Zheng village 鄭村, Sanshui 三水 county, Guangdong province, to illustrate a built structure in imitation of a writing brush (p. 125). This tower is architecturally indistinguishable from many of those associated with Wenchang in the late imperial period.

<sup>21</sup> The promotion order is included in Long and Huang 1997, 176–177.

<sup>22</sup> On religious diversity in late imperial Langzhong, see Brown 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Sichuan sheng Langzhong shi Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui 1993, 866 does not provide additional information about what textual sources might exist to track the changing usages of this structure over time.

<sup>24</sup> A more conventional Wenchang tower was built in the Jinping 錦屏 area of Langzhong county in the late Ming or early Qing. Called Kuixing lou, it was dismantled in 1808. In 1888, another tower was built on the same site. That tower was then destroyed in the Cultural Revolution; the one that stands today with the same name as the first was built in 1988. (Sichuan sheng Langzhong shi Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui 1993, 879). In terms of Kuixing worship related to Langzhong county, the county claims as a native son Ma Dezhao 馬德昭 (b. 1824), of Kuixing village. Ma composed the iconic illustration “Kuixing Dots the Dou [Asterism]” (Kuixing dian Dou) 魁星點鬥, in which the deity stands with one leg atop the character for “carp” (*ao* 鰲) while looking over his right shoulder to regard the “Dipper” (Dou 斗) character. One stele inscription of this image is preserved in the Xi’an Stele Forest, while the other is held by in the Zhang Fei Temple 張飛廟 in Langzhong (Sichuan sheng Langzhong shi Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui 1993, 816).

<sup>25</sup> In his study of Wenchang devotion in Shandong province, Zhao Shuguo identifies records of four county-level Wenchang pavilions constructed in this period: those in Zhucheng 諸城 (possibly dating back to 1404 [record partially effaced]; in the southeastern corner of the county school); Zhangqiu 章丘 (1447); Jinxiang 金鄉 (erected in 1449 at the behest of the magistrate to the east of the Wenchang shrine); and Leling 樂陵 (rebuilt in 1451 at the order of the magistrate). See Zhao 2021, 67.

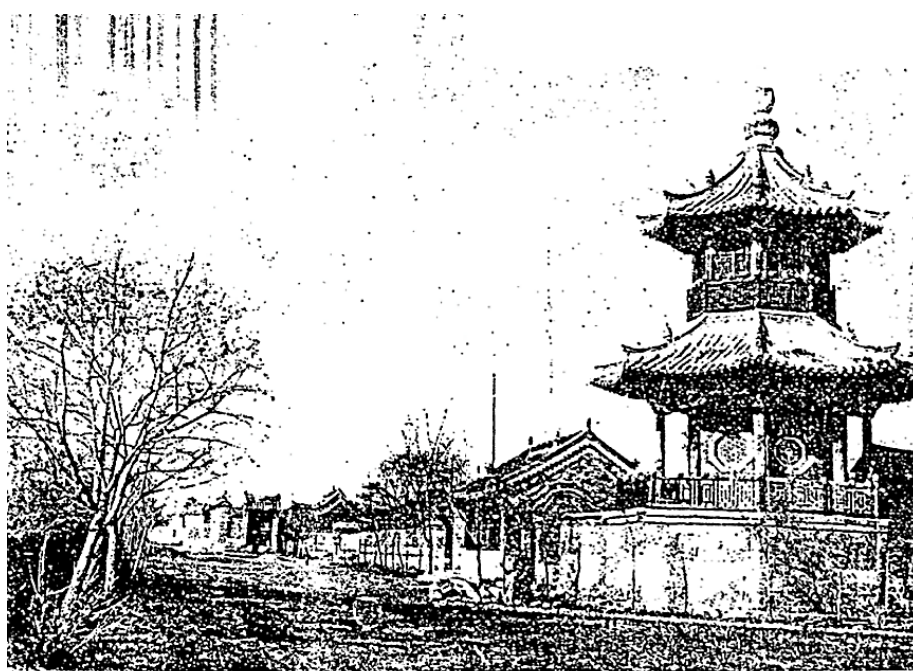
<sup>26</sup> Chien 2013 is a provisional attempt to provide a chronology of Wenchang structures in schools, but much more material is available. The oldest extant such tower may date from the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368); see Ma *et al.* 2020, which is exclusively concerned with physical evidence provided by the building itself, rather than the textual records on it.

