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READING GAMES IN EARLY MODERN CHINA

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The process of preparing for and writing this dissertation has overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic ever since its beginning. Yet, it is during such a period of uncertainty and turbulence that I learned the importance of exploring alternative paths if one way or another could not work. This dissertation is about games and literature in early modern China, but it is also about making connections, interactions, and innovations.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the dynamic interplay between games and literature in China from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, and how this interplay worked towards a definition of the "ludic" during a period of technological, cultural, and political transformations. This was a moment when authors became game designers, inviting readers to engage in various games of reading. With printed books as their primary game consoles, the early modern public learned to critically perceive and navigate a world full of chance, uncertainty, and instability.

The concept of "reading games" is concerned with how specific game elements and logics are integrated into literary experiments in forms, narrative structures, and reading mechanisms, hence "gamifying" literature. Meanwhile, it also serves as a heuristic approach to uncover an alternative history of reading by shifting the focus from the specific social groups of readers to the interactive, rule-bound modalities of reading that extend mere textual interpretations. Chapter 1 establishes the foundation of the dissertation by emphasizing "play" as a critical approach to defamiliarize the common reading experience and as a research method. Readers were asked to experience how a gamified text—for instance, a quotation paired with domino pips—unsettled linear reading and challenged direct textual interpretation. Play also allows us to think with past authors and readers. Through play, we use the accessible archives to discover the hidden rules, learn the design mechanisms of the reading games, and actively participate in enacting them. The remaining three chapters investigate the thinking, making, and playing of three types of "reading games": reading puzzles, gambling, and riddling. Reading puzzles (chapter 2) require the reader to follow a complex non-linear trajectory of words to successfully figure out a poem, a lyric, or a song. This trajectory delineates graphic and formal-level innovations made possible by the creative perception and application of the Chinese writing

system and its material substrate. Turning from words to narratives, gambling (chapter 3) highlights the episodic structure of certain short stories. Within this framework in which ordinary life intertwines with extraordinary events, the authors developed a new model of causality to link separate, usually unpredictable, incidents together. By experiencing episodic randomness akin to gambling games, the reader is trained to comprehend the implications of chance in relation to fate and contingency. Riddling (chapter 4), the last reading game, extends from the page to the stage. Riddles, as literary games, demand that the reader delve beneath the textual surface and decipher the concealed meanings. Their appropriation by the theater highlights how characters "guess" or "think" of a meaningful answer by connecting textual, gestural, or object fragments according to a certain logic. In doing so, playwrights invited the reader/audience to contemplate these interpretive mechanisms per se, especially how subjects would employ them to perceive the phenomenal world.

This dissertation departs from the common approaches that treat portrayals of games in literary texts either as evidence of historical games or as metaphors pointing towards politics and romance. It also challenges the rhetoric of technological determinism, which suggests that a ludic world only exists in an age when digital games permeate everyday lives. Instead, it demonstrates that in early modern China, as in the digital era, people played deeply and thought like game designers. They gamed creatively with the affordances of literature to develop a distinct epistemological perspective for viewing, understanding, and coping with reality. As games turned literature into a playful training ground, reader-players learned to seek truths and strategies about life and the world. Overcoming the temporal distance, the notion of "reading games" enables us to join the historical players and experience with them these ludic endeavors.

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INTRODUCTION

Starting the Game

This dissertation is about the dynamic interplay between games and literature in early modern China, and how it worked towards a definition of the "ludic" during a time of technological, cultural, and political transformations. This was the moment when authors became game designers, inviting readers to play various types of reading games. With printed books as their main game consoles, the early modern public learned to critically perceive and navigate life and the world.

Before beginning our exploration, please imagine that you are playing an adventure game on your computer:

You (the player) take on the role of "I" (我) and enter into a world solely composed of Chinese characters. Words visually form the shapes of houses, streets, and trees, while semantically signifying particular places like a restaurant, a repair shop, and a wine bar (fig. 0.1a). "I" becomes a "literate warrior" (識字勇者) and embarks on a journey together with an elderly bard. "I" collects multiple pieces of equipment, gains magical powers, and battles with enemies, aiming to rescue "Princess." Holding a sword, "I" possesses the power to delete a word in a sentence to manipulate its meaning. When "I" is chased by "Snake," "I" can turn the ending from "the warrior surrenders"走向勇者投降的結局 to "[the snake] surrenders to the warrior" ~~走~~向勇者投降的結局 (fig. 0.1b). Wearing a four-eyehole helmet,[1] "I" is able to dissect a word and reassemble its graphic components into new characters. When "I" is fighting with "Giant," "I"

[1] The four eyeholes allude to the four eyes of Cang Jie 倉頡, a legendary figure who is said to have invented Chinese characters.

can revise his utterance: Instead of “I beat [you] first, and let you stare at me as long as possible” 咱先捶一下，讓你盯個夠, “Giant” says “I take a nap first, and let you beat me as much as possible” 咱先睡一下，讓你打個夠.[2]

Fig. 0.1a

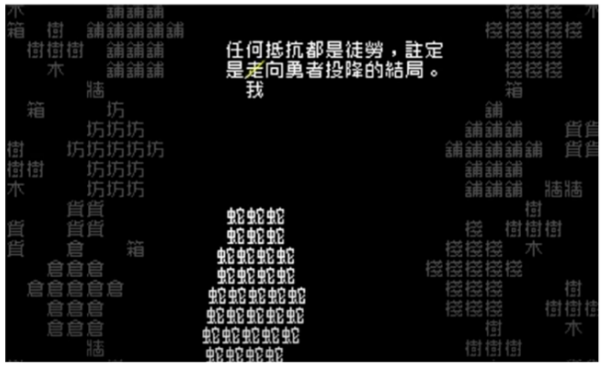

Fig. 0.1b

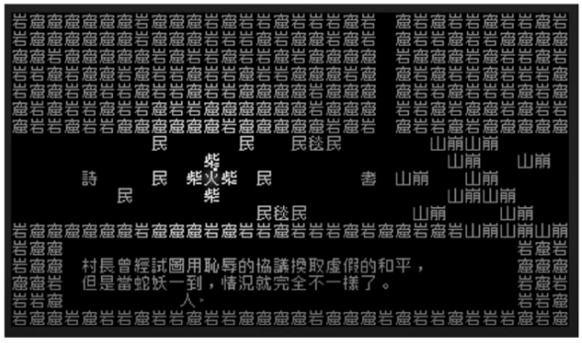

Fig. 0.1c

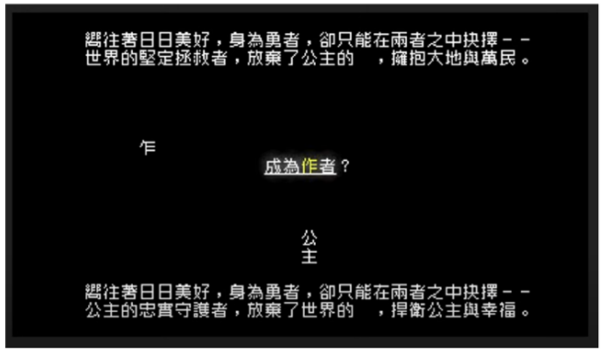

Fig. 0.1d

Fig. 0.1a-d Screenshots of *Word Game*

However, “I” is destined to be defeated by the last enemy, “Dragon.” “I” is unable to rescue “Princess.” “I” becomes “Human” (人) (fig. 0.1c). Now, “Human” is able to shuttle as a graphic component between words; but more importantly, “Human” holds the power to change the entire plot. “Human” encounters “Snake” again. In contrast to being chased by it while

[2] Here, the player first needs to dissect the character *chui* 捶 into 扌 (the hand radical) and 垂 (lit. to dangle), and *ding* 盯 into 目 (the eye radical) and 丁 (lit. a measure word). Then, reassemble them into *shui* 睡 (目+垂, lit. to sleep) and *da* 打 (扌+丁, lit. to beat).

continuously deleting key words from sentences, “Human” simply joins the sentence “when ‘Snake’ arrives” 當蛇妖一到, and quickly alters the outcome: “‘Snake’ falls down” 當蛇妖一倒(人+到). “Human” defeats “Dragon” and meets “Princess.”

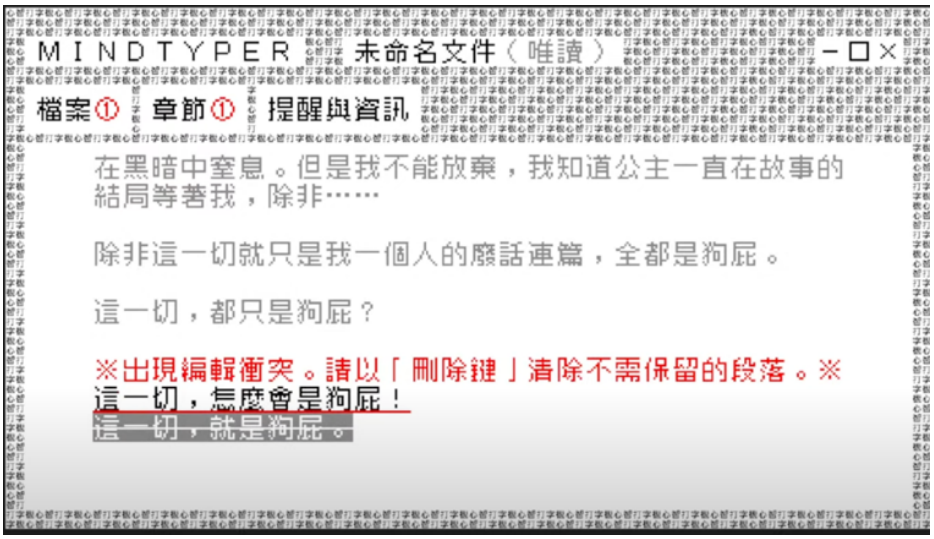

Fig. 0.1e Screenshot of ”Author’s” interface in *Word Game*

Still, “Human” is facing the dilemma of whether to become the savior of the world or the guardian of “Princess.” This time, “Human” chooses to wield all the magical power they have gained throughout the journey and figure out an alternative path. When you (the player) delete the word “what” (何), dissect the word “yesterday” (昨=日+乍), and reassemble the component “sudden” (乍) with the human radical (人), “Human” becomes “Author” (作者) (fig. 0.1d). You take on the role of the author of the game script and are entitled to make edits. But this sense of control is merely an illusion. All you can do is delete some additional sentences. Ultimately, you are asked to choose between the two lines—“How can all this be bullshit” 這一切，怎麼會是狗屁 and “All this is bullshit” 這一切，就是狗屁 (fig. 0.1e)—only to realize that you can only pick the latter. Suddenly, the script becomes nothing but a series of the phrase “bullshit.” The editing is done.

What you have just imagined playing is called *Word Game* 文字遊戲. It is an indie game that was launched by a Taiwan-based company, Team9, in 2022.[3] For the game developers, Chinese characters (*wenzi* 文字) become a vehicle not just to present the world, but also to experience it and even change it.[4] Through gameplay—with tutorials, guidelines, and hints, as well as repeated guesses, attempts, and failures—the players gradually train their eyes to look at the words anew: to not only understand their semantic meanings, but also to view them as pixels of visual representations; to not just interpret them as sentence components with a specific grammatical function (subject, object, verb, or particle), but to further decompose them into separate graphic components that could be reorganized to rewrite the sentence.

Gameplay is realized through the "gameworld interface."[5] In *Word Game*, Chinese characters are at once the building blocks of the gameworld and constituents of its interface. The latter connects the player and the game system that conveys information about the game plot while prompting effective player interaction: noticing the words' graphic shapes, attending to their grammatical uses, and altering the sentences on the screen. Without a mixture of icons, graphs, and texts to form the interface, in the world of *Word Game*, all the game-system information is presented entirely through Chinese characters. The information itself is predestined not to be passively processed but actively transcended (from the "arrival of Snake" to the "fall of Snake," for instance), as long as the player take cues from the information about

[3] Special thanks to artist Taca Sui for introducing this game to me.

