Chapter I

On a Lacquer Tray

It was the middle of an ordinary day: July 28, 1372. Ming Taizu, in his palace in the capital, Nanjing, was interrupted just as he was hoping to get some work done. His ceremonial dawn meeting with the officials who staffed the imperial court and the central government had ended. Now Taizu wanted to turn to his paperwork: the stacks of reports and suggestions from officials all over the country that embodied the work of government.[1] To his surprise and annoyance, a group of high officials, led by Minister of Rites Tao Kai 陶凱, entered the room. They wore such solemn expressions that Taizu thought they had come to admonish him for some failing, some action contrary to virtuous government—again! Instead, they presented him with a pair of ripe melons. They were not cut and covered with a napkin, as melons were supposed to be when served to the emperor; they just sat there baldly on a lacquer tray, with their joined stems sticking up.[2]

No wonder the emperor was surprised! Taizu tells us:

> At first I only knew there were melons and did not understand what was up. The minister [Tao Kai] reported: "The melons grew from the same stalk!" When I heard this, I thought it was really strange. I tried asking how this was understood in former dynasties. The group of ministers one after another said, "Several emperors of former dynasties had them, and called them lucky omens. Now, when Your Majesty is ruling, melons growing from the same stalk have been produced in Jurong. Well, Jurong is the emperor's ancestral home. It goes without saying that this is a good omen!" The group of ministers made pretty speeches like this.[3]

In making their "pretty speeches," the officials were drawing on the long tradition in which odd plants and animals, and celestial,

terrestrial, and weather phenomena could all be understood as having meaning for human affairs. Although the ministers said that the meaning of the pair of melons was self-evident, when we read Taizu's own account of the audience in which they were presented, and compare it to two other eye-witness accounts, it becomes clear that there was disagreement over how to interpret the melons. The story was retold over several hundred years by authors who had further interpretations. My research into the place where the melons were grown and the family of the man who grew them suggests yet another interpretation, one that sheds light on the nature of the Ming regime. This chapter will introduce the three primary accounts—one by Taizu, one in a court history, and one by a top adviser—and explain why the ministers interrupted the emperor's morning paperwork with a tray of fruit.

Taizu recounted the presentation of the melons in a preface to an ode that describes and praises them. His preface focuses on his own words and thoughts, which the next chapter will explore, and records the ministers' side of the conversation only briefly. In Taizu's version, for instance, Tao Kai says only four words—*gua sheng tong di* 瓜生同蒂—in the frugal language of classical Chinese: "The melons grew from the same stalk!" The emperor did not deign to record the names or titles of the other officials present, although they had been his close colleagues in the slow conquest of the empire. The two other accounts were written by officials who reported the ministers' side of the conversation more fully and the emperor's side differently. The *Veritable Records of the Reign of Ming Taizu* drew on an immediate eye-witness account of the audience, but took its final shape some thirty years later as part of the routine historiographical work of the dynasty. Based on court diaries and reports from the empire, the *Veritable Records* of each reign were compiled by scholars under the next reigning emperor. The records of the first Ming reign are notoriously unreliable. They were designed by the scholar Xie Jin to legitimate Taizu's fourth son, the Yongle emperor Zhu Di, who usurped his nephew's throne in 1402 to make himself the third Ming ruler.[4] Like Taizu's own essay and the third account of the melon audience discussed on page 5, the account in the *Veritable Records* omitted parts of the conversation and may have falsified other parts. Nonetheless, such imperfect records are all historians usually have. Different accounts, when read against each other, give a more complete view of what actually happened in the audience. But we

can also look at differences in the accounts to think about what each author was using the melon incident for. History includes not only the study of the facts of the past, but also the study of why the sources recording those facts were written and preserved.

So, why did the ministers—busy men trying to get a vast new empire up and running—think the melons were important? According to the *Veritable Records*, Tao Kai, as head of the bureau in charge of ritual, religion, and the civil service examinations, explained to Taizu: "Melons from one stalk were produced at Jurong. Jurong is Your Majesty's ancestral home. It really is a good omen. Now because sagely virtue has united the whole country in harmony, the auspicious omen of two melons sharing a stalk is manifesting Your Majesty's benevolence in protecting the people and cherishing the ten thousand creatures. It is not accidental!"[5] Tao interprets the double melons as arising from the harmony of the whole country under the benevolent reign of Zhu Yuanzhang. Peace and national unity were indeed considerable—and recent—accomplishments.

Unity began with military control. Only four or five years earlier, Ming Taizu and his generals had emerged victorious from the long civil war. The Ming empire was also politically unified; unlike contemporary Europe where local power was largely hereditary, and not closely controlled by the monarchies, the whole Ming empire was governed from the capital through bureaucrats appointed for short terms to places far from their homes. Under the leadership of the emperor, six functional ministries (Rites, Revenue, Personnel, Public Works, War, and Justice) and smaller agencies in charge of such matters as judicial review, astronomy, medicine, and horses were coordinated until 1380 by a Secretariat headed by grand councilors. A watch-dog agency called the Censorate reported on officials throughout the bureaucracy and even remonstrated with the emperor himself. There was also a think tank of the brightest scholars, called the Hanlin Academy.[6] Officials were sent to carry out imperial policy in every one of some 1,500 subprefectures and counties, and local men were selected and authorized to link the villages with the counties. As peace returned and the infrastructure was rebuilt, the economy recovered; as discussed in the Introduction, a united national market would eventually emerge to become a driving force in the world. At the midpoint of the Ming period, 120 years after the melon audience, Columbus set out to seek Chinese goods (and, incidentally, brought the New World its first melon seeds), and in the late

Ming dynasty the Spanish poured Mexican silver into China to buy them. So unity was military, political, and economic, and now that the whole Chinese-culture area was under ethnic Chinese rule for the first time since 1127, Taizu was also determined to create a unified society by eliminating Mongolian customs, assigning each family to a hereditary occupation, imposing community rituals, and promoting moral codes that drew on Confucianism, Buddhism, and popular beliefs in ghosts and spirits.[7] His dynasty lasted; his social design did not.

Unification was founded on military conquest. But, as Tao Kai's words remind us, Taizu could hold the throne only through popular and divine acquiescence: the Mandate of Heaven. The ministers certainly felt justified in interrupting his morning's work to present such a good sign that Taizu in fact held the Mandate. Recording omens had long been part of the basic work of officialdom. Dynastic histories began with basic annals of key events that included omens and portents, understood as, in one historian's words, "supernatural 'comment' on the exercise of authority."[8] It was, in fact, critical to a dynasty's survival that such signs be correctly understood. Moreover, earlier emperors had usually been delighted to receive and publicize such omens as double-headed grain, tortoises with writing on their shells, and rainbow-colored clouds. But—*melons*? Taizu was skeptical, and he asked how earlier dynasties had understood double melons.

The emperor's request for instruction was quite proper. Although the officials said that the omen was easy to understand, interpreting anomalies was in fact a tricky business. Heaven was a deity or force very different from the interventionist God who gave Moses and Muhammad their explicit instructions. Heaven did not speak. The sages of old had uncovered its patterns, governed in accord with them, and tried to record them in the classics: the *Book of Songs* (also called the *Book of Odes*); the historical work the *Spring and Autumn Annals;* the *Book of Documents* (also called *Book of History*); the *Record of Rites* (*Liji*), which described rituals appropriate to each season and situation; and the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), used to divine propitious times for action. But the classics left plenty of room for disagreement on how to understand the moral order established by Heaven.