<sup>27</sup> On such towers in Taiwan see also Nikaidō 2011.

Cumulatively, these studies demonstrate the utility of Wenchang structures in homing in on complex local dynamics including the devotional lives of examination hopefuls and degree-holders, the adaptation of Daoist theology within examination culture, and the interface between officials and local elites through fundraising campaigns and their commemoration. They also serve as a caution against making any generalisations about these towers on an empire-wide or even provincial and prefectural basis until more work has been done on the history of particular structures in their local and regional contexts.<sup>28</sup>

## General Remarks on Wenchang Towers in Diagrams in Mid-Ming to Republican Period Local Gazetteers

The diagrams including astral towers provide thought-provoking information on spatial relationships involving directional orientations, number of storeys, built complexes in which they were situated, and the absence or co-occurrence of related towers. On the most basic level, these were clearly structures in which the local elites in widely divergent areas of the empire felt a pride. Indeed, one of the most obvious reasons for their diffusion is that they were a means whereby a magistrate could be seen to “do something” at the behest of locals in order to improve their condition.



樓 星 奎

Fig. 3: A lithographic reprint of a photograph of a two-story Kui 奎 Asterism Tower and its environs from the 1921 *Fengcheng xian zhi* 鳳城縣志. Two pages combined by author. Image credit: *Zhongguo Fangzhi Ku*.

<sup>28</sup> Bujard *et al.* 2017 is the most rigorous collaborative project to survey religious institutions in a pre-modern Chinese city and evaluate the extent to which their material legacy survives into the present. The Shuntian 順天 prefectural school included a Kui tower (Kuילou) (p. 3) adjacent to its Wenchang shrine (pp. 122–123).

On the technical level of reproduction, the vast majority of available images are woodblock prints. However, Republican period letterpress (*qiānyìn* 鉛印) gazetteers include a significant number of lithographic reproductions of photographs. Examples include two-story Kui Asterism towers (Kuixing lou) in the 1921 *Fengcheng County Gazetteer* (*Fengcheng xian zhi* 鳳城縣志; fig. 3), 1928 *Liaoyang County Gazetteer* (*Liaoyang xian zhi* 遼陽縣志)—both these counties were in Liaoning province—and 1935 *Chiping County Gazetteer* (*Chiping xian zhi* 茌平縣志) from Shandong.