[4] According to Team9, "Words are not just words, but also objects, characters, and settings. A player manipulates the protagonist 'I' and seek hints within graphs or in-between the lines. [They] delete the word(s) to subvert the sentence meaning or move certain words to rewrite the facts. This fully showcases how 'imagination is the superpower.'" 字不只是字，同時也是物件、人物與場景。玩家操縱主人翁"我"在字裡行間找出端倪，刪去文字顛覆句義，或推移文字改寫事實，充分展現「想象力即超能力」.

[5] "Gameworld interface" was coined by game studies scholar Kristine Jorgensen. For her, gameworld is considered as an interface, as "it represents the formal game system and in that it works as an informal system that allows the player to interact with the game." See Kristine Jorgensen, *Gameworld Interfaces* (Cambridge: The MIT Pres, 2013), 4.

how to interact. This very paradox underpins the game mechanism. In fact, it has already been revealed from the very beginning through the initial game interface (fig. 0.2): "This is a story of 'Me' (*wo*)" 這是一段關於我的故事. But to start the game, the player needs to move the character "*wo*" from this sentence to a line below and form another complete sentence: "'I' (*wo*) start the adventure" 我開始冒險.

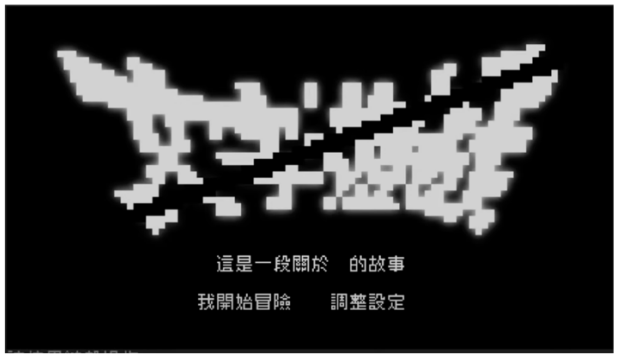

Fig. 0.2 "Start Menu" of *Word Game*

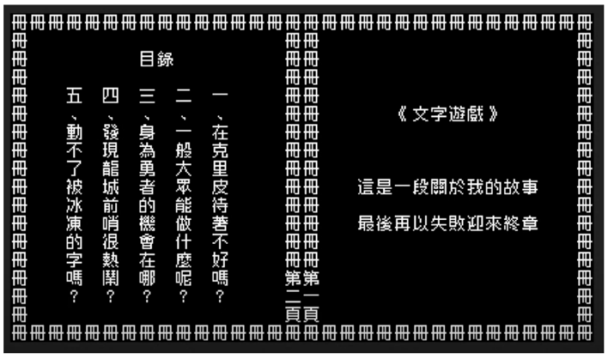

Fig. 0.3 A "Book" showing the closing credits

Beside Chinese characters, I suggest that *Word Game* is exploring the fundamental question of what "reading" is through the medium of a digital game. The act of reading is clearly denoted after the false ending of "I" being defeated by "Dragon." A book unfolds showing the closing credits (fig. 0.3). The player is explicitly informed for the first time that they have entered a fictional world constructed by some author and that it is a story composed of five chapters. The player realizes time and again that reading this book requires them to perceive Chinese characters more creatively, not simply to follow the linear trajectory of the text, and to boldly rewrite the original sentences. However paradoxical, reading the book means becoming its author.[6] But this statement is subverted when the player "becomes 'Author'" (成為作者).

[6] It is worth mentioning that in *Word Game*, as "I" becomes "Human," "Human" returns to each of the five chapters to rescript it. Only when the revision is complete can the player initiate reading the sixth chapter—a new one that they have never encountered before.

That I, the player, am controlling the narrative is an illusion. It ultimately turns out that the player is witnessing "Author" editing the script from a first-person perspective. As is revealed at the end, the player is reading a story about a father writing and rewriting a story thousands of times for his daughter who is lying in a coma.[7]

Word Game effectively outlines some of the principal ideas of this dissertation. First, a game has the potential to enrich the creative engagement with the Chinese text both for designers and players. How they navigate it linguistically and culturally plays on the particularity of Chinese characters as building blocks and on Chinese word order, as well as Chinese narrative conventions. Second, a game can be regarded as a book, and vice versa. In this sense, they are like "textual machines," which as Espen Aarseth points out, are "kinds of literary communication systems" that can only function when the components of verbal signs, material mediums, and operators are all taken into consideration. These textual machines draw attention to "the cybernetic intercourse between the various part(icipant)s [in them]"—human (e.g. designer/author and player/reader) and nonhuman (e.g. the material mediums of a digital game or a book)—and their changing power dynamic.[8] In *Word Game*, we see that the experience of the player (re)writing the narrative turns out to be an illusion of control. An author in the game world who scripts the narrative is in turn based on the algorithm developed by the game designers. Third, a game serves as a critical training ground. Through gameplay, the player enhances their linguistic, moral, and cultural awareness to perceive and interact with both the game world and the actual world anew. Chinese characters, in *Word Game*, define the ways designers see the

[7] This final scene of the game invites the player to discover the back story of the game. In fact, the princess in the game alludes to the daughter, and the warrior refers to the medicinal choice.

[8] Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 21–22. It is worth noting that Aarseth singles out textual adventure games as a particular type of cybertext; for a detailed discussion, see chapter 5 of his book.

world,[9] and accordingly, this way of looking at the world is learned and experienced by the player.

I open my dissertation with *Word Game* to make another claim: These ideas about games, diverse textual engagement, and the interpenetration of the game world and the actual world are not confined to the digital era. As I will demonstrate, three hundred years ago in early modern China, there were already game designers utilizing the available resources and knowledge to develop a series of reading puzzles echoing the design principles of *Word Game*. To solve these puzzles, players are required to dissect and reassemble the graphic components of Chinese characters and figure out a non-linear trajectory to complete poetic lines. And like *Word Game*, Chinese characters at once visually form and semantically signify various ordinary objects—for instance, a textile, a screen, or a game board—that are in turn designed to be viewed afresh. My dissertation explores how a dynamic interplay between games and literature in early modern China, including these "reading puzzles," can manifest shared ideas with the digital period that reflect an intertwining of media, aesthetics, and epistemology. If the reading puzzles are still games in the literal sense, other cases that I will discuss ask us to reconsider reading short stories about gambling and watching theatrical performances about riddling as "reading games," playable both for us and historical readers alike.

Methodologically, conducting an anachronistic study as such requires both my readers and me to take inspiration from current game studies and media studies while lifting their digital burden. It also encourages us to take a different look at the cultural products, in particular early

[9] Team9 makes this explicit as their core game design principle: "It [Chinese characters] is the way we see the world that defines the world we see." The team "focuses on exploring the essence and core of everyday objects. [They] are dedicated to creating pure, deep, innovative digital content and life products. Through them, [they] create unique worlds, one after another. Audiences can find things fresh and new as they travel through various interfaces and enjoy blurring the boundaries between the real and the fake." See https://team9.co/about/ access Feb 27, 2023.

modern Chinese literature; to break the genre compartmentalization and expand the scope of "literature"; to investigate the historical engagement with literary text and lighten the disciplinary baggage of seeking textual meanings right away; and to form a comprehensive consideration of the interactions between texts, mediums, and their operators instead of being confined by any of these three components.

I choose to zoom in on early modern China, a time roughly from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. This was a period when the literati, with their literacy, cultural knowledge, and high social status, attempted to distinguish themselves from the nouveau riche in terms of taste and lifestyle. Nonetheless, the literati formed more interconnected social relations with merchants, courtesans, and their fellow scholar-officials. Economic profits were made, while moral virtues were also promoted. This was a moment when innovations were encouraged, fashions chased after, and personal feelings (*qing* 情) celebrated. The dynastic turmoil from the Ming to Qing brought about sorrow, resentment, and nostalgia, yet the entertainments and pleasures continued. Within this larger cultural and historical context, my study investigates how games and literature worked together as an epistemological perspective by which to view, understand, and cope with reality during this period. In a media landscape where print claimed centrality, games gave rise to a series of literary experiments in terms of forms, narrative structures, and reading mechanisms. Accordingly, we recognize a variety of types of literary engagement in early modern readers. Games turned literature into a playful training ground where readers learned to seek truths and strategies to navigate a world of chance, uncertainty, and instability. In early modern China, people played deeply and thought like game designers,

gaming creatively with literature to "think about thinking and learn to act in new ways."[10] Instead of computers or other digital devices as their consoles, they used what I call a "game-literature matrix" actualized mainly through the woodblock-printed books that loom large in these ludic endeavors.

In this introduction, I provide an overview of the three key concerns of this study which I refer to as the ludic, the interactive, and the dynamic. Drawing on discussions in game studies about "the ludic century," I first explicate how early modern China joined the discourse of the blurred boundary between the game world and the actual world. Then, I delineate an alternative history of reading in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties by comparing reading to games. I tease out the parameters discussed or unnoticed that could prompt effective readerly interactions. These two aspects serve as the context of and come to light via a dynamic interplay between games and literature. By sketching out its workings, I show how this "game-literature matrix" is different from the game-literature relationship discussed by current scholars in the history of games and literary history. Together, these three aspects structure the fundamental system for a series of "reading games" that I invite you to join: reading puzzles for chapters 1 and 2, gambling for chapter 3, and riddling for chapter 4. I will end this introduction by outlining these reading games, together with some basic rules for enjoying this dissertation.

The Ludic: A Gameful World

In premodern China, as in the digital era today, games interfaced with the real world. Games could even lead to enlightenment. For instance, a courtesan named Willow Green 柳翠

[10] Eric Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century," in *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Application*s, eds. Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 21.

decides to burn her clothing (the material symbol of her social identity) and follow Moonlight Monk 月明和尚 to depart from the secular world after playing three games with him. This episode marks the climax of a *zaju* play (a form of drama developed in the Yuan dynasty; lit. "variety plays") written by the Yuan dynasty playwright Li Shouqing 李壽卿 (fl. thirteenth century).[11] *Moonlight Monk Helps Willow Green Preach Deliverance* (*Yueming heshang du Liu Cui* 月明和尚度柳翠) is a story about Moonlight Monk who is dispatched by the Bodhisattva Guanyin to enlighten Willow Green—the reincarnation of a blemished willow branch in Guanyin's vase—and bring her back to the Buddhist realm.[12]

Comprised of one demi-act and four acts, the Yuan dynasty play dramatizes the monk's multiple endeavors to persuade the courtesan to quit her mundane life. It is through games that she makes the final decision to discard her "worldly mind" 凡心. There is a paradox embedded in the courtesan's passage of mental transformation. In order to transcend the material world, she needs to experience and comprehend anew the principal sensual pleasures she previously used to entertain her clients so skillfully: playing games of Go, backgammon, and kickball.[13] Although Moonlight Monk is a novice, he takes the lead in each game and teaches Willow Green a lesson about the game's "double meanings" 雙關二意. "What are these called?" 這個喚做什麼, the

[11] Historical records about Li Shouqing are limited. According to *The Register of Ghosts* (*Lu guibu* 錄鬼簿) by Zhong Sicheng 鐘嗣成 (c.1279–1360), Li was from Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, and used to serve as a county magistrate

[12] The play belongs to the genre of "deliverance plays" (*dutuo ju* 度脫劇). The concept was first raised by the Japanese Sinologist Aoki Masaru. It refers to plays "in which an immortal explains the Dharma to a mortal, causes him to be liberated from worldly cares, and leads him into the way of the immortals." This definition in English is quoted from Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema trans., *The Orphan of Zhao and Other Yuan Plays: The Earliest Known Versions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 202.