Moreover, discerning Heaven's will in any particular case was difficult, and one sign of an emperor's virtue was his willingness to accept explanations and guidance from the scholar-officials attending

him. They had won their places in government because of their deep and wide knowledge of history, literature, and the classics of Confucian thought, knowledge that had shaped them into virtuous and thoughtful persons. As bureaucrats, officials enforced imperial law, but as scholars they guided the emperor in carrying out Heaven's will. Occasionally, this meant drawing on their classical knowledge and the present circumstances to interpret anomalies as omens. Tao Kai's interpretation is straightforward and typical of such occasions: he reminds the emperor of the Mandate of Heaven and flatters him by saying that he has truly attained it. Two further interpretations of the double melons offered by officials at the time are more complicated, as we shall see.

The third contemporary version of the melon incident is an eyewitness account of the audience by one of Taizu's long-time top advisers, Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–1381). Song Lian was one of a group of Confucian thinkers who had seen in Zhu Yuanzhang the potential for being the absolute ruler they thought would end the violence and social disorder of the late Yuan period. Song argued that effective government would obviate all rebellion and crime by being so complete as to seem natural, and that the ruler's mind should in fact be aligned with natural patterns. In Song's view, as paraphrased by John W. Dardess:

> When the ruler instructs his people, his efforts should radiate with the luminosity of the sun and moon. When he is pleased, he must communicate his pleasure in such a way that the people are made to think of auspicious clouds and felicitous breezes. His anger should have the sudden and startling effect of thunder and lightning. When he acts to foster life and productivity, these acts must penetrate and nourish as sweet rain and dew; and when he deals in death, the effect should be as devastating as that of an ice storm or frost on vegetation.[9]

From about 1358, when Taizu passed through Jinhua, a center of Confucian studies at the time, Song Lian served him as an adviser and writer.

Song Lian's account of the melon audience stars not Tao Kai but a different minister, Grand Councilor Wang Guangyang 汪廣洋 (d. 1380), an upright and serious scholar who had worked with Taizu since 1355. Wang took advantage of Taizu's question about the

history of auspicious melons to flaunt his erudition. He quoted almost word-for-word a passage from a history of the Han dynasty that notes numerous vegetable omens: two or more ears of grain growing from one stalk, several stalks producing one head of grain, trees that grow together, and eight cases of auspicious melons (*jia gua* 嘉瓜).[10] Wang then referred briefly to a memorial by Tang statesman and literary master Han Yu (768–824), a report explaining to the Tang emperor the connection of the ruler with vegetable omens. Han Yu had written:

> When the kingly one's virtue reaches the earth, then auspicious grain is produced. Prostrate, I consider that Your Majesty's way harmonizes Heaven and Earth, and grace drenches animals and plants. Nothing nearby fails to cooperate; nothing distant fails to honor. Spirits and humans are in accord; wind and rain come in season. The aforementioned auspicious grain and other such phenomena, like two roots joining to make one plant, or two ovaries producing one flower [or one ovary producing two flowers] or like extended tendrils blossoming, or different fruits on the same stem, all convey congratulations on harmony and also express the blessing of an abundant harvest.[11]

By referring to Han Yu's report, Wang Guangyang asserted that auspicious melons were a standard omen and offered the new ruler a connection with the glorious Tang dynasty. Wang continued: "There have always been such lucky omens in response [to good governance]. Your Majesty's energetic spirit of rule has exceeded that of the Han dynasty and surpassed that of the Tang dynasty. Therefore, Heaven has bestowed this precious tally, in which we see the image and reality of the Great Peace."[12] Historical precedent, as Wang presented it, not only validated the authenticity of the omen, but served as a prelude to the Ming founder's own achievements.

Song Lian further reports that the other ministers joined in Wang's praise of the emperor. They also referred to earlier heavenly responses to Taizu himself. Song Lian's hymn of praise, which follows his prose account of the conversation, reports:

> The group of ministers all said,
> bowing and kowtowing,

"Divine peace is thus/sproutingly manifested:
Long live the Son of Heaven!
Now, following the founding of the dynasty,
the numinous bestowals have come one after another:
double-headed grain,
joint-calyx pregnant lotus,
and now in addition this divine tally.
Recently, under the emperor's rule
kingly transformation [has occurred] of itself nearby,
while distant regions all submit."[13]

Like Han Yu's memorial and Wang's speech, this hymn offers blatant flattery, often part of the relationship between minister and ruler. But these statements were also propaganda in the making, drafts of public relations bulletins that the ruler could use to strengthen his government's legitimacy.[14] Song Lian explains that rulers from the antique paragon the Duke of Zhou onward had all commemorated and publicized their omens. Song requests that Taizu order the history officials to prepare a true account (*bei shi lu* 備實錄). An omen was no use if not publicized!

Taizu knew the value of propaganda very well, even while he dismissed the ministers' words as "pretty speeches." He himself promulgated fantastic stories suggesting that he was destined for greatness from birth, and his writings frequently mentioned signs of Heaven's approval. But because he insisted, as historian Hok-lam Chan has explained, on having "a complete monopoly of such propaganda," he sometimes rejected putative auspicious omens, even punishing those who submitted them.[15] In August of 1372, shortly after the melon incident, Taizu expressed his fear that officials could deceive and manipulate him, as they had done earlier rulers, by inventing and reporting good omens and hiding bad ones. Whereas some earlier emperors had actively encouraged the presentation of good omens, Taizu now ordered Wang Guangyang to permit the presentation only of ill omens, portents of disaster. Six months later, Wang was removed from court.[16] His flattery in the matter of the melons had apparently backfired. Wang's political misfortune may explain why the *Veritable Records* make Tao Kai the spokesman, whereas Song's eye-witness account featured Wang's analysis. To glorify Taizu and by reflection his son the Yongle emperor, *Veritable Records* compiler Xie Jin may have been trying to glide over the ugly politics of the first Ming reign. For the plain fact is that Taizu

ultimately executed almost all of the officials at the 1372 melon audience, men who had worked with him for a long time.

Chen Ning 陳寧, for instance, had been a minor Yuan official and had advised Taizu about combining concern for the people's subsistence with military conquest. In 1372, Chen was high up in the Censorate, the watchdog agency. In 1380, he was sentenced to death for conspiracy with Grand Councilor Hu Weiyong 胡惟庸, whom Taizu believed had plotted a *coup d'etat*. Zhao Yong 趙庸 had commanded troops for Taizu since 1361, and Taizu had ennobled him as a marquis; in 1393, he was executed on charges of conspiring with another long-time comrade of the emperor. Grand Councilor Wang Guangyang, who had been honored as the "loyal and diligent earl," was forced to commit suicide in 1380. Song Lian died on the road to exile in 1381, after advising and serving Taizu for over two decades.[17] Of the men present at the 1372 audience, only Tao Kai and Mu Ying 沐英, a foster son of Taizu and a successful general, survived Taizu's attacks on the men who had helped him win and hold the throne. Compiler Xie Jin was well aware of this unhappy history. As a brash young man he had himself remonstrated with Taizu: "Your Majesty has grown angry and pulled out roots, cut tendrils, and executed evil traitors. . . . Some people in the morning are esteemed, and in the evening they are executed."[18] Two decades later, Xie may have assigned the speaking role to Tao Kai to avoid raising the names of this unfortunate cadre of advisers when writing of an omen intended to symbolize the benevolent rule of his patron's father.