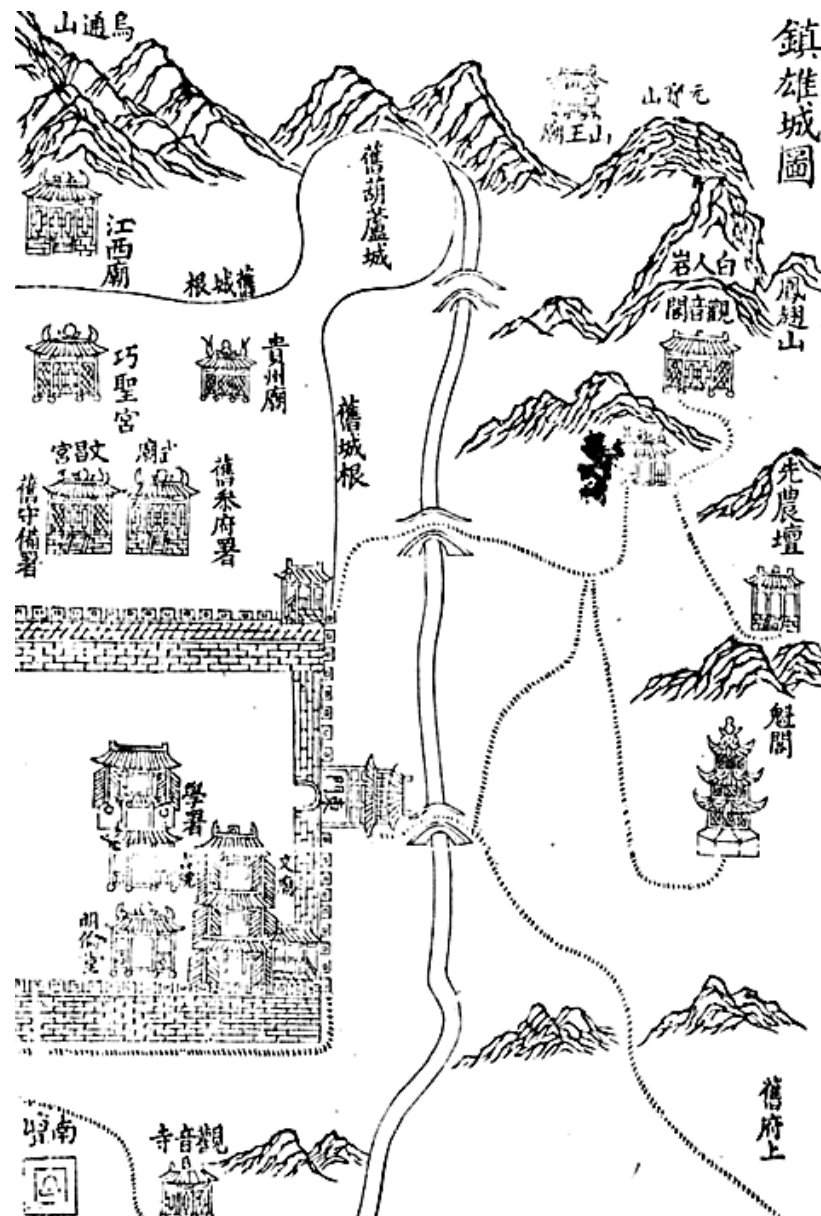


Fig. 4: A three-story Kui[xing] Pavilion outside the city walls in the 1887 *Zhenxiong zhou zhi* 鎮雄州志 (p. 36). Note the Wenchang Palace 宮 immediately north of the current city walls inside the line indicating the old ones. Image credit: *Zhongguo Fangzhi Ku*.

In a testament to the capacity of woodblock printing to convey detailed visual information, the photographic images are a step backwards in clarity from their woodblock predecessors. Woodblock paragons of architectural detail include the three-story Kui[xing] Pavilion depicted twice in the 1887 *Zhenxiong Departmental Gazetteer* (*Zhenxiong zhou zhi* 鎮雄州志) of Yunnan Province: first outside

the city walls in the “city diagram” (*chengtu* 城圖; p. 46, fig. 4); second as a two-page (two half-woodblock pages) spread devoted to the structure itself (pp. 47–48, fig. 5).<sup>29</sup>