[13] Willow Green, like many other Yuan dynasty courtesans, is described as being "clever by nature; she can play the word games of character dissection, string lines together, make jokes, play musical instruments, and sing and dance. There's nothing she doesn't know. She is skillful at all of them" 心性聰明，拆白道字，頂針續麻，談笑詼諧，吹彈歌舞，無不精通，盡皆妙解. This description is a standard formula to describe a higher-ranking courtesan character in Yuan *zaju* plays. See Li, *Yueming heshang du Liu Cui* 月明和尚度柳翠, in *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選 (Ming Wanli edition), edited by Zang Maoxun 臧懋循, *Xinji xia* 辛集下, 2:a.

monk points to the Go stones when the courtesan has the servants bring the game equipment. When Willow Green responds that they are called "Go stones" 碁子, the monk soon "makes a move," comparing the black and white pieces to the courtesan and her mother:

> To the tune *Gan heye* (*Dry Lotus Leaves*)
>
> O your mother, is working.
> You are waiting to *jump apart from* her.
> O your mother, is relying on your *positions* as a courtesan,
> When [she] *sticks* to you, don't snuggle up to her;
> If you *get away* from her, then you are smart. (*Italics* mine)
>
> 【乾荷葉】
>
> 你娘呵，是個做活的，恨不的待斜飛
> 你娘呵，則是倚仗著你個弟子猱兒勢，
> 粘著處休熱相偎，逼綽了便是伶俐.[14]

Audience members like Willow Green who possess knowledge of Go would not find it hard to recognize that the aria is replete with Go terminology. "To jump" 飛, "to stick/link" 粘, or "to get away" 綽 are all basic terms for the strategies of placing Go stones on the gameboard, yet here, they are borrowed to describe the mother-daughter relationship.[15] Later the monk continues this persuasive approach, drawing analogies between the courtesan's sullied body and dice, and between her male clients and a hollow (heartless) ball. The mundane world is analogous to a

[14] Li, *Du Liu Cui*, 23:a.

[15] When the game of Go is represented in early modern Chinese literature, it is often used to comment on the relations of the characters in the particular plot. A typical example is the single-act play "The Intruder in the Game of Go" 圍棋闖局 written by Zhan Shiyu 詹時雨. It is included as a prefatory text in the Hongzhi 弘治 edition (1498) of the *zaju* play the *Romance of the West Chamber* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記). The act focuses on the female protagonist Yingying playing the game of Go with her maidservant Hongniang. Illiterate though she is, Hongniang becomes the master of the game explaining aspects of Go through a series of arias. On the surface, these arias describe the philosophical, historical, and cultural depth of the game as well as its strategies. In fact, like Moonlight Monk, the maidservant uses the vocabulary of the game to comment on the relationship between Yingying and her lover Student Zhang, and her mother who objects to the couple's romantic relationship. This episode of Yingying and Hongniang playing the game of Go is further integrated into the famous scene of Student Zhang jumping over the wall to meet Yingying in the *Southern Drama of the Romance of the West Chamber* (*Nan xixiang* 南西廂) written by Li Rihua 李日華 (1565–1635). But this integration is more Li's innovation since there is little similarity between the act in the Hongzhi edition and that in *Nan xixiang*.

playground on which the courtesan is both a skillful player and a piece of game equipment to be constantly played. By way of such semantic doubleness, games, which originally served as the means of livelihood for the courtesan to entertain her clients, become a critical perspective for viewing the social world she lives in. This very act is a continuous effort to tie games with life—only through the lens of games can the truth of life itself be revealed. Willow Green needs to see *through* the game of Go and "forget about black-and-white minds first" 先忘黑白心; only then can she "[embark on] a journey without enemies where no one would find her" 一條無敵路，徹了無人尋.[16]

I take this gameplay vignette between Moonlight Monk and Willow Green as the entry point of this section to articulate how games can be related to the real world. In this act, what Moonlight Monk cares about is not the process or result of the games but rather, the ways in which gameplay and its vocabulary can inform the world and then impact life. The monk, in other words, turns the courtesan's knowledge about the games (their rules and strategies) into what game designer and scholar Eric Zimmerman calls "gaming literacy." It is a kind of literacy that "rather than addressing the meanings that only arise inside the magic circle of a game, asks how games relate to the world outside the magic circle…It asks, in other words, not *What does gaming look like?* but instead: *What does the world look like from the point of view of gaming* (emphasis in original)"[17] Zimmerman proposes "gaming literacy" in response to a ludic turn in the early twenty-first century. If the twentieth century is regarded as an information age

[16] Li Shouqing, *Du Liu Cui*, 23:a.

[17] Eric Zimmerman, "Gaming Literacy: Game Design as a Model for Literacy in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, eds. Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2009), 24. "Magic circle" is a concept raised by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. According to him, the magic circle of a game delimits a temporary space. A game "interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there." See Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2016), 9.

dominated by the moving image, a gameful world has taken shape in the twenty-first century. In this world, not only do games become part and parcel of our everyday entertainment, media platform, and economic backbone, but "practices and attitudes, patterns and tropes, materials and tools, languages and concepts from (digital) games and play increasingly pervade all arenas of life."[18] During this era when "media and culture is increasingly systemic, modular, customizable, and participatory,"[19] when game elements are broadly integrated into business, education, and other non-game activities, gaming literacy becomes vital in understanding the system structures, as well as in modifying, transgressing and reinventing them with new meanings.[20]

Yet using games as a paradigmatic perspective for viewing the world and testing possible solutions to real challenges is not confined to the twenty-first century. From the premodern game of Go used to enlighten a courtesan to the arcade game *The Brandley Trainer* (1981) used for military training in the Cold War, games have long been impacting people's thinking and action in reality. Games have critical potential in modeling, exploring, and altering social, economic, political, and cultural issues.[21] For instance, Tara Fickle studies how gaming technologies have actively engineered the racialization of Asian Americans. Fickle brings actual games and abstract gaming rhetoric into conversation, positioning them at "the two ends of the spectrum of gaming technologies."[22] Gaming in both concrete and rhetorical senses becomes an important vehicle for Asian Americans to think about race, progress, and inequality. Likewise in Shakespeare's England, games throw into relief "the exploratory and experimental elements" of the theater and

[18] Walz and Deterding eds., *The Gameful World*, 7.
[19] Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century," in *The Gameful World*, 20.
[20] Zimmerman, "Gaming Literacy," 25.
[21] Clark C. Abt, *Serious Games* (London and New York: University Press of America, 1987); Patrick Jagoda, *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 3.
[22] Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 10.

of the *theatrum mundi* more broadly. In Gina Bloom's point of view, it is through games, especially the theatrical representations of sitting pastimes including cards, backgammon, and chess, that open up new ways to think about interactivity in the seventeen-century British commercial theater. Not limited to the affordances of digital media, interactivity is informed by a series of gameplay scenes that cannot be reduced to metaphors and that encourage the audience to *feel* as if they are cognitively and emotionally joining the players onstage.[23] For Bloom and her fellow early modern theater historians, thinking of theater as a game-like playable media helps modify "the traditional view of theater as principally mimesis" and underscores its ludic, cultural, and social efficacy.[24]

Both Fickle and Bloom focus less on what games *are* than on what games *do* with race or theater. They expand the scope of games by questioning the analog-digital divide and taking into account game rhetoric, literary representations of games, and theater as game-like media. Fickle points out that games in literature are as forceful as stories in games; rather than pure allegories, they resemble "'real' games in their dynamics but literature in their execution," turning "the 'invisible' of race and culture…apprehensible to both character and reader."[25] In fact, from digital games to parlor games, from literary imaginations of games to games staged on theater, all of these can be considered "gaming technologies" that "function as stand-alone operating systems that allow, and quite often require users to operate the meaning making machine in question."[26] As such, they also call for the gaming literacy of the operators and scholars alike to recognize their systems and play with them.

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[23] Gina Bloom, *Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

[24] Tom Bishop, Gina Bloom, and Erika T. Lin, "Introduction," in *Games and Theatre in Shakespeare's England*, eds. Bishop, Bloom, and Lin (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 20.

[25] Fickle, *The Race Card*, 19.

[26] Fickle, *The Race Card*, 10.

As a study centering on early modern China, my dissertation joins this conversation to depart from a rhetoric of technological determinism. That is, the gameful world or the ludic era only exists in a time when digital games permeate our everyday lives. To explore the ludic manifestations during this period requires us to redefine what games and play could be in the first place; only then can we start to explore the doubling of games and reality. Specifically, I ask: In addition to games in a more traditional sense like Go, what can be considered a game—or to use Fickle's term, a "gaming technology"—and how is it played or operated? How could the particular concepts and perceptions of the world be transformed into a game? Conversely, how could the game reapply and relate them to the real world? My samples come from the intersections of specific games and literature. The interactions between Moonlight Monk and Willow Green in the Yuan *zaju* is a foil for my search for a series of moments when games such as word puzzles, gambling games, and riddles are entangled with literature in various ways. These games provide direct hints to which elements of the games are integrated into literary creations. This process of literary "gamification"—a term referring to "the use of game mechanics in traditionally non-game activities"[27]—turns the literary text into a reading game. I look at the puzzles designed for complicating the linear reading experience and for viewing, dissecting, and reassembling Chinese characters in creative ways. Gambling in short stories teaches readers to navigate and manage chance as if they were skillful gamblers. Riddling in theater invites readers and spectators alike to guess the playwright's intentions and learn to grapple with the uncertainty of the mundane realm. In short, readers engage with the literary text as gameplayers, thus seeking a ludic way to navigate reality.

[27] Sebastian Deterding, Rilla Khaled, Lennart E. Nacke, and Dan Dixon, "Gamification: Toward a Definition." *CHI 2011 Gamification Workshop Proceedings* vol.2, Vancouver, Canada, 2011, 2.

The Interactive: An Alternative History of Reading

Here is a premise: If reading becomes a game, it should be bound by certain rules of how to engage with a literary text; just as importantly, readers will be prompted to join the reading game and interact with the text by either following or transgressing the rules. Perhaps the most direct evidence justifying this assumption is that in early modern China there was a fad in which editors and commentators attached *dufa* 讀法 ("How to Read" guidelines) to the front of literary works proper.[28] These numbered instructions explicitly guided readers to read the text in a specific manner. For example, in Zhang Zhupo's 張竹坡 (1670–1698) *dufa* for the novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅; the one-hundred-chapter novel about the rise and fall of merchant Ximen Qing's 西門慶 household), he recommends that readers pay attention to its plot, characters, and narrative devices. In addition, Zhang suggests:

> 41. If the reader of the *Plum in the Golden Vase* reads it as a work of literature by the author, they will be deceived by it. They must read it as though it were a work of their own in order not to be deceived by it.
> 42. Though the reader should certainly read it as though it were a work of their own, it is even better to read it as a work that is still in its early planning stages. Only if the reader starts out with the assumption that they will have to work out every detail for themself in order to avoid being deceived, will they avoid being deceived.
> …
> 95. The reader of the *Plum in the Golden Vase* should keep a sword ready to hand so that they can hack about them to relieve their indignation.
> 97. The reader of the *Plum in the Golden Vase* should keep a good wine by their side so that they can drink lustily in order to dispel the reek of worldliness.
> 98. The reader of the *Plum in the Golden Vase* should burn fine incense on their desk in order to express their gratitude to the author for creating this literary masterpiece, in all its intricacy, for their enjoyment.
>
> 看《金瓶》，將來當他的文章看，猶須被他瞞過；必把他當自己的文章讀，方不被他瞞過。(四十一)
> 講他當自己的文章讀，是矣。然又不如將他當自己才去經營的文章。我先將心與之曲折算出，夫而后謂之不能瞞我，方是不能瞞我也。(四十二)

[28] I want to emphasize that the notion of *fa* 法 bears multiple implications. It can mean regulations, methods, or models. The multiplicity of *fa* suggests the degrees to which a reader may follow these *dufa*.

…
讀《金瓶》，必須列寶劍於右，或可劃空洩憤。(九十五)
讀《金瓶》，必置大白於左，庶可痛飲亦消此世情之惡。(九十七)
讀《金瓶》，必置名香於几，庶可遙謝前人，感其作妙文，曲曲折折以娛我。(九十八)[29]

I highlight these *dufa* to show that there is an extensive understanding of reading in early modern China. Per Zhang Zhupo's suggestions, the reading process is not passive reception. In entry nos. 41 and 42, the readers are asked to put themselves in the author's shoes. The particular word "*man* 瞞" (to deceive, hide) indicates that for Zhang, fiction like *The Plum in the Golden Vase* puts the revelation and concealment of information at play; some of it is shared by both the readers and the author, whereas some is known only to the author. Only through an active "reverse-engineering" of the novel can the author's work and ideas of writing it be discovered. Entry nos. 95, 97, and 98 advise readers on how they should respond to their feelings and sensations when reading the novel. Reading, moreover, becomes an event, or rather a performative act, instead of being merely the looking at or making sense of the text. All sorts of props are suggested—a sword, good wine, and fine incense—and among them is the physical book. Entry no. 98 is especially worth noting. While it points to a ritualistic method of connecting the readers with the author, it also seems to make a statement, if still in a playful tone, to the effect that *The Plum in the Golden Vase* is something comparable to an intricate game. The author designed the novel to "entertain" (*yu* 娛) his readers, and they enjoyed it by being aware of the author's intentionality, evoking subjective feelings, and executing methods to interact with it.