The evidence that any of these men actually plotted against Taizu is slim, and in any case no plot could justify Taizu's execution of tens of thousands of alleged co-conspirators, whom he ferreted out, or implicated, in a process that came to be known as assigning "melon-vine guilt."[19] But if we look closely at what was said in the 1372 melon audience and at what was happening at that time, it seems likely that the ministers were, in fact, trying to manipulate Taizu, just as he suspected. Let us return to the rather strange series of utterances at the beginning of the presentation of the melons. Tao Kai, according to the *Veritable Records*, said:

> "Your Majesty is ruling. Melons sharing a stalk have been produced in Jurong. Jurong is Your Majesty's ancestral home. This is really a good omen."[20]

Taizu's essay reports in less stately language that the ministers said:

> "Now, when Your Majesty is ruling, melons growing from the same stalk have been produced in Jurong. Well, Jurong is the emperor's ancestral home. It goes without saying that this is a good omen!"

Why the emphasis on Jurong county? Since Taizu was the emperor, an auspicious omen anywhere in Ming territory could have been considered to apply to him. Moreover, it seems very odd to have to remind someone of the location of his own ancestral home. That Song Lian omits this comment from his account emphasizes its apparent superfluity. What could it mean?

Jurong county, close by the early Ming capital of Nanjing where the conversation was taking place, had indeed been the home of Taizu's ancestors.[21] Yet Taizu himself had been born north of the Yangzi River, in Fengyang, and he considered that his home town.[22] Following Han imperial precedent, he permanently exempted Fengyang residents from taxes and labor service, and at the time of the melon incident he was constructing a lavish capital city there called Zhongdu ("Middle Capital"). Some officials disapproved of the choice of the location for a new capital. The place was backward, and poor, and isolated. By the time of the melon audience in 1372, building Zhongdu was already costing huge amounts of money and many laborers' lives.[23] In 1375, long-time adviser Liu Ji 劉基 (1311–1375) wrote that even though Fengyang was the emperor's home, it was not fit to rule from. So Taizu finally agreed to keep Nanjing as his main capital: a capital of past regimes, located right on the great Yangzi River in what a Portuguese visitor later called "a very fertile, fresh and beautiful country."[24] (In 1420, the Yongle emperor made Beijing (Peking) into the main capital of the Ming dynasty, keeping Nanjing as a secondary capital.) I think that in 1372, the Jurong origin of the double melons was stressed specifically to push Taizu toward this change in policy, to convince him to abandon the Zhongdu project and choose Nanjing as his permanent capital. There was no need whatsoever, based on historical precedent, to select the dynastic founder's home town as the capital. But seeing Taizu's heart set on selecting a hometown capital, the ministers may have proposed Jurong as an alternate home town,

making next-door Nanjing a natural choice for the capital. They were using the melon omen to change Taizu's mind in a current policy debate.

Furthermore, Song Lian may have been intervening in a second policy debate. For Song's preface and hymn not only reported what others had said, but also voiced his own considered views on what the melons meant. Song's hymn of praise says:

> In the fields of Jurong
> beings are without blemish.
> Divine melons show forth:
> different fruits, same stem.
> The melons did not ripen singly,
> but grew together.
> The two *qi*s [i.e., yin and yang energy] nourished matter;
> twin stars descended in spirit.
> Their hidden chambers both sweet,
> icy jades competing in loveliness.
> Bright moons, double wheels—
> it seems they can stand up to the comparison!

Song does begin with the fields of Jurong, but the locality recedes, and the melons, the other part of the equation, come into focus in a long, lush description. Song argues that they refer to conditions in the whole newly conquered and still expanding empire. His prose argument begins: "The August Ming sets the pattern for the nine regions [of China]; its virtue soaks, its benevolence covers. Harmonious airs rise fragrantly, and numinous beings signal prosperity." Song then refers to the melon plants as representing the spread of the Chinese people, based on the orthodox interpretation of a song from the classic *Book of Songs* (see Chapter 6). But he moves quickly to a more specific interpretation. Melons become a symbol of empire, of conquest.

> I pray that, as these melons
> cooperate in auspiciousness and join in blessing,
> there will also be peace in China,
> growing until the azure [sky] is its cover.

—that is, until the Ming empire encompasses the whole world. "What is the message?" Song's hymn asks, and he replies:

> The border areas will unbrokenly extend,
> the four regions will yield,
> and virtue will move in the eight directions.[25]

Melons may have particularly appealed to Song Lian as a metaphor for a united Ming empire. It was the duty of each new dynasty to write the history of the one before it, and in presenting the *Yuan History* to Ming Taizu in 1370, he and other compilers (including Tao Kai) had written of China in the late Yuan period as having been "divided up like a melon."[26] Now it was whole again.

Yet Song's interpretation is even more specific than this. He refers to the regional origin of melons in the Northwest, where the desert haven of Turfan, irrigated with snowmelt from distant mountains running through underground tunnels, was justly famed for its melons (and is still today).

> Now, melons appeared originally among the Uighur people. China subdued [that region] and obtained [melons], so they are called "Western." Today, the emperor has ordered the great generals to march west to Gansu and Xiliang. . . . the Western regions all with one heart come to the court, shoulder to shoulder submitting tribute. That Heaven manifests matching good omens, is it not also because of this?[27]

The melons, then, specifically have to do with Ming campaigns in the Northwest. The Gansu corridor had been conquered two years earlier, and just that summer of 1372 Ming troops had fought and raided as far as Jiayuguan and Dunhuang. Yet Mongol victories in the West during the same summer would lead Taizu, early in 1373, to give up the goal of conquering Outer Mongolia.[28] Song's comments, seen in this immediate context, may not only be celebrating the Gansu victories, but also arguing for continuation of a policy to press further north.

The two agendas the ministers appear to have pursued by presenting and discussing the double melons both focus on the emperor, but they address two different spatial aspects of the empire. Tao Kai and Wang Guangyang locate empire at court and seek to place Taizu in a proper center, a capital whose maintenance would not drain away resources, a capital well established by the patronage of several earlier dynasties. Jurong is important to them as a place close enough

to this capital to stand in for it, and they appeal to the emperor on the basis of its being his ancestral home. Song Lian's interpretation looks instead at the court's outward reach. Answering a question the other interpretation does not address—Why melons?—he uses the history of melons to stress a connection between the Chinese heartland and distant western areas that have just been re-incorporated. Taizu's status as conqueror and universal ruler, rather than his origins as a Jurong man, is the point.

Taizu did tend toward paranoia. As Edward Farmer points out, his vigilance and alertness were what had made him "the sole survivor of a prolonged period of dog-eat-dog competition that destroyed all of his rivals."[29] Late in life he instructed his descendants, "If you take your safety for granted and forget to take precautions, then evil persons will be able to plot. Neither your life nor your state can be protected. You must be prepared day and night as if you were going into battle."[30] Yet it is unfair to attribute to Taizu's incipient paranoia his fear that his advisers were using omens to manipulate him. The ministers were acting within a long tradition of court politics in which, as Rafe de Crespigny has perceptively suggested, warning portents and auspicious omens "were used by both the emperor and his officials as a means of conducting debate at one remove, and also of generating propaganda for their respective positions among a wider public opinion."[31] The ministers showed Taizu the melons, and their texts showed readers the emperor receiving the melons from their hands and accompanied by their words. On the one hand, this presentation flattered the emperor and contributed to dynastic propaganda. But on the other hand, it also allowed ministers to use the melons—the voice of Heaven speaking to the Son of Heaven—to influence Taizu and shape policy without having to disagree openly.