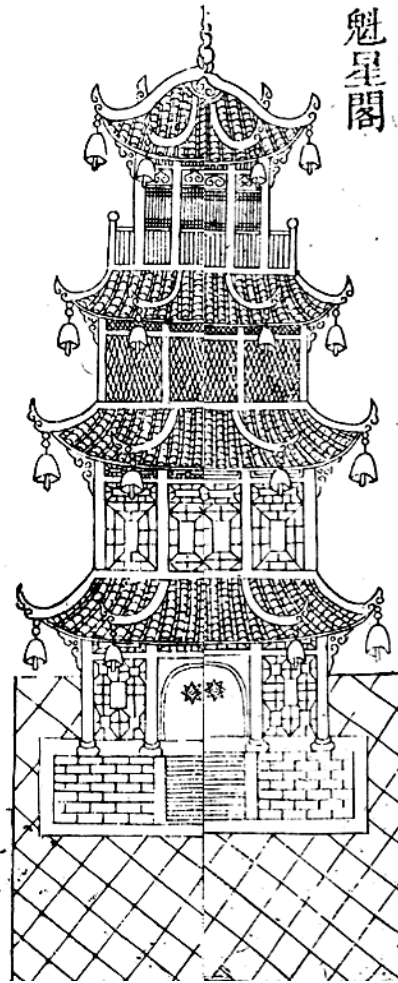


Fig. 5: A four-story Kui[xing] Pavilion in the 1887 *Zhenxiang zhou zhi* (p. 46); presumably the same structure represented as having three stories in the previous illustration. The fine detail renders visible the lattice windows, tiles, bells hanging from the eaves, four front columns, and contrasting square and diagonal patterns of the brick floor before and surrounding the structure. Image credit: *Zhongguo Fangzhi Ku*.

Higher quality means of photographic reproduction were available in China at the time. As the Wenchang towers were frequent draws in the nascent international tourism industry, a number of examples are available. The first known photograph of the Changzhou county Cultural Star Pavilion (on which, see below) is from the Presbyterian missionary Hampden C. DuBose’s pamphlet “Beautiful Soo’: The Capital of Kiangsu,” produced by the Shanghai-based publisher Kelly and Walsh in 1899 (fig. 6). Tainan in Taiwan (administratively under Fujian province for much of the Qing) hosts several Wenchang structures that have been tourist attractions consistently from the early twentieth century to the present. These are the Wenchang Pavilion built on the site of the former Dutch fort Providentia (Chikanlou 赤崁

<sup>29</sup> The gazetteer also includes a detailed description of the rites performed at the tower during the provincial examination.

樓; Xie 2003) and that at the nearby Confucian temple.<sup>30</sup> The Kuixing tower on the southeastern end of the lake in front of the official school in Jiading 嘉定 (in Songjiang 松江 prefecture during the Qing) is an example of a later tower—built in 1976 (Zhang 2009, 143)—acting as a tourist draw (fig. 7). The current tourist uses of these structures sometimes diverge dramatically from how they functioned in the Ming and Qing. A prominent example is the Confucian Temple in Hangzhou, where the Wenchang Pavilion houses the series of 16 portraits of arhats by the Five Dynasties (907–79) painter Guan Xiu 貫休 inscribed on stelae. The set was reordered by the Qianlong emperor and housed at the Shengyin Temple 聖因寺 on the other side of the West Lake until the 1960s, when it was brought to the Confucian Temple for protection (Du 2008, 13, 270–86).



Fig. 6: The first known photograph of the Changzhou county Cultural Star Pavilion and the building in front of it. From DuBose’s pamphlet “Beautiful Soo’,” first published in 1899.

Most of the available images of complexes with both Wenchang and Kuixing Pavilions show them in the southeast corner: the example presented here is from the Yongzheng edition of the *Taishun County Gazetteer* (*Taishun xian zhi* 泰順縣志) in Wenzhou 溫州, Zhejiang province; fig. 8 and fig. 9). As early as the eleventh century—in accounts of geomantic towers explored by Liu—the southern direction was considered bolstering. By the sixteenth, those who composed texts on the Wenchang towers frequently asserted that the southeastern corner was the proper place to build a tower in order to enhance civil examination performance. In his 1844 manual *Xiang zhai jing zuan* 相宅經纂 (A Selection from Classics of Residential Topomancy), Gao Jiannan 高見南 provided so much directional latitude for siting these towers that three-eighths of the fengshui compass was a viable option. The passage titled “Directional positioning of a high tower [in the shape of a ] writing brush” (Wenbi gaota fangwei 文筆高塔方位) reads:

For, in the capital, the [administrative seats of] provinces, prefectures, departments, counties, and rural villages, when the literati are not benefitting [from the current geomantic order], those who do