[29] The English translation is based on David T. Roy trans., "Chang Chu-p'o on How to Read the *Chin P'ing Mei* (*The Plum in the Golden Vase*)," in *How to Read the Chinese Novel*, ed. David L. Rolston (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 240–42.

Whether the author or even Zhang Zhupo actually regarded *The Plum in the Golden Vase* as a game is unknown. But these *dufa* entries nonetheless underscore the interactive and participatory nature of the readerly engagement with the author, the literary text, and the book as a material object. It is this rule-bound interactivity that suggests the novel's *potential* to be enacted as a reading game (or rather games). In this sense, "reading game" is a heuristic to uncover an alternative history of reading in China. To date, studies of the Chinese history of reading have concentrated on specific social groups of readers and their reading practices, including children and women, ethnic minorities, as well as targeted readers "addressed by the author or publisher."[30] "Reading games" turns the focus from readers to the modalities of reading as "trans-individual forms."[31] If every reading game is a structured system, I intend to understand the foundational structures *and* the emergent interactions prompted by the system.

In fact, if we revisit current scholarship in early modern Chinese literature and print culture, we will recognize that scholars have already touched on a series of "interfaces" that have prompted effective readerly interactions.[32] In addition to *dufa*, commentaries and annotations (*pingdian* 評點) written before, after, or between the literary text proper, as well as in books'

[30] For the former two categories of readers, see for instance, Li Yu, "A History of Reading in Late Imperial China, 1000–1800" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2003); and Nathan Vedal, "The Manchu Reading of *Jinpingmei*: Commentary, Encyclopedism, and Translingual Practices in Early Eighteenth-Century China," *Late Imperial China* 42, no.2 (2021): 1–48. For a discussion of the targeted readers, see Anne E. McLaren, "Constructing New Reading Publics in Late Ming China," in Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow eds., *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 152–83.

[31] Roland Barthes, Richard Howard trans., "Writing Reading," *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 31. For Barthes, "the most subjective reading imaginable is never anything but a game played according to certain rules." Michel de Certeau also advocates for exploration of "the very operation of reading, its modalities and its typology" that is "characterized by advances and retreats, tactics and games played with text." See de Certeau, Steven Rendall trans., *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 170, 175.

[32] This is also true of material culture in early modern China. By raising the concept of "material thinking-with," art historian Jonathan Hay argues that "the secular decorative object forever exists at the interface between the intentionality of its producer and the participatory engagement of the beholder…The decorative object comes to be animated as its own material thought process, which beholders actualize within the parameters imposed by the object in an infinite possible number of ways." See Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 78.

upper margins have actively shaped the ways readers have approached the texts.[33] In her study of the late Ming iconoclastic writer Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), for instance, Rivi Handler-Spitz explores how Li's marginal comments invited readers to "experience in textual form some of the uncertainties accessory to life in the early modern world in which they lived." In particular, his commentaries showcased an ambiguous attitude as to whether readers should accept his authorial judgment or construct meanings of their own. As the responses of the historical readers suggest, both ways of reading his works were practiced.[34]

Sometimes, commentaries are implicit. As David Rolston points out, in vernacular fiction, commentaries can be intratextual, made by the storyteller-narrator, through his conversation with the audience, and via the voice of the characters in a story. These intratextual remarks and the extratextual commentaries together formed as an integral whole to communicate moral and practical wisdom to the readers.[35] Paratextual materials like illustrations can serve as non-verbal commentaries as well.[36] This includes a series of object images such as a broom, a mirror, and a book before the text proper of the novel *Supplement to "Journey to the West"* (*Xiyou bu* 西遊補, dated 1641). As Robert Hegel suggests, instead of representing any particular event in the novel, these ambiguous images invite the readers to "appreciate their symbolic

[33] David L. Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing Between the Lines* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Robert E. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 305–11.

[34] Rivi Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an Unruly Age: Li Zhi and the Culture of Early Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 5. Chapter 6 gives a detailed discussion of Li Zhi's commentaries and attitudes towards reading.

[35] Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary*, chapters 9 and 12.

[36] Robert E. Hegel, "Picturing the Monkey King: Illustrations of the 1641 Novel *Xiyou bu*," in *The Art of the Book in China* (London: London University School of Oriental and African Studies, 2006), 175–91; Ma Meng-ching 馬孟晶, "*Suiyangdi yanshi* de tushi pingdian yu Wanming chuban wenhua" 《隋煬帝艷史》的圖飾評點與晚明出版文化, *Hanxue yanjiu* 漢學研究 vol.28, no.2 (2010): 7–56.

relevance" to the narrative as a whole. The illustrations thus motivate readers to ponder more of the philosophical depth of the novel instead of simply reading it for pleasure.[37]

Apart from commentaries, the format of a printed book also provides hints for the readers as to how to interact with the page. Among the late-Ming and early-Qing printed books, a series of multi-register commercial publications such as drama miscellanies (*xiqu zashu* 戲曲雜書), daily-use encyclopedias (*riyong leishu* 日用類書), and drinking game manuals were widely circulated in the book market. He Yuming, by carefully examining the interplay between the form and content of these books, argues that these publications "replace sequential reading with segmental reading, and replaces the dominance of time on the page with the logic of space." These books created a new theater of reading, or to use her term, of "book conversancy," through which the printed texts and images were associated with contemporary practices of social performances like banqueting, gaming, singing, and playacting.[38] Likewise, Shang Wei states that these multi-register miscellanies suggest "a reading strategy to cope with fragmented materials on the page," as "a reader following a drama on the bottom row from one page to the next might find it tempting to glance at the rows above for jokes, riddles, market slang, common sayings, and popular songs."[39] However, both Shang and He only make suggestive hypotheses of how these books were read and used in reality. This is because there is an insufficient number of extant historical records about the actual reading practices of the books. Indeed, the most

[37] Hegel, "Picturing the Monkey King," 184–85.

[38] According to He, "book conversancy" helps emphasize "a spectrum or field of possible or projected uses or modes of consumption for a given book (even including 'abuse' or other sort of usage not anticipated by the producers)." See He, *Home and the World: Editing the "Glorious Ming" in Woodblock-Printed Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), 6.

[39] Shang Wei, "'Jin Ping Mei' and Late Ming Print Culture," in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, eds. Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 187–219; "The Making of the Everyday World: *Jin Ping Mei cihua* and Encyclopedias for Daily Use," in *Dynastic Crisis and Cultural Innovation: From the Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond*, eds. David Der-wei Wang and Shang Wei (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 63–92.

effective path that these scholars take is to focus on the book pages themselves and then work outward to reconstruct their production, circulation, and consumption.

My dissertation takes all these aspects into account. In addition to paratexts like *dufa* and commentaries or a book's format, I want to bring in another parameter that can cue readerly interactions: games. To be sure, games as an interactive system bound by rules always invite players to actively participate by imposing certain behavioral patterns. Yet when intertwined with reading, games productively expand our search for "reading games" beyond those components of printed books in three ways. First, in early modern China, literature left its traces in game manuals and was inscribed on ephemera like game boards, as well as cards and tallies for drinking games. With their specific gaming mechanisms, they complicate both the mediums and the act of reading.[40] Second, games represented in narratives can also signal specific methods of reading. These intratextual, diegetic descriptions depict the character(s)' gameplay experience. Moreover, authors use them to communicate particular ways to approach the narrative as a whole, which often reflects on how one should perceive and cope with aspects of reality. Third, games prove that the reading experience itself can be intermedial. According to Ling Hon Lam, while each medium (e.g. print and theater) prefers a certain experience (e.g. silent reading vis-à-vis listening), these experiences were intermingled in early modern China.[41] Drawing on the reading scenes in the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢), Lam suggests that the experience of reading a book silently was integrated to that of watching theatrical performance. "The aural experience of performance is now marked, embedded,

[40] Charlotte Eubanks argues that playing a board game with inscribed Buddhist doctrines turns reading into patterned and spatialized play. I will return to Eubanks' argument and discuss the interplay between reading and board games with dice in chapter 3. For her study, see Eubanks, "Reading as Patterned Play: Everyday Religion and the Spatialization of Doctrine in a Buddhist Board Game," *Book History* 23 (2020): 40–75.

[41] Ling Hon Lam, *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early Modern China: From Dreamscapes to Theatricality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), especially 44–45.

saturated, transformed by private, silent reading, with the result that even performance and listening become 'privatized' and 'textualized.'"[42] Here in Lam's discussion, what was read was not confined to physical books, but also extended to onstage performances. In other words, instead of a physical book predestined to be read, it is reading that makes a "book"—whether it is a physical book, a game board, or a theatrical performance—come into being. Games, especially the series of "reading games" that I will invite you to explore, testify to this intermediality, and they also build on it. By "intermedial," I not only mean that reading a text can facilitate or enact gaming, but also that the experience of reading can be informed, annotated, adjusted, and complicated by gaming in its own right.

The Dynamic: The Game-Literature Matrix

In this dissertation, the notion of "reading games" is both literal and figurative. Let me repeat: "reading games" is concerned with how elements of games are integrated into literature, hence gamifying it; it is also a heuristic for studying the act of reading as something game-like. To understand this doubleness of "reading games," we need to equip ourselves with "gaming literacy": to identify the workings of each type of gaming system and learn to play it. I call each component of this system a "game-literature matrix" to emphasize a more fluid, tangled, and sometimes dialectical game-literature relationship.[43] Unraveling these matrices and how they

[42] Lam, "The Matriarch's Private Ear: Performance, Reading, Censorship, and the Fabrication of Interiority in 'The Story of the Stone,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 65, no.2 (2005): 384.

[43] "Matrix," according to *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), originally refers to the womb. It means "a place or medium in which something is originated, produced, or developed; the environment in which a particular activity or process begins." I am largely inspired by Noémie Ndiaye who compares race to a matrix, "as a womb-like space producing and nurturing paradigms that differ from each other yet share the bulk of their genetic material, and whose lives remain inextricably interconnected." In this way, "matrix reflects [her] investment in thinking about race as a dynamic structure of power relations that is systematic, future oriented, and constantly in movement." See Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 4, 7.

prompted historical and potential operations forms the basis for seeing how and why the interplay between games and literature can empower an early modern public to ludically and creatively perceive and navigate life and the world.

A game-literature matrix departs from the current discussions of game-literature relationship in China. If we recall the gameplay vignette between Moonlight Monk and Willow Green, we notice that Chinese game historians and literary historians alike were concerned with questions similar to the monk's. We scholars are not that unlike Moonlight Monk: we inquire about certain historical games on the one hand, while continuing to interpret the social, moral, and literary implications of these games on the other. Yet, we are also utterly different from the monk. In reality, with hundreds of years of distance, we can never experience playing the games as he does with the courtesan. For studying games in history, the only thing that is accessible to us is the archive. These materials, ranging from literary and visual representations of games to game manuals and equipment, offer us the opportunity to get closer to the distant past and understand how, where, and by whom some particular games were played. This approach is exemplified by a series of essays in the exhibition catalogue *Asian Games: The Art of Contest* (2004). Contributors to this catalogue like Andrew Lo and Colin Mackenzie mainly take advantage of literary records, together with illustrations and archaeological findings, to reconstruct a cultural history of premodern games such as Go, backgammon, and playing cards.[44]

[44] For details, see Colin Mackenzie and Irving Finkel eds., *Asian Games: The Art of Contest* (New York: Asia Society, 2004). The catalogue is divided into four parts: "Tossing and Turning," "War and Territory," "Games of Matching and Memory," and "Power and Dexterity." It provides a comprehensive overview of different types of games in premodern Asia, including China. See also Cai Fengming 蔡豐明, *Youxi shi* 遊戲史 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chuabanshe, 2007) for a similar approach to studying games in Chinese history. Readers may consult the relevant footnotes in the four chapters in the body of this dissertation for current scholarship on specific games (i.e. drinking games, gambling games, and riddles).