Beyond addressing the immediate policy issues, the scholar-officials were making a claim to interpretive authority: a claim that they were qualified to mediate between Heaven and the emperor.[32] This role Taizu was determined to deny them. Taizu told his descendants that they should take strange occurrences like misplaced objects or a sick horse as signs that danger lurked. But he instructed them that rather than relying on expert diviners,

> you shall carefully make the decision yourself. . . . If there is a fierce wind or a sudden thunder coming directly against you, or if there is a bird in flight or beast afoot

> approaching strangely, this is a warning from the spirits. . . . Celestial phenomena cannot be caused by man; the others are all things that can be caused by man. Perhaps evil persons would take advantage by making it look like there was something when there was not.[33]

Rather than setting aside the double melons entirely, Taizu thought carefully about their meaning. Against the ministers' claims he defended his prerogative of interpretation with a barrage of self-contradictory arguments. Let us turn to his side of the story.

Chapter II

What the Emperor Said

Fruit and melons without land won't grow;
fish and dragons without water can't function.
Su Shi

Taizu's own preface to his ode on the melon audience reports that he was astonished and puzzled when he first saw the melons, even a bit peeved to be interrupted at work. Song Lian, by contrast, paints a picture of a pleased sovereign who first modestly refuses and then respectfully accepts the auspicious omen. To Song Lian's eyes, "the emperor appeared gratified" upon seeing the melons. Before asking about historical precedents, "he looked at them again and again for a long time." And after hearing Wang Guangyang's recitation of precedents, he "modestly hung back and would not agree." Song Lian also reports that the emperor to some degree accepted the argument that the melons were numinous—filled with spiritual energy and meaning.

> The emperor said, "Ah!
> We are still dissatisfied [with the ministers' explanation].
> Good omens ought to lie in *people;*
> how can *things* transmit them?
> [But] *if* things are blessed,
> it is proper to offer them in the imperial ancestral temple,
> since it is my ancestors'
> accumulated blessings that they show."
> Not boasting of the ripe melons,
> the emperor thus did not keep them,
> but only personally expressed this thought:
> "My common followers
> respond to Heaven with fruit [or, "really respond to Heaven"]:
> this is flourishing virtue."

With respect to the ancestral offering, Song's preface explains:

> [The emperor] would not agree [to Wang's interpretation] but presently considered that, since the numinous gift had reached him, he could not refuse to accept it. Then he ordered a eunuch to put them [the melons] in the Qianqing Palace. The next day, he offered them in the imperial ancestral temple.[1]

Of the many comments Taizu made on the melons, Song selected those that made the emperor seem an earnest ruler, appropriately humble before Heaven, and concerned chiefly with virtue and human affairs. Modestly accepting reflected glory, the emperor presents the choice tribute to his ancestors, saying that it was their virtue, if anything, that called forth the omen. The account had to preserve some of what Taizu actually said, since it was written for him. Yet his utterances are put in the best possible light. Song's prose preface gives none of the many complex arguments Taizu made, which we will see below, and his hymn reports only the emperor's view that it is the honesty and hard work of the people that is the real good omen. Song had long tutored Taizu in aspects of rulership. Perhaps in this piece he was trying to teach his sovereign how he *ought* to have behaved, and spoken, and thought about the omen.

Yet there was more to Taizu's response than "becoming" imperial modesty. First of all, it was unnecessary for a ruler to make a show of rejecting omens. The Han emperor Wu (Wudi; r. 141–87 B.C.), for instance, liked omens so well that he once accepted two contradictory interpretations of an omen, generously rewarding both interpreters.[2] Lucky omens had usually been especially welcome early in a dynasty, when a new ruling house "still had to fight for final recognition."[3] Taizu's reluctance set a new precedent, which his successors observed into the sixteenth century. Second, despite all the talk about achieving perfect sagely rule, the Ming government in fact confronted a panoply of serious problems in 1372: border wars; rebellions among Han and minority people; piracy and invasions from the sea; and famine, flood, drought, pestilence, and locust plagues in various parts of the empire. Taizu and his government had successfully dealt with many of the problems. Yes, tribute missions were coming in from overseas, demonstrating the magnetism of the new emperor's virtue—and of China's goods and markets. Yes, reconstruction and unification were proceeding. But it was quite reasonable for Taizu to worry that his throne was not perfectly secure and to feel that complacency was unwarranted,

even dangerous. Contrary to Song Lian's wishful presentation, then, the emperor was not merely being modest in rejecting the melons as an omen his virtue had brought forth. Rather, in accord with Hok-lam Chan's observation, he was asserting his unique right to accept or reject phenomena as omens, and to interpret them. He claimed that prerogative in a number of odd and conflicting statements, reported differently in the three primary accounts.[4]

Once Taizu had recovered from his initial surprise, and following the explanation that the melons grew in Jurong, he first alluded to the antique ritual classic *Record of Rites*. He may not have done so in the audience itself; Song Lian does not report it. But by the time he wrote the essay, he had had time to look up a classical quotation that served his purpose nicely: "Heaven's *qi* descends; Earth's *qi* rises up." Upon hearing or reading these lines, every scholar would have known instantly that the *Record of Rites* itself continues: "Heaven and Earth are in harmonious cooperation; all things bud and grow."[5]

It was important that Taizu embellish his thoughts with a quotation, for education justified status and power. The social and political elite of China were highly educated. From the Song period on, they rarely held office by hereditary right, but instead had to pass rigorous civil service examinations on the classics, Confucian writings, history, poetry, and policy. Early in his reign Taizu had re-instituted the examinations, but in 1373, the year after the melon audience, he would suspend the exams for a decade, because he distrusted the literati men the examination process favored. By 1470, however, the examinations had become essentially the only route into office, and a very important part of social and cultural life.[6] The elite gentry class, with family traditions of learning, and with land-holdings or mercantile capital that assured young men leisure to study, naturally did best in the exams. But printed books to study from were readily bought, and commoners who studied hard could pass the three-tiered examinations, win an official post, and rise into the gentry class, earning tax exemptions and other privileges related to newly acquired status. Conversely, gentry families whose boys balked at spending long years poring over old books could lose their elite status and their access to political office (girls were excluded from the exams, but not necessarily from education). So, education was in itself a status marker. A poor orphan, Taizu had learned to read and write only as an adult, and although he spent his days reading

memorials and writing edicts, admonitions, essays, and even poems, he remained insecure about his classical training. He wanted to demonstrate his mastery of the classics with this allusion.

He continues in his own words that he has heard of "auspicious grain, double water lilies, 'rejoicing-union' flowers, trees that grow together, and two heads of grain on one stem. [But] produce on the same [melon] stalk I have never heard of nor seen. So I greatly wondered at it." Taizu admits that there have been plant omens in the past, but not double melons. He is contradicting Wang Guangyang's report on the Han-era double melons and Han Yu's memorial, but since Taizu and Song Lian report opposite sides of the conversation in two different texts, it is impossible to know who spoke first. Was Wang correcting his sovereign, or was Taizu dismissing the learned scholar's evidence?

As he did in many of his edicts, Taizu then refers to his own life experience.

> Moreover, I come from a farming family. I personally tilled the ditch-drained fields. Yearly I saw the five grains grow and develop, but I never heard of [melons] sharing a stalk! I lived among the group of heroes for eleven years, and as king and emperor have already recorded ten years. [Yet] I have never heard of this [type of] good omen! Because I am not familiar with the *Odes* and *Documents*, I lack a broad view of antiquity and modern times—that must be why.[7]

How shall we interpret that last sentence? Is it modesty? It sounds like crude sarcasm. Elsewhere Taizu wrote scornfully of scholars "who sit looking on in the market and the village, bragging of their own ability, enjoying flattery from the ordinary people[.] When did they ever experience or witness anything? . . . They merely spouted empty rhetoric, thinking it ability, but making no contribution to affairs."[8] Taizu's sarcastic comment in the melon essay about his own lack of book learning points up his mistrust of scholars. Taizu emphasizes instead the value of the practical knowledge he has gained as farmer, soldier, and ruler. "Where does knowledge lie?" he seems to ask: "in books or in the school of hard knocks?"