<sup>30</sup> A photograph by S. Sidney from 1870 of the Wenchang tower at the Tainan prefectural examination complex appears in Le Gendre 2012, 128 (Plate 2-13; explanation xxxviii, 421). It shows the tower in dilapidated condition between renovations, with the roof completely destroyed. The caption terms the structure “The Tower of the Gods of Literature”; the plural is because not only Wenchang (“the God of Literature”) but his subordinate deities were enshrined there.

not place in the first class on the examination register, can—in the four directional positions of *jiā*, *xūn*, *bīng*, or *dīng* [positions on the geomantic compass indicating east to south], select an auspicious site, and erect a sharp peak in the shape of a writing brush. It only needs to surpass in height other hills [in its proximity] in order to cause first-class candidates to emerge. Alternatively, one can erect a [structure in the shape of a] writing brush on a hill or on a flat location construct a tall pagoda: all constitute “writing brush peaks.”

凡都省府州縣鄉村，文人不利，不發科甲者，可於甲巽丙丁四字方位，上擇其吉地立一文筆尖峰。只要高過別山，即發科甲。或於山上立文筆，或於平地建高塔；皆為文筆峰。<sup>31</sup>



Fig. 7: The Kuixing tower on the southeast corner of the lake in front of the official school in Jiading, Jiangsu province, built in 1976. Photo by the author, 2014.

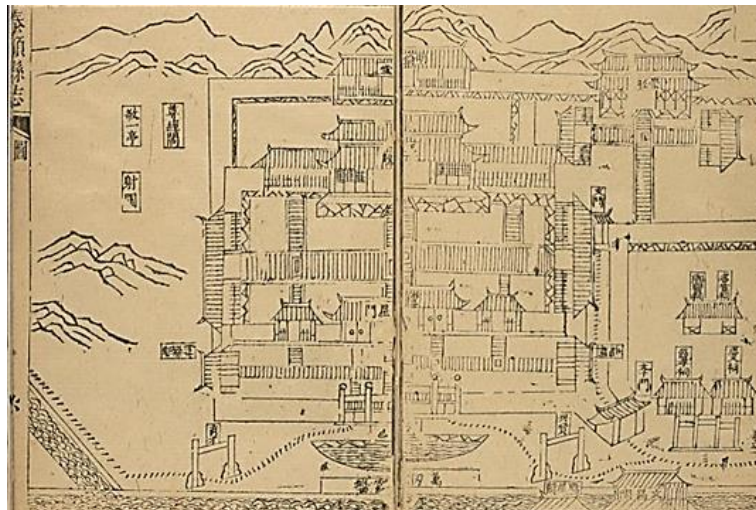


Fig. 8: Paired Wenchang and Kuixing Pavilions in the southeast corner just outside of the walls of the Confucian temple complex in Wenzhou 溫州, Zhejiang province. From the Yongzheng reign *Taishun xian zhi* 泰順縣志, tu 5b–6a. Image source: Harvard Yenching Library (persistent link: <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:14396917?n=74> ).

<sup>31</sup> Gao 1999, 95. I am grateful to Tristan Brown for pointing out this source to me.





Fig. 9: Detail of the Wenchang and Kuixing Pavilions in *Taishun xian zhi*, tu 5b.

As a means of achieving greater height, some towers were erected on the city walls. In the accompanying illustration from the Kangxi edition of the *Pingshun County Gazetteer* (*Pingshun xian zhi* 平順縣志), Shanxi province, the Wenchang Pavilion and Kuixing Tower are both on the city wall in the southeast corner (fig. 10).

