

Document 2.6: “Inscribed on the Doors of My Bookshelves,” a poem by Yang Xunji (1456–1544)¹

Mine was a trading family
Living in Nan-hao district for a hundred years.
I was the first to become a scholar,
Our house being without a single book.
Applying myself for a full decade,
I set my heart on building a collection.
Though not fully stocked with minor writings,
Of major works, I have nearly everything:
Classics, history, philosophy, belles-lettres²—
Nothing lacking from the heritage of the past.
Binding up the volumes one by one in red covers,
I painstakingly sew them by hand.
When angry, I read and become happy;
When sick, I read and am cured.
Piled helter-skelter in front of me,
Books have become my life.
The people of the past who wrote these tomes,
If not sages, were certainly men of great wisdom.
Even without opening their pages,
Joy comes to me just fondling them.
As for my foolish family, they can't be helped;
Their hearts are set on money alone.
If a book falls on the floor, they don't pick it up;
What do they care if they get dirty or tattered?
I'll do my best by these books all my days,
And die not leaving a single one behind.

¹ The poet's name is also spelled Yang Hsün-chi.

² literature

There are some readers among my friends—
To them I'll give them all away.
Better that than have my unworthy sons
Haul them off to turn into cash.

Source: Yang Xunji, "Inscribed on the Doors of My Bookshelves." Trans. John Timothy Wixted. *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor H. Mair. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 273.