What is beyond the scope of this dissertation is the growing field of contemporary Chinese game culture and industry. Scholars mainly focus on video games and digital platforms. See for example, Marc L. Moskowitz, *Go Nation: Chinese Masculinities and the Game of Weiqi in China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013); Marcella Szablewicz, *Mapping Digital Game Culture in China: From Internet Addicts to Esports*

Andrew Lo, still the most important early modern historian on this topic, has surveyed a wide range of what he calls "amusement literature" ("writing done for amusement"[45]) to unveil the cultural pastimes of seventeenth-century literati, particularly their enjoyment of drinking games, cards, and mahjong.[46] Lo's major focus is game manuals (*pu* 譜) and notation books (*biji* 筆記) written by the well-educated literati: while the former detail the game rules, the latter documents the various gameplay experiences of the authors and their friends, as well as their attitudes toward such quotidian entertainment. Other Ming-Qing literary historians delve into vernacular novels to seek game-related information. Regarded as encyclopedias of early modern everyday life, novels such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and *Flowers in the Mirror* (*Jing hua yuan* 鏡花緣) bring merchant, servant, concubine, and courtesan players into the picture. Thanks to these literary representations, modern scholars have a better understanding of how games were played in history by people of different social classes and genders. Games as a trope also frequently hint at the author's embedded messages. Hence, deciphering the metaphorical meanings of the games—as prophecies of the character's fate,[47]

Athletes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); and Hether Inwood ed., *Games and Gaming in China and the Sinophone World*, Special Issue of *British Journal of Chinese Studies* 12, no.2 (2022).

[45] Andrew Lo, "Amusement Literature in Early Ch'ing," in *The Power of Culture: Studies in Chinese Cultural History*, eds. Willard J. Peterson, Andrew Plaks, and Ying-shih Yu (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1994), 303.

[46] Lo aims to understand the rules and characteristics of these games through textual materials. His scholarship includes Lo, "Amusement Literature in Early Ch'ing"; "The Late Ming Game of Ma Diao," *The Playing Card: Journal of the International Playing Card Society* no.29 (2000), 115–36; "The Game of Leaves: An Inquiry into the Origin of Chinese Playing Cards," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 63, no.3 (2000): 389–406; and "Literati Culture in Ming Dynasty Drinking Games Using Cards," *Zhongyang daxue renwen xuebao* 31 (2007): 243–88.

[47] See for instance, Haun Saussy, "Reading and Folly in *Dream of the Red Chamber*," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, no. 9.1/2 (1987): 23–47, especially 36–42.

moral advocacy,[48] or reflections on the novel's narrative attributes[49]—serves as a key, if not the only one, to understanding the literary work itself.[50]

Scholars therefore tend to read this literature either as textual evidence for the history of games or to interpret games as narrative devices in the service of plot and characters. These two perspectives alone cannot make full sense of the complex relationship between games and literature in early modern China. The game-literature matrix requires us to transcend the limits of modern disciplinary compartmentation: for instance, game historians prefer facts about games to literary traits, while literary scholars usually prioritize textual interpretation and close reading. Indeed, as Natasha Korda points out, games "continually test the parameters of rule-bound, boundary-setting, disciplinary activity."[51] To understand and explain the working of game-literature matrices encourages me to game with the archives.[52] Therefore, I look for traces of games in printed books and manuscripts, and traces of literature on cards and game boards. For literature, I am not confining myself to any particular literary genre but focus more on the interpenetration of poetry, prose, fiction, and drama. Notably, I take into consideration theater's overlap with games from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Chinese theater during this period was less bound by a physical stage and many works were originally meant to be read as

[48] See for instance, Ying Wang, "The Supernatural as the Author's Sphere: *Jinghua yuan*'s Reprise of the Rhetorical Strategies of *Honglou meng*," *T'oung pao*92, no.1 (2006): 129–61.

[49] See for instance, Thomas Kelly, "Riddles in *Jin Ping Mei*," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 8, no.2 (2021): 341–70.

[50] Over the past few years, the developing field of contemporary game studies has been providing literary scholars with new theoretical tools with which to study premodern Chinese literature. Sun Hongmei, for example, compares the novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記) to an adventure game. Contemporary video games provide Paize Keulemans with a new lens to approach aspects of the four Ming masterpieces. Unfortunately, most of these works had not yet been published when this dissertation was written, except for one article by Keulemans, "Immersion without Mimesis in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Sangoku Musou* (*Dynasty Warriors*)," *Nanyang Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* no.3 (2002):125–50.

[51] Natasha Korda, "Epilogue: Field of Play—Gamifying Early Modern Theatre and Performance Studies," in *Games and Theatre in Shakespeare's England*, 305.

[52] Korda, "Epilogue," 304.

"desktop dramas" (*antou ju* 案頭劇) even as some were still being performed onstage simultaneously.[53] "Reading games," I maintain, also takes shape through theater, which effectively reflects on the intermedial nature of reading experience. For convenience, I divide these materials into three categories, namely, game equipment inscribed with literary quotes, literary games, and literary representations of games, but with special attention to how these categories shift from one to another.

I refer to this interplay in flux between games and literature as the "game-literature matrix," wherein various manifestations of the game-literature relationship are generated, developed, and connected. Each manifestation bears its own meanings—yet meanings, too, emerge in the dynamic process of one manifestation transforming into another. In this dissertation, I identify three types of game-literature matrix and their suggestive readerly interactions. Each matrix has a core unit that molds its generative mechanism, that is, words, dice, and fragments. These units provide three types of links that connect various game-literature interplays across media. Specifically, words visually and semantically serve as the building blocks of texts inscribed on different surfaces;[54] dice, in both literal and figurative senses, generate episodic narrative structures; and fragments invite a particular logical mechanism of connecting them to make a meaningful whole. Hence, for instance, we will see that a poem about playing Go can be formulated into a reading puzzle whose basic goal is to connect the words and figure out the poem successfully. Meanwhile, the puzzle itself becomes a notation system for

[53] Sophie Volpp, *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth-Century China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), especially chapter 2.

[54] In his study on the Japanese anime industry, anthropologist Ian Condry suggests that animation characters and worlds can be understood as "a kind of generative platform of creativity." Here, "platform is not only as mechanical or digital structures of conveyance but also as ways to define and organize our cultural worlds…In the case of anime, it is seldom narrative coherence—the story—that provides the link across media. Rather, the characters and the worlds provide that link." See Ian Condry, *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 58.

recording and reconstructing historical Go games and strategies, with each word denoting a particular stone's position on a game board. We will witness a death game that originated from two children tossing a coin. This representation of a coin-tossing gambling game is based on a particular gambling manual, and it leads to a surprising unfolding of the narrative. Thirteen people die episode by episode, mirroring the contingency of dice rolling. We will notice that a riddle is composed of literary fragments cited from different sources.[55] Riddles metamorphose into charades in a play that belong to a longer pantomime—fragments of actions to be decoded and linked into a logical whole. And the play serves as one fragment of an author's oeuvre, awaiting readers to piece it together and form his image.

"Reading Games": Start Now

We distinguish these game-literature matrices for the ultimate purpose of learning to play with different systems of reading games. In these reading games, we are not only onlookers, but also participants. Thus, "reading games" bear a third implication as a corrective to the historical gap between the past and the present. I have designed the dissertation as a four-chapter game of reading. There are four rounds of metagames, that is, games about reading games. Together with the essential instructions on how to interact, my analysis about their written or hidden rules of reading—their *dufa*, so to speak—is part and parcel of the information that my readers need to gather in order to play the metagames on their own. "A metagame," according to Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, "ruptures the logic of the game, escaping the formal autonomy of both ideal rules and utopian play." If a game is rule-bound, goal-oriented, and sometimes takes place within a "magic circle" separate from real life, the metagame "anchors the game in time

[55] To see how teasing out the language registers of riddles sheds new light on textual culture, see He, *Home and the World*, chapter 1.

and space."[56] I choose to frame my dissertation as interactive and playful instead of asking my readers to passively follow my analysis. This is exactly because playing these metagames enables you not only to understand the rules, but also to empirically feel with, and sometimes against, the experiences of historical readers who might have played the reading games, even if the traces of the latter are notoriously hard to find. My strategic move is to invite you, my readers, to explore all at once the making, thinking, and playing of these reading games in early modern China with me.[57]

Chapter 1 sets the foundation for the dissertation by foregrounding "play" both as a critical approach to defamiliarize common reading experiences and as a research method. Readers are asked to experience how a gamified text—for instance, a quotation paired with domino pips—unsettles a common linear reading and holds back a direct textual interpretation. It is play that affords us today the opportunity to think with authors and readers of the past. Through play, we game with the accessible archives so as to discover the hidden rules, learn the design mechanisms of the reading games, and also to enact them. The remaining three chapters study three types of reading games: reading puzzles, gambling, and riddling. Specifically, I analyze three particular game-literature matrices, their generative mechanisms, and corresponding historical and potential interactions. I will bring in the historical reader-players whenever possible. "Reading puzzles" (chapter 2) requires the reader to follow a complex non-linear trajectory of words to figure out a poem, lyric, or song successfully. This trajectory suggests a fluid connection between text, image, and object. It delineates graphic and formal-level innovations made possible by the creative perception and application of the writing system

[56] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 2, 11.
[57] Boluk and LeMieux, *Metagaming*, 2.

and its substrate. Turning from words to narratives, gambling (chapter 3) trains readers to understand chance both within the story world and beyond. This is realized by developing an episodic narrative structure, usually through short stories, a nature shared with gambling games as players bet one round after another. Riddling (chapter 4), the last reading game, extends from the page to the stage. While a riddle is a literary game that demands one to read through the textual surface and decipher its concealed meaning, its transformation in theater highlights a particular mechanism of linking fragments together to make a meaning whole. Through representing the process of riddling, playwrights invite the audience to think about the very nature of "guessing" and "thinking" as an attitude to deal with the phenomenal world. If these three types of reading games place emphasis on the levels of word, narrative structure, and reading mechanism, respectively, they are also organized by the degree of control the author-designer exerts on the reader-player: with reading puzzles demanding strict compliance with the *dufa* and riddling being the most open to reader engagement.

Lastly, some *dufa* for this dissertation.

You may read it anytime and anywhere, since reading games in early modern China could take place under a variety of circumstances, at a scholar's personal studio, in a woman's boudoir, during a night banquet, or on a public stage. This dissertation, likewise, can be read alone or with someone else, as a hard copy or on a digital tablet. But I suggest you prepare a pen, a piece of paper, and if possible, a pair of dice, to facilitate your gameplay experience. Finally, while I hope to make you see early modern Chinese literature and culture anew, you are encouraged to agree and disagree, revise and subvert the written or hidden rules of this dissertation. This is a newly developed gaming system. It can only be improved together with you, my fellow players/designers.

Now, let us start the game.

CHAPTER ONE

Play as Method

If you insert what has no thickness into
such spaces, then there's plenty of
room—more than enough for the blade
to play about in it.
以無厚入有間，恢恢乎，其游刃必有餘地矣
"The Secret of Caring for Life," *Zhuangzi*
《莊子·內篇·養生主》[1]

A literacy based on play is a literacy of
innovation and invention.
Eric Zimmerman[2]

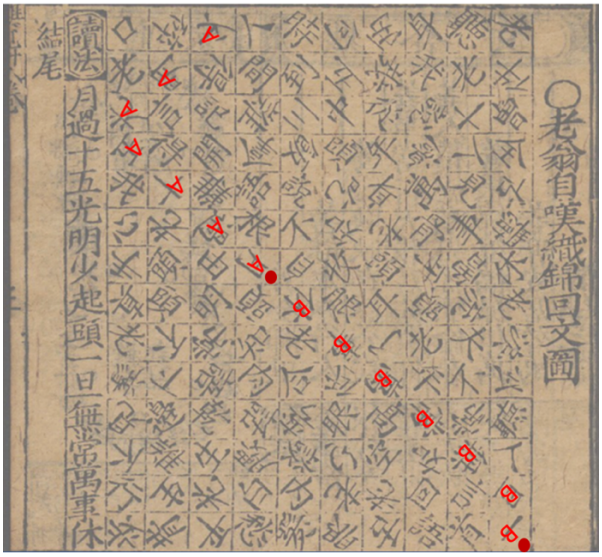
Please join me in a game of reading.