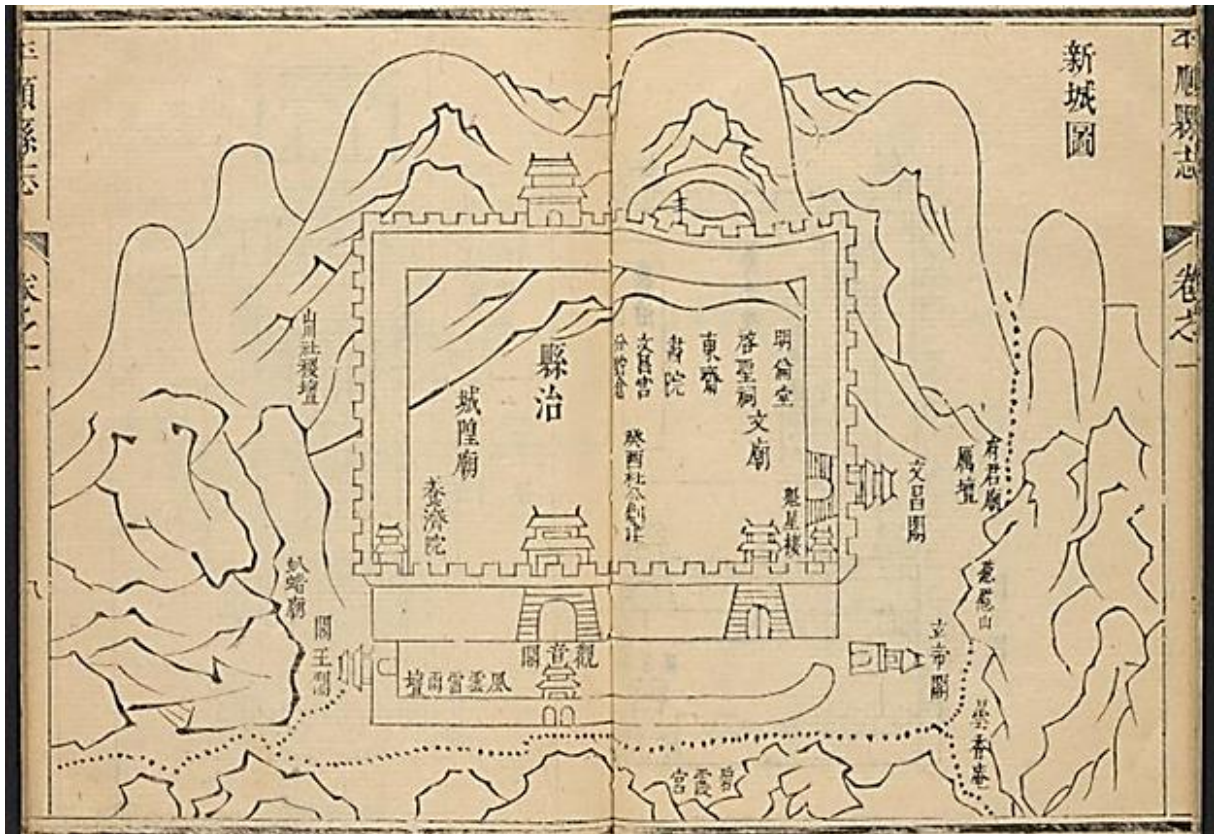


Fig. 10: A Wenchang Pavilion and Kuixing Tower on the southeastern corner of the city walls in the Kangxi edition of the *Pingshun xian zhi* 平順縣志. Note the presence of a Wenchang Palace 宮 as part of the Confucian temple complex inside the city walls. Image source: Harvard Yenching Library (persistent link: <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:12771493?n=27>)

## The Changzhou County Cultural Star Pavilion: Site of Competition Between Eastern and Western Urban Suzhou

The above remarks are primarily based on using the image searching function of LoGaRT without extensive reading in available texts or fieldwork at the relevant sites. This final section considers the available visual records on a tower on which I have done extensive readings and extended fieldwork: the Cultural Star Pavilion (Wenxing ge 文星閣; also occasionally called Wenchang ge 文昌閣) in Changzhou 長洲 county (present day Suzhou; fig. 11).



Fig. 11: The Cultural Star Pavilion on the main campus of Soochow University. Photo by the author, 2011.