In this passage, Taizu seems to deny that double melons even exist. But later in the essay, he interrupts his last argument to question the

existence of folk-tale fruits like the double pear and fiery jujube—divine fruits ensuring immortality—and the fairy peach, which blooms once every three thousand years in the orchard of the Queen Mother of the West, a mythological deity popular in Tang poetry, Daoism, and popular religion. Taizu calls these fruits "of which one hears, but which one cannot see."[9] But these double melons are there, right before his eyes. Why is he reluctant to accept them?

Song Lian interprets his reluctance as modesty, and that is, indeed, the next pose Taizu strikes in his own account.

> At the time when I was presented with the melons, the group of officials took their virtue as redounding to me [*de gui yu zhen* 德歸於朕]. When I listened to their speeches, I felt anxious and ashamed. I don't presume to call forth omens with my virtue but only pray for the harvest to be abundant and the people happy."

But is this real modesty? Taizu continues: "I fundamentally am of slight virtue, but even if I had virtue, the Lord-on-high [*Shangdi* 上帝] could not respond with a good omen to make me arrogant. [On the other hand,] if I committed a slight transgression, He would surely announce it with a bad sign to make me careful about my person, and not let the people reach the point of calamity."[10] Here, as in many of his other writings, Taizu assumes that he is in communication with, as he puts it, the Lord-on-high.[11] It was to this deity that he had sacrificed in late 1367, asking for good weather as a sign that he should take the throne.[12] Now that he is emperor his virtue is so crucial, Taizu suggests, that Lord-on-high would warn him even about his minor faults but would not risk his becoming arrogant by congratulating him on his successes. That is hardly a modest stance; rather, it reflects the sense of his own centrality. A few years later, Taizu would express his centrality in ritual terms by uniting what had been separate sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. The unified ceremony, described by a recent historian as "a microcosmic re-creation of the universe in which all natural forces and deities headed by heaven and earth . . . held the annual meeting," emphasized the emperor's pivotal position in the universe as the mediator of that meeting.[13]

Taizu's peculiar claim that Lord-on-high might chastise but would never praise him seems to foreclose the possibility of any good omen

at all: a radical revision to traditional political theory. The passage is dramatically different in the *Veritable Records* version:

> The emperor said: "Auspicious vegetable omens, like auspicious grain, double water lilies, 'rejoicing-union' flowers, and melons on the same stalk—these are all examples. The ministers take their virtue as redounding to me. I am not virtuous and dare not presume [*bugan-dang* 不敢當]. Even if I had virtue, Heaven [*Tian* 天] would not express it through an auspicious sign of one creature. If I committed a slight transgression, [Heaven] would surely use signs to reprimand and warn me, to make me careful about my person, and to protect the people from getting to the point of calamity."[14]

As well as changing the name of the deity from Lord-on-high to the less personal Heaven, Xie Jin, the compiler of the *Veritable Records*, has transformed Taizu's claim—that his virtue would not call forth omens—into a conventional phrase of polite modesty, appropriate to conversation but not true to Taizu's report of his thoughts. An emperor should be modest, but should not deprecate himself too convincingly.[15] Xie further dilutes Taizu's expressions by removing the word "bad" from the description of the sign Heaven would provide to warn the emperor about his faults. Xie's account even goes so far as to completely reverse Taizu's argument in one way: part of the same list of vegetable omens cited above appears, with one minor difference in wording, but now the emperor accepts the melons as canonical. Xie's changes have the effect of dampening the emperor's disagreement with his ministers' view that these particular melons were a message about him from Heaven. That disagreement is reduced to one final point.

This final point is a most interesting argument, which the *Veritable Records* presents accurately, but briefly. The emperor said: "These vegetable omens are produced in that ground and only respond to the people of that ground. What does it have to do with me? If throughout the space between heaven and earth times are peaceful and harvests rich, *that* is the omen of king rule. So kingly omens do not appear in trivial things."[16] How, in other words, could the cosmically significant state of the empire be expressed by a couple of honeydews? As Wolfram Eberhard hypothesizes in discussing ill omens, if the assumption was that human actions or qualities could

be reflected in natural anomalies, "the size of the portents should, in a hierarchical society such as the Chinese, be found to be in relation to the status of the person(s) who caused it."[17]

Taizu's own essay presents this argument more fully, in his usual run-on style. He writes, and may have said in the original audience:

> In antiquity and today, the auspicious signs of the five grains and the lucky omens of vegetation have roots nourished in rich soil. Any omens or blessings that come from the products of a piece of land not bigger than several feet or tens of inches or so must redound to the one who owns and manages [the land]. It has nothing to do with me! . . . Whatever five-grains or vegetable lucky omens arise within a piece of land of several feet, several tens of inches, or several Chinese acres (*mou*), they only congratulate him who owns and manages it! If throughout the space between heaven and earth the times are peaceful and the harvest abundant, *that* is the sign of kingly rule. Kingly omens do not exist among trivialities![18]

Song Lian's hymn, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, gives a faulty echo of this argument when the emperor says: "Good omens ought to lie in *people;* how can *things* transmit them?" The omission of the term "trivial" in this summary helps neutralize Taizu's skepticism about whether the melons are truly an omen. Song portrays an emperor who, quite properly, values people rather than things. Taizu's point was quite different: that kingly omens appear only in large-scale phenomena. He claims a distinct authority for the monarch: his special relation with Lord-on-high (or Heaven) means that the emperor's virtue or vice uniquely affects the peace and prosperity of the whole world, but is too great to be reflected in silly little things like melons.

But while rejecting the significance of local omens as messages to or about himself, Taizu accepts that vegetable omens do signify something. He acknowledges a very local moral authority: Heaven uses vegetable omens to commend even farmers for their virtue. From Taizu's perspective, imperial authority, insofar as it springs from the moral approbation of Heaven, is different from the moral worth of a farmer in scope, but not in kind. The theme of the farmer's virtue continues in Taizu's ode, dedicated to the paired deities Heaven and Earth.

Heaven is a marvelous mirror;
the gods of Earth tally.
They know that my good people
work hard at farming from morning until night.

What do vegetable omens respond to? The hard work of the farmers, is the answer given here. Tao Kai, Wang Guangyang quoting Han Yu, and Song Lian all expressed confidence that the appearance of the auspicious melons signified that the virtue of the Ming founder was permeating the country and bringing forth good *qi* and numinous plants. By contrast, Taizu's arguments do not make his own role clear. It may be that his pacification of the realm has made it possible for farmers to cultivate the land in peace, but Taizu does not say that. His ode continues with a reference to the *Record of Rites* verse he invoked in the preface:

Heaven's *qi* descends;
Earth's *qi* rises up.
The yellow springs and the fertile earth
take shape together.
From the same stalk double produce
came from Jurong.
The commoner did not eat it himself,
but with sunburned back came to the court.

The good omen is not attributed so much to the production of the melons as it is to the selfless travail of the farmer who, upon identifying the fruits as auspicious, took them to the imperial court to share the good sign with his sovereign and acknowledge that the good omen could only have resulted from the emperor's great virtue. Taizu describes the melons:

Blue-green clouds of many colors,
partly like emerald, partly like coral.
I split them and drink the juice—
crossing Chu, eating duckweed.