Take a look at the bottom left section of the book leaf below, titled "A Brocade Palindrome about an Old Man's Self-Pity" 老翁自歎織錦回文圖 (fig. 1.1). In the first round of the game, simply look for the line "After the Fifteenth Day, the moonlight gets dim" 月過十五光明少. Then, locate the line "Once [you] die, everything is over" 一旦無常萬事休.

[1] Burton Watson trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 51.

[2] Eric Zimmerman, "Gaming Literacy," 27.

Fig. 1.1 “A ‘Brocade Palindrome’ about an Old Man’s Self-Pity” 老翁自歎織錦回文圖. From *Miaojin wanbao quanshu* 妙錦萬寶全書 (*Complete Book of Myriad Treasures*), Anzheng tang 安正堂 edition (1612).



Players who cannot read Chinese characters: please follow the orientation of “A” to find the first line and “B” to find the other. The red dot marks the starting point for each line.

This is an easy challenge, right? You realize that the characters of both lines share the same orientation until a character reaches the border. Now, let us do a second round. Suppose these two lines are the first and the last of a seven-line poem. All you need to do to figure out the poem is to follow the pattern you have just recognized: trace the characters by their shared orientation and pause after every other seven characters. What was your experience?

Allow me to make a guess. Did you take out a pen, trying to link together the characters to compose the lines? Did you revolve the page or tilt your head to make the words more legible? Did you think about it for a while, yet sometimes still lose track of certain lines? Or did you, unwilling to be defeated, try to jumpstart the poem from another line, making yourself at least identify the terminal point? Whatever the scenario, as long as you thread all the characters together per the instructions, you may discern that a poem about an old gentleman lamenting his aging body gradually takes shape, while a crisscross textual labyrinth visualizes it simultaneously (fig. 1.2).

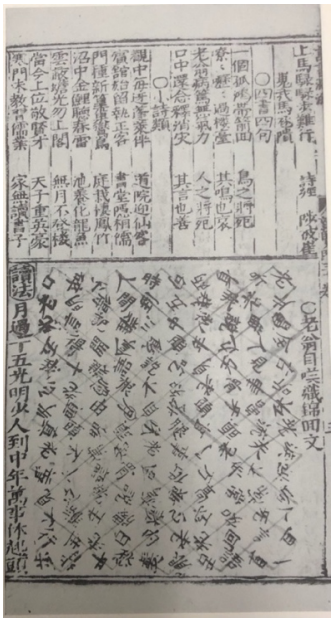


Fig. 1.2 One reader's tracing of solving the "Brocade Palindrome" reading puzzle. From *Wanshu yuanhai* 萬書淵海 (*Source and Sea of the Myriad Books*). Ming Wanli edition (printed in 1610). In *Chūgoku nichyō ruisho shūsei* 中国日用類書集成, vol.7, 472.

This is a game that widely circulated in late Ming (1573–1644) daily encyclopedias as part of the sundry everyday life trivia for people of multiple social echelons. The game is normally included under the category *zalan* 雜覽 ("Miscellaneous Items for Browsing"). It shares the books' lower register with acrostics, palindromes, and visual poetry; with riddles; and sometimes moral aphorisms juxtaposed in the upper register. Its title, "Brocade Palindrome" 織錦回文, is clearly borrowed from the legendary palindrome by a talented woman of the Former Qin, Su Hui 蘇蕙 (fl. 375–384). According to the historical anecdotes, Lady Su wove the palindrome on a piece of brocade, sending it as a token of longing for her husband Dou Tao 竇滔 (fl. fourth century), an official in exile thousands of miles away.[3] For Su, only her beloved could decipher the depth of her feelings embedded in a single piece of brocade—a square amounting to approximately eight hundred characters that could be read in any direction and which generated numerous poems.[4] However, understanding our seventeenth-century reading puzzle against this

[3] It is difficult to ascertain if Su Hui "wove" or "embroidered" the palindrome onto the brocade, despite the fact the historical accounts all use the verb "to weave" (*zhi* 織). Scholars, moreover, have tended to use "weave" and "embroider" interchangeably. In addition, whether Su Hui sent this brocade palindrome out of remorse or out of longing for her husband depends on the specific accounts. Notably, the image of Su Hui shifted from a talented woman to a jealous wife in the Tang dynasty, based on a biography attributed to Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705) dated to 692. For scholarship on Su Hui and her palindrome, see Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, eds., *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 127–31. David R. Knechtges and Taiping Chang, eds., *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide Part One* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 408; Michele Metail, *Wild Geese Returning: Chinese Reversible Poems*, trans. Jody Gladding (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2017); and Qiaomei Tang, "From Talented Poet to Jealous Wife: Reimagining Su Hui in Late Tang Literary Culture," *Nan nü* 22, no.1 (2020): 1–35.

[4] Since the seventh century, Su Hui's palindrome has been known as the "Picture of the Turning Sphere" (*Xuanji tu* 璇璣圖). *Xuanji* refers to the Big Dipper in particular and constellations in general, along with the notion of *tu* 圖 (picture, image), emphasizing the visual design of this palindrome, which possibly represents a cosmological pattern. Although no pre-Tang or Tang dynasty *xuanji tu* remain, some Ming dynasty copies provide clues about its visual form, coloration, and ways of reading. See "Portrait of Lady Su Hui with a Palindrome in the Manner of Zhu Shuzhen," handscroll, probably seventeenth century, Harvard Art Museum (https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/206522); "Lady Su Hui and her Verse Puzzle," handscroll, sixteenth century, Metropolitan Museum of Arts (https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/51584); and Sang Shichang 桑世昌 (fl. twelfth century), Zhu Xiangxian 朱象賢 revised and expanded, *Huiwen leiju* 回文類聚, Yuwen tang 裕文堂 edition (printed 1662).

backdrop would be misleading: it is anything but a palindrome. It requires the player to figure out a pattern of reading that can guide them from the first character to the end. If there is still some analogy between the reading puzzle and the original brocade palindrome, I suggest that it is the act of "weaving." Yet whereas Su Hui wove her words together with her emotions into the brocade, the designer of the puzzle engineered a rule to position the characters so that the player, after first identifying the rule from the reading guide, could weave the characters into a frivolous poem. In other words, what the puzzle makes most manifest is neither the individual characters nor the verse content; rather, it is a regulated *process of reading* that becomes visible—all the more so when the player starts to draw physical lines to facilitate their gameplay experience.

This "Brocade Palindrome" teaches us two lessons. First, playing it calls into question how we understand the act of reading. In this reading puzzle, before interpreting the semantic meanings of a text, the reader-player is directed to the syntax, the ways to "weave" the words into meaningful lines by following word orientations. Second, its playability bridges the gap between the past and the present; it encourages us scholars to participate like players ourselves rather than solely as critics attempting from the start to decipher the textual meanings, historical development, and cultural and social implications. Here, play is both a critical and transhistorical experience. It is a critical and creative approach to defamiliarize common reading experience. If the text belongs to a certain structured system (a seven-word poem), play explores, manipulates,

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Eugene Wang contextualizes the naming and design of *xuanji tu* (which he translated as "Picture of the Turning Sphere") in the pre-Tang and Tang dynasty astrological, visual, and literary traditions. In particular, he convincingly suggests that the emergence of *xuanji tu*—a text of personal longing visually designed as a cosmological representation—resulted from the spread of astrography into the public domain. However, Wang also states that the nonlinear visual design of the text in *xuanji tu* (a type of circular text, *huiwen* 迴文) was shared with the circular order of a series of inscriptions on bronze mirrors, tomb stones, and Dharani scripts. This parallelism is simply based on the visual similarity of the textual order and may overlook the complex reading experience of *xuanji tu* which could be read in multiple directions beyond the clockwise or counterclockwise ones. See Eugene Y. Wang, "Patterns Above and Within: The Picture of the Turning Sphere and Medieval Chinese Astral Imagination," in *Books in Numbers: Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Harvard Yen-ching Library*, ed. Wilt L. Idema (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 49–89.

and reconfigures it (a seven-word poem in the form of a reading puzzle).[5] The linear reading of the poem is unsettled, and the reader is held back from a direct textual interpretation. At the same time, play for scholars underscores an embodied practice to think *with* and perceive the approach of players. Play is our research method for retro-engineering the systems and their reconfigurations, and the changing operating mechanisms. My dissertation treats play in this double sense. In particular, I concentrate on how elements from specific games gave rise to new approaches to playing with the literary text (gamifying a text, so to speak), thereby encouraging corresponding strategies of reading it.

As a prelude to the following case studies, this chapter elaborates on play as method by inviting you to participate in two thought experiments. They are based on a series of materials published by the early Qing publisher, editor, and author Zhang Chao 張潮 (1650-ca. 1707).[6] A literatus well-known for his publishing enterprise, he printed riddles and board games of his friends in collectanea; he designed his own drinking games and reading puzzles and preserved them in book form. These publications provide us with valuable sources to inspect the game culture during Zhang's time as well as his pioneering ideas on play, books, and reading. This chapter pays particular attention to the dice manuals in *Collectanea of the Glorious Age* (*Zhaodai congshu* 昭代叢書) and designs for drinking games in *Miscellany of Master Xinzhai* (*Xinzhai*

[5] This notion of "play" may be understood in a more Derridean sense. For Derrida, to put it simply, play is an act of moving within a rigid structure that often has an unchangeable center, whereas freeplay can transcend such a structure. See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 247–65. Following this Derridean conceptualization of games, game scholar, designer, and theorist Ian Bogost states that "play is not only fun, not only a child's activity, but also exploring the free movement present in a system of any kind, where *system* might refer to a social situation as much as a machine assembly. Play is the process of exploring such a system"; "Play is not an act of diversion, but the work of working a system, of interacting with the bits of logic within it." Ian Bogost, *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, The Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 113–14.

[6] For a comprehensive study of Zhang Chao's publishing enterprise, see Suyoung Son, *Writing for Print: Publishing and the Making of Textual Authority in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018).

zazu 心齋雜組). We will first explore the mechanisms and motivations for pairing literary quotes with dice/domino pips to understand how a gamified text and reading experience comes into being through play. Then, we will use cards and tallies for drinking games—objects combining literary quotes, drinking guides, and illustrations—to see how play can enable scholars to uncover the hidden rules, learn the design mechanisms, and ultimately, enact the historical games.

Defamiliarizing Reading via Play

It was late on a cold night. Two ladies, Xiaoqing 小青 and Susu 素素, were playing a dice game. Both needed to come up with a line from the famous romantic comedy *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭)—the moving love story of the beautiful girl Du Liniang 杜麗娘 and the scholar Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅 traversing life and death, dream and reality—according to the specific dice patterns one of them tossed. There was no winner or loser. When the lamp burned out, the game terminated. All the recited lines, their scene titles, together with the corresponding dice patterns, had probably been copied by the two players, then carefully preserved in the bookcase of their mutual friend Little Lady Six 小六娘. Years passed. Xiaoqing and Lady Six died, with Susu alone left in this world. Covered with dust, the yellowing manuscript became the material remains of these ladies. By flipping through its limited pages, we can unlock the memories of a night mixed with laughter, frowns, excitement, and drowsiness that would otherwise be buried in oblivion. Zhang Hui 彰晦 (style name: Xiuxian 秀先) discovered the manuscript and sent it to a publisher. In the preface, he expressed his wish to commemorate the event through publication while expressing a desire to "caress their figures and urge their shadows [to drink] fondle their appearances and compose their images" 撫形屬

影.[7] This became the printed pamphlet *The Peony Pavilion Dice Manual* (*Mudan ting toupu* 牡丹亭骰譜; fig. 1.3). It was later collected in *Collectanea of the Glorious Age* first compiled by Zhang Chao, and then edited by Yang Fuji 楊復吉 (1747–1820) and Shen Maode 沈懋德 (fl. nineteenth century).[8]

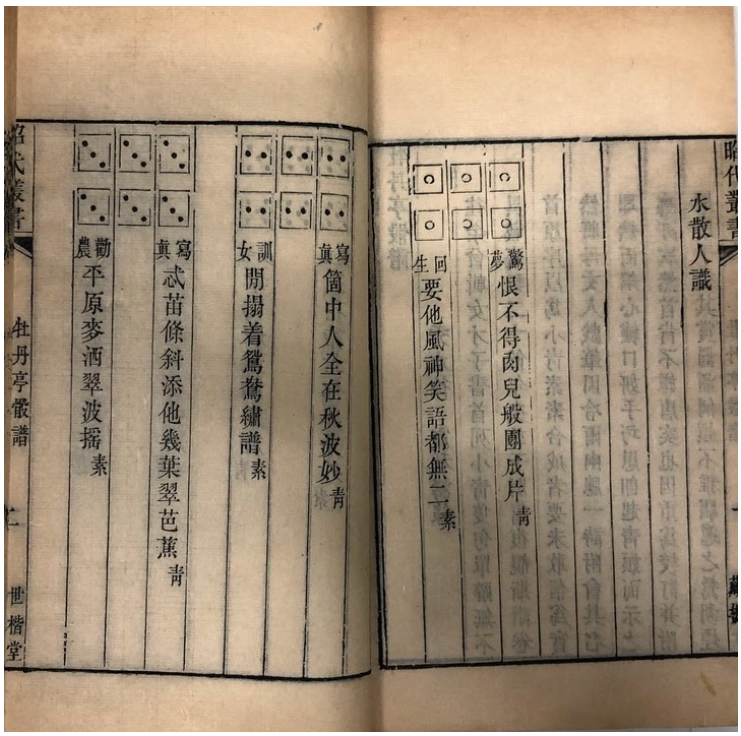

Fig. 1.3 *The Peony Pavilion Dice Manual*.
From *Zhaodai congshu*, Shikai tang 世楷堂 edition (1844), *juan* 37.