Suzhou is one of the most richly documented cities in the imperial period; a profusion of primary sources has inspired a wide array on scholarship on the city, its denizens, and its implications for the urban form in Chinese history more broadly.<sup>32</sup> The Changzhou county Cultural Star Pavilion is one of the best-documented and best-preserved Wenchang towers of the late imperial period.<sup>33</sup> The tower was first constructed in the 1550s as part of a new complex for the Changzhou county school, initiated by a magistrate in response to pleas from students. As Michael Marmé has captured vividly, this was a difficult decade for the city, one characterised by natural disasters and pirate attacks.<sup>34</sup> In 1612, on the advice of geomancy experts who deemed that a taller structure in the *xun* 巽 direction was necessary for the fortunes of the county to improve, the structure was moved a short distance to the southeast. According to one

<sup>32</sup> The earliest gazetteer record on Suzhou is translated and annotated in Milburn 2015. The same author provides a thoughtful analysis of the most significant Ming gazetteer of Suzhou: Wang Ao's 王鏊 (1449-1524) *Gusu zhi* 姑蘇志 (1506) (Milburn 2009, 105-107). Xu 2000 is a major urban history. Wang 2009 is the fullest attempt at a comprehensive history of the city.

<sup>33</sup> Burton-Rose 2020, esp. 368-69, 379-80.

<sup>34</sup> Marmé 2005, 221-30.

unsourced present day account, there was one more move in the late Ming (Shen 2006, 77). Since that time, the building has remained in place: it survived the Taiping occupation of Suzhou because it served as a useful watchtower over the eastern wall of the city.

Gazetteer diagrams bolster textual evidence regarding the nature of the intervention intended by the backers of this tower from the late Ming through the early Qing (which is far from the only period of interest for this structure). This Cultural Star Pavilion was built in response to a sense of inferiority in the eastern half of Suzhou *vis à vis* the western (Wu 吳 county). As Cao Zishou 曹自守, Wu county magistrate from 1559 to 1563, explained, within the walled city: “Public offices and the mansions of officials, and even [rich] merchants, collect in large numbers on the west side. Hence the land to the east is spacious and that to the west is crowded. It is commonly said that the west side is more cultured than the east.”<sup>35</sup>



Fig. 12: The eastern portion of the walled city of Suzhou with few built structures, as depicted in the *Longqing Changzhou xian zhi*. N.p.

<sup>35</sup> 公署宦室，以逮商賈，多聚於西。故地東曠西狹。俗亦西文於東。Cao 1997, 200. “Wuxian chengtu shuo” 吳縣城圖說 in Gu 1997. Translation modified from Marmé 2005, 229. ce 5, 11b-12a.

This disparity between the cultural cachet of western versus eastern Suzhou is on full display in the most spectacular High Qing depiction of Suzhou, *Shengshi zisheng tu* 盛世滋生圖 (Picture of Fecundity in a Flourishing Age; later more commonly known as *Gusu fanhua tu* 姑蘇繁華圖 [Flourishing Suzhou]) of Qianlong period court painter and Wu county (Suzhou) native Xu Yang 徐揚 (fl. 1750s). The painting meanders in and out of western Suzhou and its rural hinterland, without even depicting the two eastern gates of the city (Feng 葑門 in the southeast and Lou 婁門 in the northeast). It includes the prefectural and Wu county Confucian temples—both of which traced their provenance back to the Northern Song reformer and Wu county native Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052)—but not the Changzhou county school (Yang 2008, 83). Astral towers are not depicted in either of these complexes.<sup>36</sup>