This makes it sound as though Taizu unceremoniously ate the melons. But according to Song's report, the emperor first offered them up in the imperial ancestral temple. Taizu may have omitted that because admitting that he had elevated the melons to the status

of a sacrifice to his ancestors would have run counter to the suspicious tone that dominates his essay. Nonetheless, he does mitigate his negative stance by describing the melons as delicious and beautiful, and by alluding to a legendary incident that took place near Nanjing in the distant past. The King of Chu saw huge red fruits growing from plants along the river, and Confucius explained that these fruits were auspicious. Any reader would immediately have thought of this incident and understood that Taizu was praising the melons as being like these mythical, magical fruits. Despite his arguments to the contrary, Taizu accepted the melons as significant to himself—significant enough to offer up to his ancestors, to praise, and to record.

Rationalist Confucian scholars sometimes argued that omens were not mystical communications from Heaven but should be studied as "useful barometers of social sentiment and public virtue."[19] Taizu accords with this kind of interpretation by returning to the theme that it is the subject's diligence and loyalty that are truly the good omen. His ode concludes with congratulations and blessings for the melon grower.

> The commoner's heart is filial and obedient.
> How could I have any ability?
> Clumsily I utter a few phrases
> to praise the sincerity of the commoner.
> I wish you in every generation
> a harmonious family and a peaceful home,[20]
> and determined sons and grandsons
> [like] enfeoffed lords [or] ranked dukes.
> Be it for a thousand or ten thousand years,
> do not forget to work at farming.

Taizu's final good wish for the farmer, that his family will prosper and spread, reminds us of Song Lian's likening the spreading melon plant of the classic *Book of Songs* to the flourishing of the dynasty. The spread of the empire, of the ruler's authority, depends on the increase and continuance not only of his own family, but of the families of diligent and virtuous subjects. The farmer seems more a symbol here than a real person. Taizu's reference to nobility is symbolic, too: the descendants will be numerous and fine, but they will also stick to farming. Taizu takes the opportunity of the ode to emphasize a theme of his social vision, that every man should follow

his father's profession, and not think about moving up. Taizu also gave the farmer a small amount of money: 1,200 copper cash.[21] That was not much, but an imperial ode was surely enough to make the farmer a celebrity back home. The reader of any of the three accounts might well assume that he lived happily every after. But we will see that he was not so lucky.

The three primary accounts of the melon audience use the incident differently. Taizu paints the officials as a credulous and sycophantic crowd from whom he distances himself to maintain his independence of mind. While he allows complexities or contradictions in his own thinking to come through clearly, he shortens and manipulates the officials' utterances in order to dismiss them, expressing disdain for men set all a-flutter by some fruit. He simultaneously accepts and rejects the melons as an auspicious omen and presents a number of arguments about them that go far beyond expressing the modesty Song Lian uses to justify Taizu's puzzling reaction. Taizu disputes scholar Wang Guangyang's historical evidence for prior examples of auspicious melons. He argues that Lord-on-high would warn him about his transgressions, but would not stoop to commend him through so trivial a thing as a piece of fruit.

Taizu further postulates that each farmer has a legitimate sphere of influence in the sense that the appearance of lucky produce within a field or garden may show Heaven and Earth responding to the farmer's own virtue. Taizu's policies on local governance went through various phases. In this early stage in which the melon incident occurred, a time when the Ming bureaucracy was just establishing control, Taizu allowed existing social authorities in small spheres to remain in place. He honored local deities and locally respected men, to help build dynastic strength out of existing social relationships.[22] The idea that a farmer's virtue could call forth auspicious omens on his own land made sense to Taizu in this phase, and was certainly preferable to granting that scholar-officials had the knowledge and moral authority to judge and interpret such omens for him. Despite his apparent rejection of the melon omen, then, Taizu did use it as propaganda: to assert his superiority to his court officials, to tout his concern for the farming people, and to highlight his special relationship to Heaven—all central themes of his rule.

Ming Taizu truncated the ministerial utterances and gave space to his own thoughts in his preface and ode. The later *Veritable Records*,

based on a third, lost, contemporary record of the conversation, pares down Taizu's rambling rant and allows the ministers to state their case more fully. The account presents two dignified characters: an earnest emperor and a learned official. The emperor agrees with the official on many points but has one rational, even laudable argument against accepting fruit as a significant communication from an impersonal Heaven to a powerful ruler: it simply is not weighty enough. The creation of both of these characters fits in with the intentions of compiler Xie Jin. In his youth Xie had severely criticized some of the Ming founder's policies, including punishing evil-doers with executions "spreading like a vine," and had even remonstrated with him about his habit of fashioning supernatural tales about himself.[23] But for some reason, Taizu, though displeased, had only banished Xie from the court, and Xie survived to craft a most favorable portrait of him, writing elsewhere:

> Hail the Great Ming Grand Progenitor, the Holy and Divine, Cultivated and Martial, Revered and Brilliant, Dynasty-founding, Refined and Virtuous, Successful and Accomplished, One-with-Heaven, and the Great Filial Exalted Emperor! He responded to the auspicious cycle of fortune of a thousand years and the accumulated achievements of the multitude of sages. With profound tenderness of the Mandate of Heaven, he arose by treading in steps unsupported by [the wealth of] a single foot of land. People joyfully rallied to him and faithfully rendered service; in less than three years he had already ensconced himself at the national capital. 'When the Dragon flies, the clouds follow.' The land of Hua Xia [i.e., Han Chinese] as well as the Man and Diao [i.e., non-Han tribes of the south and north] all but follow and submit. The sun shines and the moon overlooks, and the mountains, the streams, the ominous as well as the auspicious all rest in peace.[24]

Such exaggerated language was intended to exalt both Ming Taizu and Xie Jin's boss, Yongle, who had usurped the throne from his eldest brother's son in a bloody civil war. Yongle justified his violent reversal of his father's choice of successor by saying that he was protecting his father's institutional legacy. Omens were a mode of legitimation that Yongle liked, and his father's melons also reflected

glory on him. On the other hand, Xie also portrayed the ministers as dignified partners in government, perhaps to influence the Yongle emperor to treat officials—like himself—respectfully.[26] In this he ultimately failed: he antagonized Yongle and died in prison.[27]

In the third account, written immediately after the melon audience, Song Lian addresses the Ming founder himself. The text's intimate purpose is signaled by, among other things, the absence of surnames from the long list of those present at the time the melons were presented. Yet Song's text also propagandizes the Ming enterprise both to the educated public and to posterity. Song reduces all of Taizu's convoluted arguments to a modest reluctance. He leaves out Taizu's ambivalent pride in his farming origins and his uneasy reference to his education; he leaves out Taizu's certainty that Lord-on-high would let him know if he erred even slightly; he leaves out the assertion that kingly virtue does not appear in anything so trivial as melons; he leaves out too the notion that the farmer's virtue calls forth his own omens on his own land; and he leaves out the deep suspicion of scholar-officials that comes across so clearly in Taizu's version. Instead, lavishly congratulating his protégé, the emperor, on his successes as evinced by the melons, Song Lian simultaneously flatters him, instructs him in the proper posture for an emperor presented with such signs, and suggests to other readers that Taizu has already learned that posture.

All of the ministers took what Robert Campany calls the "locative approach," discussed in the Introduction. Double melons mean something about the Ming center and its control outward, the ministers assert. Yet just as Taizu's own writings exhibit pessimism about his ability to project virtue outward from the throne, his response to the melons also suggests a world view closer to an "anti-locative" cosmography, one that eschews carefully centered hierarchy and blurs distinctions between inner and outer.[28] In his essay on the double melons, Taizu indeed insists that he is critical to the health of the cosmos, but he is not just a sacred place-holder. He narrates his own individual story and defines himself as a man who has seen life, has worked like the melon farmer, has fought, and has studied. He seems less concerned than the ministers to display each and every product in terms of its relation to the imperial position. His lists of fairy fruits are random, not ordered in a neat hierarchy or system. Individual virtue, whether his own or that of a local farmer, may call forth responsive signs independently. Taizu does finally domesticate

the melon farmer into the imperial order by noting his obedience in submitting the melons to court, and by offering the melons to his ancestors. But along the way, he has argued that family farms are centers of virtue unto themselves, centers that may produce their own meanings independent of the court. That argument forces the historian to consider the fact that before the melons could be deployed at court, they had to arrive there. How did that happen?