But this is only part of the story. When Zhang Chao was still collecting books for his collectanea, he wrote to his fellow literatus Wang Zhuo 王晫 (1636–?) as he suspected that this dice manual was not, in fact, authentic: “Despite [the compiler] being upright in his youth, I am

[7] The narrative of this paragraph is based on the preface to the dice manual by Zhang Hui.

[8] For the publication of *Zhaodai congshu*, see Son, *Writing for Print*, chapter 3; for the afterlife of the collectanea and Yang Fuji’s editorship against the High Qing scholarly culture, see He Bian, “Re-Collecting the Glorious Age: Yang Fuji and the Disciplining of *Zhaodai congshu*, 1772–1844,” *Late Imperial China* 40, no.1 (2019): 1–41.

simply afraid that he clumsily faked the authorship" 此君少年誠實，但恐拙於托人.[9] Indeed, many signs betray the fact that this is in no way a faithful record of an actual game. The dice patterns are organized in numerical order (as fig. 1.3 shows here, there is an identifiable sequence of six "twos," "threes," "fours," and "fives"). A "manual" (*pu* 譜), as a genre, aims to collect, categorize, and organize specific knowledge, with topics ranging from animals, plants, and rocks to painting, calligraphy, music, and games.[10] Another evident clue lies in the dubious identities of all the parties involved in playing, preserving, prefacing, and publishing the game. As Yang Fuji notes, Xiaoqing was fictional, and Lady Six's existence is only alluded to in some letters, not to mention the mysterious Susu and the preface writer Zhang Hui whose given hometowns were nowhere to be found.[11] All these aspects of this "unsolved case" 公案 just increase our skepticism—can we still call it a record of an actual game?

Xiaoqing has long been associated with Tang Xianzu's *Peony Pavilion* ever since the play was circulated in the late Ming dynasty. Known as the most legendary female reader of the play, Xiaoqing's ontological status is still a mystery.[12] Whether she was a real historical figure or a fictional invention, she earned her fame as an ill-fated talented woman and became the heroine

[9] Zhang Chao ed., *Chidu oucun* 尺牘偶存 (printed 1780), *juan* 10, 26:b.

[10] Interestingly, Yang Fuji categorized the dice manual under "Arts and Crafts" 藝術類.

[11] *Mudan ting toupu*, in *Zhaodai congshu*, 1:a. Little Lady Six, according to the story complex of Xiaoqing, was assumed to be Madame Yang 's 楊夫人 daughter whom Xiaoqing outlived. It is uncertain who Susu was.

[12] Ever since the seventeenth century, literati like Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664) began to doubt whether Xiaoqing was merely a literary creation, speculating that Xiaoqing is actually a wordplay on the character *qing* 情 (emotions)'s two parts (heart 忄 + green 青), but at the same time, a series of poems attributed to Xiaoqing suggests that there may have been a historical woman behind the figurehead. In either case, as Ellen Widmer argues, the historical and the fictional work go hand in hand with each other, helping shape her image as an ill-fated talented lady who died young in distress in Hangzhou. For a discussion of the biographies, plays, and other literary works focusing on Xiaoqing, the reasons of Xiaoqing's unprecedented celebrity, as well as her impact on the late Ming and early Qing female writers, see Ellen Widmer, "Xiaoqing's Literary Legacy and the Place of the Woman Writer in Late Imperial China," *Late Imperial China* 13, no. 1 (1992): 111–55. For the lore of Xiaoqing and the female readership of the *Peony Pavilion*, see Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), chapter 2.

of various literary and dramatic imaginings from the seventeenth century onward. According to the extant biographies of Xiaoqing, she was married to one Mr. Feng in Hangzhou in southern China. Feng's main wife, out of extreme jealousy, had her live in seclusion near West Lake. Sorrowful and despondent, Xiaoqing died young, leaving behind only a few poems and a letter. Among her literary legacy is a poem on her reading of the *Peony Pavilion*:

> Cold rain outside the dark window—such a mournful sound!
> I trim the lamp and leisurely read the *Peony Pavilion*.
> In this world there are people even more foolish than I:
> Xiaoqing is clearly not the only one with a broken heart.
>
> 冷雨幽窗不可聽，挑燈閒看牡丹亭。
> 人間亦有癡於我，豈獨傷心是小青。[13]

It is this poem that largely inspired multiple writers to render Xiaoqing as a lonely reader of the play. Reading, in some literary imaginations, was even turned into a fatal act, through which Xiaoqing's own life, mirroring the ailing protagonist Du Liniang, ends pitifully.[14]

The dice manual came into being within this context of writers inventing scenarios of Xiaoqing reading the *Peony Pavilion*. It is possible that before it was sent to Zhang Chao, Xu Zhen 徐震 (sobriquet: Idle Master of Yuanhu Yanshui 鴛湖煙水散人, fl. eighteenth century) first came across it. This was approximately twenty years after he completed his own version of Xiaoqing's biography that he published together with stories of twelve other talented women in his *Book of Female Talents* (*Nü caizi shu* 女才子書). As the manual's collator, he speculated that the manual might have been inspired by Xiaoqing's poem. Whether it was Xu Zhen who adjusted the entries of the manual into an ordered sequence is still unclear. Yet the general mechanism of associating specific patterns with selected lines from the play was radically at

[13] The English translation is quoted from Wilt Idema and Beata Grant eds., *The Red Brush*, 510.

[14] See, for instance, Zhu Jingfan 朱京藩 (fl. seventeenth century), *Fengliu yuan* 風流院, in *Guben xiqu congkan erji* 古本戲曲叢刊二集 (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2016).

odds with literary imaginings of how Xiaoqing read the *Peony Pavilion*. The units of Tang's play—arias, lyrics, and poems—with their affective power over female readers and even their fates are now dissected into fragmentary words and phrases. The first two quotes paired with the six "one-dot" patterns may serve as an example. Xiaoqing's line "longing only to make of our two bodies one single flesh" 恨不得肉兒般團成片 is quoted from scene 10, "Interrupted Dream" 驚夢.[15] If in the original context, this line is the culmination of Liniang's erotic dream and straightforwardly describes the couple's sexual desire, even the literal reading as implied by its original context needs to be subverted to match the dice patterns. Here, the phrase "making two into one" 團成片 is singled out, taking on a new interpretation of "becoming a stretch of circles," as the word *tuan* 團 also suggests the round shape of the dots, and *chengpian* 成片 indicates the multiple quantity of the dice. Then, Susu recited a line from scene 35, "Resurrection" 回生—"Let her beauty, her smiling ways remain unchanged" 要他風神笑語都無二—which is sung by Liu Mengmei before he digs up Liniang's coffin to resurrect her. But clearly, it is the phrase "unchanged" 無二, here read as "no two," that corresponds to the uniform "one dot" of all six dice.

If we step back, we see that this *Dice Manual of the Peony Pavilion* follows a larger trend of printing dice manuals and domino manuals (*paipu* 牌譜) in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties.[16] These manuals were put to different uses, but pairing a poetic, lyric, or theatrical line with dice or domino patterns became a very common practice. Most domino manuals intended to introduce the rules of the domino game, usually with the additional literary quotes meant to be

[15] Tang Xianzu, *The Peony Pavilion*, trans. Cyril Birch (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1980), 50.

[16] Each domino tile is composed of two sets of dots (from one to six), and thus altogether has thirty-six different patterns. What is characteristic in China is that each pattern is also given a poetic name or title.

"recited and enjoyed" (*yinwan* 吟玩).[17] In other cases, including the *Dice Manual of the Peony Pavilion*, there are only patterns and selected lines, making the manual more akin to a literary collection than a rule book. Compiling such manuals was not confined to male literati. For instance, a *Domino Manual from the Past* (*Gu paipu* 古牌譜) published by the late Ming dramatist and publisher Zhou Zhibiao 周之標 (fl. 1610–1647) provides some valuable traces of female involvement in similar activities. The manual is attached as an appendix to the *Collection of Orchid Babbling by Seven Women of Talent* (*Nüzhong qi caizi lanke ji* 女中七才子蘭咳集), an anthology of the literary works and biographies of seven talented women, among whom Xiaoqing occupied first place. According to Zhou's preface, the manual used to be in his private collection, and his wife Hu Zhenbo 胡貞波 (style name: Bingxin 冰心) helped to edit it, matching each pattern with a poetic quote.[18] The manuscript had been kept in his private book chest for a while until he was preparing this anthology of female writers. In this sense, publishing the manual became Zhou's gesture of advocating for the literary talents of women—in addition to creative writing, being able to read and memorize a wide range of literature was also part and parcel of what he meant by "talent" (*cai* 才).

These manuals, instead of solely serving as a literary anthology, were closely associated with actual drinking activities. In fact, prior to the current configuration of the *Peony Pavilion Dice Manual*, each dice pattern was likely accompanied by a drinking instruction which was omitted by Xu Zhen to maintain the elegance of the manual. *The Domino Manual from the Past*,

[17] Fanli 凡例, in Zhongli Qiyunzi 鐘離棲筠子, *Paitong fuyu* 牌統孚玉, Ming Shizhuzhai 十竹齋 edition (published in 1640).

[18] In her editorial statement, Hu Zhenbo mentions that "to quote the poetic lines, [she] has applied methods including compounding meanings, mimicking shapes, distinguishing colors, matching sounds, and recording number. Viewers should understand [how the dot patterns and quotes are connected] on their own." 引詩句有會意、有象形、有辨色、有諧聲、有紀數，觀者當自得之.

as suggested by Zhou Zhibiao in his preface, may be similarly applied in real banquets:"[Members of] a poetry circle may borrow it as sources of conversation; even more so, [members of] a wine society may take it to spice up [their] drinking" 騷壇可借為談資，酒社更藉為飲料.[19] Indeed, concrete evidence shows that seeking such a dot-word pair was integrated into drinking games.[20] There is at least one set of drinking cards, now preserved in the National Library in Beijing, that incorporates domino patterns into its design. These thick paper cards (known as "leaves," *yezi* 葉子), or sometimes long, thin ivory tallies (*chou* 筹), each consist of three interrelated parts: an image or dice/domino pattern, a literary quote, and a drinking instruction.[21] Interestingly, the same line from a quatrain by the Tang dynasty poet Qian Qi 錢起 (ca. 722–780) can be found both in the *Domino Manual from the Past* and one of the drinking cards (fig. 1.4). The line reads "in the moonlight, the twenty-five string zither [*se* 瑟] was played" 二十五絃彈夜月. It originally referred to the disconsolate zither melodies played by an imaginary Goddess of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers 瀟湘. Here, it was selected to gloss the number "twenty-five" 二十五 of the black dots, with the one dot symbolizing the night moon. The card further forms an image-text complex: the drinking guide toasts those "who are good at playing [the *qin* or *se* zither]" 奉善操客, while the image offers another new interpretation of the poetic line, depicting not the goddess, but a scholar playing the *qin* in a garden at night. In terms of the *Peony Pavilion Dice Manual*, although we can only imagine the drinking instructions, the

[19] Zhou Zhibiao, preface to Hu Zhenbo ed., *Zhoujun jianding gu paipu* 周君鑒定古牌譜, from *Zhonghua zaizao shanben congshu* 中華再造善本 (Beijing: Guojia tuchuguan chubanshe, 2012).