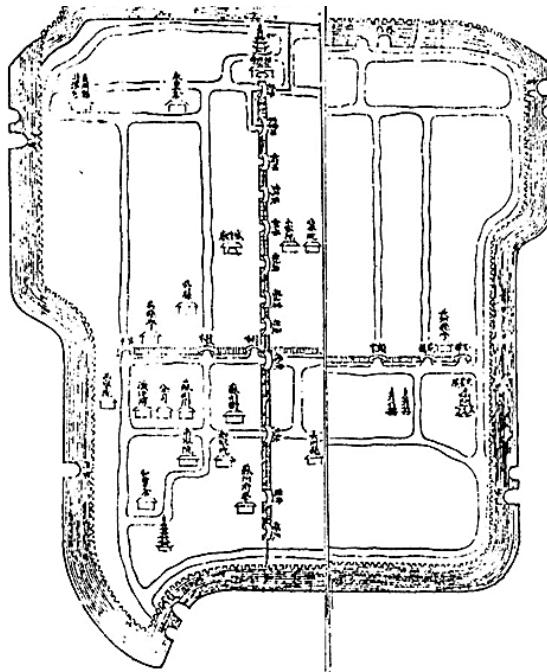


Fig. 13: How Wu county (the western half of urban Suzhou) viewed Changzhou county (the eastern half of urban Suzhou) in the late Ming: empty except for the county school-Twin Pagodas-Cultural Star Pavilion triad. From the 1642 *Wu xian zhi*, tu 4b–5a. Image credit: *Zhongguo Fangzhi Ku*. Combined in Photoshop by the author.

As a baseline, a diagram of the area from the first extant *Changzhou xian zhi* 長洲縣志 (Changzhou county gazetteer)—that of the Ming Longqing reign (1567–72)—prior to the construction of the Cultural Star Pavilion had so little to show that it included significant portions of the western walled city as well (fig. 12). The Chongzhen (1627–44) reign *Wu xian zhi* 吳縣志 (Wu county gazetteer, preface dated 1642) depicted the Cultural Star Pavilion, but the eastern half of the city remained significantly under-endowed with historical sites in comparison to the western half (fig. 13). The Cultural Star Pavilion can only be comprehended in relation to two other structures: the Changzhou county school, in which it was originally located and with which it continued to be associated even after being physically relocated; and the Twin Pagodas (Shuangta 雙塔) complex directly to the west, which can be traced to initial construction on the same site in 861. Geomancers conceptually converted the shadows of the Twin Pagodas into ink brushes

<sup>36</sup> The present day Suzhou Confucian temple has a Wenchang Palace (Zhang 2009, 103), but the date of its construction is not yet clear to me.

in the pool in front of the Cultural Star Pavilion, thereby incorporating a more venerable Buddhist complex into a literati-official Confucianisation of the cityscape. The imaginary and symbolic subordination of the Twin Pagodas to the Cultural Star Pavilion is crystallised in the portrait of the tower commissioned by Peng Dingqiu 彭定求 (1645–1719) for his site-specific gazetteer *Modest Gazetteer of the Cultural Star Pavilion* (*Wenxing ge xiaozhi* 文星閣小志, 1704<sup>37</sup>; fig. 14). Peng's illustration amplified the spatial core of Changzhou county depicted in the *Wu County Gazetteer* sixty years earlier, but converted the perceived lack into repletion by magnifying the scale of the Cultural Star Pavilion complex.



Fig. 14: The Cultural Star Pavilion towers over the other complexes that form the cultural core of Changzhou county—the official school and the Twin Pagodas—asserting its pervasive, positive influence over the area. From Peng Dingqiu, *Wenxing ge xiaozhi*, 1704, *Wenxing ge*, tu 1b.

## Conclusion

This article is a brief consideration of one aspect of one type of primary source on Wenchang towers in late imperial China. It considers the visual information available on these structures in late imperial gazetteers and the nature of the questions that can be asked of it. It is my hope that this may form a small contribution towards a broader recognition of the significance and diversity of these towers and the uses for which they were employed, and the importance of combining all available sources of information on each individual structure.

<sup>37</sup> The date of publication comes from Peng's autobiography: Peng circa 1719, 61b.

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All *Siku quanshu* (hereafter SKQS) editions refer to texts accessed through the Kanseki Repository (<https://www.kanripo.org/>), which are available as a digital facsimile of the Wenyuan ge exemplar juxtaposed with the searchable transcription.

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