Chapter III

Up from the Garden

The Ming empire was administratively divided into thirteen provinces, nine more loosely controlled defense areas, and two metropolitan areas the size of provinces. Within those were units called prefectures, which had a longer history, and below those again were the subprefectures and counties. The metropolitan area of Nanzhili was about the size of Great Britain or Minnesota, with a population of approximately ten million. Yingtian ("Respond to Heaven") prefecture encompassed both the capital city of Nanjing and Jurong county. Jurong county, with its seat at Jurong city and 426 rural villages, had about 206,000 people in the early Ming period,[1] about five times the population of contemporary London. It had one magistrate who had a small staff that helped him in collecting taxes, settling lawsuits, solving crimes, and keeping the peace. The magistrate and the prefect managed the many exchanges between court and locality.

On the day before the audience in 1372, Song Lian reports, Zhang Yulin 張遇林, the prefect of Yingtian, had placed the melons in a plain box, painted a picture or diagram of them on the outside, and asked the Ministry of Rites to present them to the emperor. We do not know how or whether the prefect explained the melons, and we can only guess at his motive in presenting them to Taizu.[2] Perhaps he was expressing Yingtian prefecture's gratitude for a tax exemption bestowed at the request of officials in April of the same year,[3] or perhaps he was angling for a promotion. But in any case, the Yingtian prefectural office was in the capital itself, not in neighboring Jurong county. How did Zhang Yulin get the melons? Taizu's ode says that "the commoner . . . with sunburned back came to the court." Unless this is just poetic invention, the farmer had traveled to Nanjing himself, skipping the intermediate level of the magistrate, and carried the melons to Prefect Zhang's office.

In both locative and anti-locative cosmographies as Robert Campany discusses them, it is the state collector at the center who takes the active role in identifying and interpreting anomalies.[4] Yet on this occasion in 1372, the ministers' use of the melons as flattery, as propaganda, or as intervention in policy debates was premised on the commoner's having brought them to court. Taizu's argument that the moral authority exemplified by the melons accrued to the farmer himself was only possible because the farmer had disagreed. If the Jurong man had not thought the melons referred to the emperor, they would have remained in Jurong.

In creating meaning out of life, people have to decide what to interpret. The world is full of odd things, not all of which were understood to be omens. Melons were specifically protected from theft in Ming law, and were important enough in market garden Jurong that their theft came to carry a penalty of 2 taels of silver, but they are, after all, small things.[5] They do not fit into Michael Loewe's definition of omens as "portents of nature that are obvious to all, and that are of sufficient size and strength to demand explanation," like an eclipse.[6] So in 1372, there had to be a local decision in Jurong, first, that the melons constituted an auspicious anomaly, and second, that they referred to the Ming emperor. Several elements, I believe, entered into this decision: Jurong's standing as a Daoist center, an earlier offering to Ming Taizu, local traditions of understanding odd plants, local relations with magistrates past and present, and the family of the farmer himself.

Just as Nanjing constituted the central place of the early Ming cosmic regime, Jurong was a center of Daoism. A thousand years earlier, the scholar and Daoist Ge Hong had lived in Jurong, and Mount Mao, where three brothers had gathered medicine for the local people, had been the site of a new Daoist revelation. Daoism, with roots in antiquity, included volumes and volumes of scriptures with texts ranging from esoteric discussions of the spiritual to proto-scientific treatments of astronomy and the natural world. Text and nature were never far apart: some Jurong Daoists stored scriptures in gourds[7] (called *gua* 瓜, the same word as used for melons), perhaps because of the primal chaos and fertility signaled by their myriad seeds, perhaps because of the metaphorical connection to the constellation Big Dipper, which was a Daoist deity.

Such gourds were literally full of meaning, but other plants were meaningful too. Pine resin and fungus, for instance, promised

purification, long life, and special powers like flight if one subsisted on them instead of grain and meat while carrying out spiritual exercises. In this way of thinking, food and medicine were not clearly distinguished: a discussion of the different kinds of melons (*gua*) for instance, says that green melons plucked in the seventh month are used in many prescriptions, that pumpkin (southern *gua*) and another fruit, northern *gua*, will dispel pain and sickness, and that watermelon (western *gua*) will expel summer heat.[8] Daoists not only ate carefully, but compounded elixirs and pills. In a story relayed by Ming Taizu himself, his mother was said to have been given a fragrant white-powder pellet by a mysterious Daoist on the day before his birth.[9] Not all Daoist medicines were benign, however. Even people who were not full-time spiritual seekers ingested odd substances like arsenic and lead: Daoist elixirs killed two of Ming Taizu's sons.[10] Jurong, perhaps because of its Daoist heritage, had its own long tradition of producing anomolous flora. The county gazetteer lists among local products five kinds of magic fungus and reports a local saying: "The magic fungus is a numinous being; one may encounter it, but one cannot seek it."[11] The celebration and interpretation of odd plants was not unique to Jurong, but it was taken very seriously there.[12]

The 1372 melons were not the first auspicious flora the county had presented to Taizu. In 1355, the emperor-to-be had crossed the Yangzi river from his base to the north in a dramatic maneuver to which he frequently referred, and seized control of the area that included Nanjing and Jurong. As a leader who proclaimed himself a man of the people, Taizu may have seemed approachable, and the counties near Nanjing courted his favor. In April or May 1367, Taizu proclaimed to the subjects of Jurong county:

> From the time I crossed the river, it has been thirteen years, and many auspicious omens from within my territory have come in for presentation. In 1356, grain in Taiping prefecture's Dantu county produced one stem with two heads; in 1357 Yingtian prefecture's Shangyuan county grain produced one stalk with three ears, and Ningguo prefecture's Ningguo county grain produced one stalk with two ears. Today, Jurong county has again presented grain of one stalk with two ears. Now because the subject people are diligent in farming matters, and

> are thankful for the harmony of Heaven, it has come to be like this. If you people continue to exert your strength in your ditch-drained fields, in order to serve your parents and teach your wives and sons, you will always be the people of the Great Peace and together enjoy the happiness of a fruitful harvest.[13]

The proclamation agrees with some of Taizu's comments in the later melon audience. Indirectly, Taizu seems willing to take some credit for the omens, but the direct message is clear: auspicious flora come from proper behavior demonstrated by the farming people and are unimportant when compared with the real blessings of peaceful communities, harmonious families, and rich harvests. The proclamation omits any reference to the imperial ancestors' having lived in Jurong, and points out that Jurong's production of auspicious grains is not unique. Perhaps it was intended to dampen enthusiasm for such tribute, and it may have done so, for the proclamation is not included in the 1496 Jurong county gazetteer's collection of imperial orders germane to the county, and it is recorded in the 1750/1900 Jurong gazetteer in only one line.[14]

In addition to the lukewarm proclamation of 1367, there is another reason that the presentation of melons in 1372 is surprising in the local context. Double melons had appeared before and would appear later in Jurong, but they tended to be associated with the county magistrate. Although he usually held office for only three or at most nine years, the magistrate was the key figure in good governance. As one man wrote, reflecting on the landscape of his native place from which he had long been absent:

> I am unsure what changes may have taken place in it. It all depends on the quality of our magistrates. If they have all been good magistrates, who have gained the cooperation of the people and have brought on Heaven's bounty, then the flora and fauna will have flourished even more; the mountains will have become even finer and the waters clearer, and the pleasure of it all will have increased. But this is not what I hear. I fear that what I used to enjoy now looks lamentable, and that the local people must be envying the immortals on their transcendental journey.[15]

If a magistrate collected a reasonable amount of taxes, did not leave too many crimes unsolved or lawsuits unsettled, and escaped rebellion and other serious trouble on his watch, he might be promoted. Some magistrates poured their energy into making things better—by fairly apportioning tax burdens among the rich and poor; building city walls, bridges, altars, schools, orphanages, free pharmacies, and old-age homes; improving popular morality; and destroying popular cults of which they disapproved. Often, from about 1470 onward, such activist magistrates wrote or oversaw the compilation or updating of a local gazetteer, a publication that recorded the county's history and famous inhabitants, its institutions and scenic points of pride, its poetry and its products. Such a gazetteer might be a venue for competition among local gentry families vying for honor, and it might also enhance the magistrate's reputation by recording his activities. The magistrate might also earn a record in the gazetteer for his own native place,—which was always far from any post in which he served, so as to prevent any collusion between the magistrate and the locals that could threaten the dynasty. Yet some cooperation with locals was necessary in order for a magistrate to get anything done. Magistrates hired lower-class men as policemen and literate men as clerks, and they worked with landowners and local gentry families in almost every area of governance. If a magistrate was honest, hardworking, and lucky, or if he had a good relationship with the community or those who dominated it, he might earn a place in a local shrine or signs of Heavenly approval. Several magistrates of Jurong had achieved this kind of success.

Magistrate Zhang Kan 張侃, for instance, was a Song-era magistrate whose good governance, specifically his building of a Buddhist pond into which one released living creatures, had called forth five vegetable omens, including lucky melons (*rui gua* 瑞瓜) described as "[two] on one stem" (*gua bing di* 瓜並蒂 or *bing di gua*). A commemorative inscription, complete with a picture of each omen, had been carved as a stone stele in 1229 to immortalize the omens and Zhang's accomplishments.[16] On the other side of our incident, in the middle of the Ming period, more double melons and lucky vegetables congratulated Jurong magistrates. Local gentryman Wang Shao 王韶, after earning a provincial degree in 1450, had been a proper official whose virtue improved the morality of the people in his jurisdiction. But as he preferred to grow old at home rather than remain in office, he returned to Jurong and spent his days with poetry

Jurong Town. From *Yitai Zhang shi jiasheng* (Genealogy of the Yitai Zhang).

and wine, adopting the name "Man of the Way Who has Returned to Leisure." He helped compile the 1496 county gazetteer and contributed many poems to it, including one that celebrates the double melons and other auspicious signs that appeared under Magistrate Zhang Hui 張蕙 in about 1470, and one celebrating the auspicious grain that grew in response to Magistrate Wang Xi 王僖 in the 1490s. Both of these magistrates were activists, and both had relations with Jurong gentry society; Wang Xi collected materials for the county gazetteer, and Zhang Hui contributed many poems, poems composed over wine, perhaps in the company of Wang Shao himself. Wang Shao's poems conclude with compliments to the dynasty but explain the lucky plants as springing from the good governance of the magistrate. The people, who presumably grew the plants, appear only as grateful subjects, in one poem adding to the celebration with their songs. A third Ming magistrate, Xu Guang 徐廣, called forth auspicious grain and lucky melons in about 1488.[17] It was a Jurong tradition, then, to link double melons with good magistrates rather than with the emperor.

In this county so rich in strange plants and their lore, it is hardly surprising that a pair of double melons was interpreted as an omen in the early Ming period. The Song inscription and picture commemorating Magistrate Zhang Kan's melons were still in the county school—indeed they were there long after the early Ming. The inscription and a schema of the picture were included in a late Qing collection of Jurong county inscriptions that leaves out characters that had become illegible with time, and hence the Song inscription must have been copied from actual steles (texts engraved on stone), not from the text that had been reprinted in the 1496 gazetteer.[18] And in 1847, Jurong County School Instructor Zhang copied the double melons from the inscription into a painting with a short poem; the image of two round melons seemed very appropriate to celebrate his concubine's presenting him with twins.[19] (Double melons decorate at least one popular print of "One Hundred Boys," a lucky image to be pasted up at the New Year.[20]) The inscription must have been there to be seen in the early Ming period by anyone who had occasion to visit the county school.

The man who grew the melons could easily have seen the inscription. Song Lian tells us his name: Zhang Guan. Although Guan's father and grandfather did not hold office, and had probably not even taken the civil service examinations, they were educated men of good

family, who lived in or very near Jurong town.[21] Such men would have had occasion to visit the county school. This was part of a government complex found in every county; two sets of buildings housed on one side the county school where students who would take the examinations registered (in the Ming period little actual teaching went on there) and on the other the temple to Confucius and his disciples, where the magistrate carried out regular ceremonies. The complex was the headquarters for ceremonial meetings between local gentry and the magistrate. For instance, there the magistrate might hold the "community libation ceremony," to honor the old and powerful men of the county and be recognized by them in return. Attending any such occasion, the men of the Zhang family would certainly have noticed the Song inscription commemorating an illustrious magistrate who happened to share their surname. In fact, as we will see, the Zhangs had a close connection with the Jurong county school. Zhang Guan surely knew about Zhang Kan's melons.

So when Zhang Guan's garden produced two melons on one stalk, it made sense to him to identify them as a lucky omen. From the central perspective, the perspective of emperor and court, with which historians normally begin, it seems only common sense, too, that those melons would be interpreted as a sign of Heaven's approval of the new Ming emperor. But now that we have examined the local context—Taizu's lack of enthusiasm about Jurong's lucky grain five years before and the Jurong tradition of interpreting such omens as referring to the magistrate—we know enough to think it rather odd that Zhang Guan brought the melons to the capital. He may have chosen to interpret them as referring to the emperor because the incumbent magistrate, Huang Wenwei 黃文蔚, was undistinguished; indeed he left almost no trace. Zhang may have considered him undeserving of Heavenly approbation, yet may have still been reluctant to insult him by passing the melons through his hands, and so he may have gone directly to the prefect.

As to what Zhang was hoping for, one can only speculate. One Ming poet-farmer, Liu Song, recorded his own thoughts as he worked in his garden, noting how the melon seeds in his hand, when planted, would need plenty of space for their vines to spread; how the melons should already be fruiting since the weeds were flowering so well; and how the fruits should ripen deliciously.[22] But we have no such record of Zhang Guan's thoughts. When did he notice the anomaly? What discussions ensued among kin and neighbors over

the course of the growing season as the melons swelled? Zhang's wife had given birth again just the year before; what ambitions for his young sons were expressed? Six or seven early-Ming Jurong men won office by being recommended for their virtue or talent. Perhaps Zhang Guan thought his offering would lead to an official position. Perhaps he hoped to, as the saying is, "Present a melon and receive a jade."[23] Instead, he was sent home with 1,200 cash and an imperial ode, which he must have proudly inscribed on a stone stele, though none survives.[24] Locals had choices about how to understand anomalies, and whether to present them to the throne. After 1372, Jurong men did not send lucky fruits to the emperor. They went back to using melon omens to commend good magistrates instead of the emperor—perhaps because of the tragedy that befell Zhang Guan and his family.