[20] See, for instance, the eighteenth-century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢), chapter 40 for a detailed representation of this game.

[21] For a survey of the extant drinking card games in the Ming dynasty, see Andrew Lo, "Literati Culture in Ming Dynasty Drinking Games Using Cards," *National Central University Journal of Humanities* 31 (2007): 243–88.

obvious social aspect of a joyful banquet nullifies the original emotional power and affective mode of reading the *Peony Pavilion*. The play's original context disappears as each guest ponders the possible connections between the dice patterns and the literary quotes.

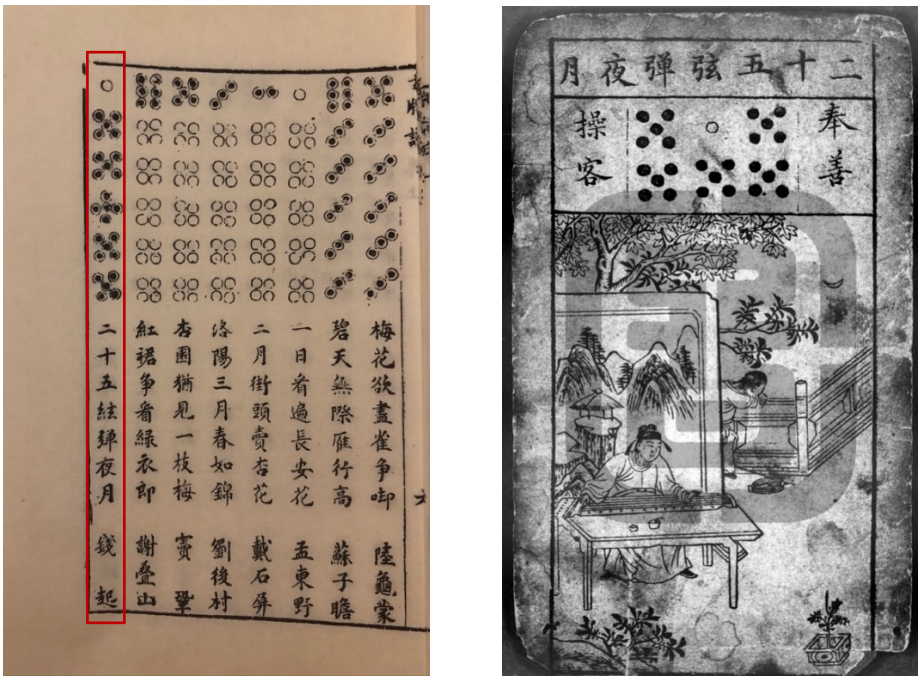

Fig. 1.4 A drinking card (right) with the same domino pattern and poetic quote as the *Gu paipu* (left).

Neither acknowledging an editor's talent nor arousing a reader-player's joy can fully explain the motivations behind compiling these dice or domino manuals. Dorothy Ko, in her study on Xiaoqing and the relevant "female readings of the cult of *qing*," once mentioned another domino manual of the *Peony Pavilion* collated by a gentry woman called Chen Lanxiu 陳蘭修 (fl. 1662–1722) from Changshu 常熟 (Jiangsu Province). For Ko, "such word games…suggest that to those lovers of literature, the world of sentimentality, with all its fanciful aura, was intimately linked to the written word."[22] To be sure, the story of Xiaoqing epitomizes a fervent pursuit for emotions (*qing* 情) so prevalent in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties.

[22] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 84.

While the *Peony Pavilion* was written out of the playwright's excessive sentimentality, reading the play, in turn, was said to fuel a cult of *qing* represented by the plight of Xiaoqing and other female readers. Yet still debatable is the extent to which the practice of compiling and reading these dice or domino manuals could be counted as part of this craze in general, and how doing so would reflect an intertwinement between sentimentality and written words (*wen* 文).

In fact, games turned this emotion-word relationship very much the other way round: if it was reading drama—being immersed in the plot—that largely fueled the cult of *qing*, it was emotion that made selecting lines to match dice or domino patterns possible. Zhang Chao now re-enters the scene. Around 1705, he exchanged views about changing a domino manual into a dice manual with his elder family member Zhang Dingwang 張鼎望 (ca. 1661–1714), an aficionado of Qinqiang opera who was living in Shaanxi Province. Through a series of correspondences, Zhang Chao deliberated about the probability of some rare patterns and the overlapping design of dice and domino tiles. At the same time, he recognized a tradition of pairing the patterns with literary quotes, whether be it a line from Tang dynasty poetry and the Four Books, or from plays like *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記) and *The Lute* (*Pipa ji* 琵琶記).[23] He suggested to Dingwang that it could be "a romantic affair" 韻事 to "pick lines to imitate [the patterns], annotate each entry with a drinking guide and an official title, and carve them on woodblocks for publication" 選句以象之，並注酒政，其上即以台銜署之，鏤板共行. "So long as someone is sentimental, they can extract meaning from poems and lyrics" 有情便可從詩詞取義, he continued, turning sentiment into the very basis for recreating literary meanings.[24]

[23] Zhang Chao ed., *Chidu oucun*, *juan* 10, 6:b–7:a.
[24] Zhang, *Chidu oucun*, *juan* 10, 20:b–21:a.

Zhang Chao's stress on a reader's agency to "extract meaning" 取義 rather than simply making sense of an author's original intent is shared and further expanded in an earlier late Ming domino manual *The Whole of Dominoes, Enjoying the Confidence of Jade* (*Paitong fuyu* 牌統孚玉, prefaced dated 1639).[25] The manual is more a catalogue listing all the combinations of assorted domino patterns to which the literary quotes of poems, lyrics, and songs are subordinate. The explication of the roles played by the literary quotes of different genres goes even further in the manual,

> Sing about [them ("*zhi*" 之), namely, the dominoes] with poetry to articulate their ("*qi*" 其) intentions. Interpret [them] with lyrics to communicate their feelings. Describe [them] with songs to mimic their appearances. Distinguish [them] with essays to develop their talents. Annotate [them] with the *Books* to preserve their meanings.[26] Summarize [them] with the *Classics* to exhaustively express their nature.[27] These are all the implications of selecting the lines.
>
> 詩以詠之、言其志也。詞以通之、達其情也。曲以摹之、肖其貌也。文以章之、發其才也。書以識之、存其意也。經以括之、盡其性也。選句之義盡於此也.[28]

This extended enumeration itself is a pastiche of writings about Chinese literary thought. It begins with an obvious parody of the most canonical and authoritative statement of poetry in Chinese literary tradition: "The poem articulates what is on the [poet's] mind intently" 詩言志.[29] The subsequent list seems more generic. It pairs each genre with one function of literature—to

[25] For relating the manuals as such to the divination tradition, see Andrea Bréard, "How to Quantify the Value of Domino Combinations? Divination and Shifting Rationalities in Late Imperial China," in *Theories and Practices of Divination in East Asia*, ed. Michael Lackner (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 499–529.

[26] The *Books,* known as "The Four Books," refer to the four authoritative books of Confucianism, namely, *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), *The Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), and *The Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子).

[27] The *Classics*, known as "The Five Classics," refer to the five classics of Confucianism, namely, the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經), *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), and *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋).

[28] *Paitong fuyu shiyi* 牌統孚玉釋義, in *Paitong fuyu*, 7:b–8:a.

[29] Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1992), 26.

communicate feelings, to mimic appearances, to reveal talents, to preserve meanings, and to exhaustively express an essence—in order to parallel the sentence structure of the first line. While attempting to refer to the wide range of literary genres that a quote could draw on, the list nonetheless hyperbolically frees the literary text from its semantic and ethical obligations. To put it differently, these decontextualized literary quotes matched with the domino patterns were not made to communicate their authors' intentions, feelings, or personal traits; rather, they are turned into a medium not just to gloss the abstract dots, but to flesh them out and endow them with life. This medium is enacted by the reader-player. Only when they no longer comprehend the quote within its original context and start to draw a connection between the text and the dots (referred to by the pronoun "*zhi*" and "*qi*") can these patterns' "intentions" "be articulated," "feelings" "be communicated," or "talents" "be revealed." Ultimately, in this utmost romantic scenario, reading the text unconventionally becomes the very act to animate the lifeless dots, rhetorically transforming them into conscious and emotional beings.

Play as Research Method

The above case of the dice/domino manuals demonstrates how play defamiliarizes a common linear, semantic reading that attends to what the text means. As tellingly demonstrated through the *Peony Pavilion Dice Manual*, one will get lost in the fictional realm if one chooses to believe the words in Zhang Hui's preface and deem the manual a record of an actual dicing game in history. In other words, a reader-player of the manual needs to be aware of the creative engagement with the literary quotes in order not to be tricked by its compiler. The case further poses a question on how to read a literary text, especially one from a temporally and culturally distant past. If a common linear reading is no longer applicable for the dice/domino manuals, we

should be informed of appropriate approaches to the text at the outset. Compared to a historical reader-player who may have read, used, and compiled such manuals, we modern scholars are more or less facing an unfamiliar object in silence that requires us to figure out these untold reading rules in the first place. Yet this does not mean that we are in a disadvantageous position; instead, with more accessible sources than the players in history, we are still able to get close to the rules and understand their implications as we did in the previous section. I associate this process of research with "play" to distinguish it from "literary analysis," which usually focuses on a direct interpretation of the text's semantic meanings.

In this section, I will use a drinking card game (*jiupai* 酒牌) example to elaborate on play as a particular research method. I mentioned briefly earlier that literature is part and parcel of the game, with literary quotes furnishing the cards or tallies. As I will further demonstrate, the cards were usually designed to form a set of literary figures—characters from the novel *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳), legendary wine aficionados, to list a few—through which some historical players evoked their relevant memories and knowledge. These cards and tallies, as well as their reprintings in printed books become an alternative site for us to encounter early modern Chinese literature. Undoubtedly, the drinking card game invites one to play in the most literal way. An investigation of how play differs from the archival approach to historical games, how it communicates the silent rules, and how scholars are placed among players will prepare us for exploring the validity of this method to study reading games in the following chapters.

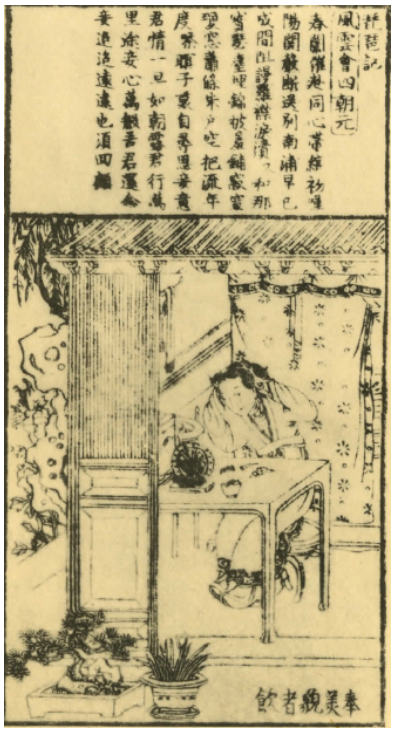

Fig. 1.5 *The Lute* Drinking Card (16×8.5 cm).
From *Yuanming xiqu yezi* 元明戲曲葉子 (*Drinking Cards on Yuan and Ming Dramas*).
In *Zhongguo gudai banhua congkan* 中國古代版畫叢刊, vol.4, 4.

Let us begin with this thought experiment. If you were going to study this drinking card (fig. 1.5), how would you do it? Here is my answer. I intend to treat the card as an object in its own right and approach it from its intrinsic design to its external contexts. First, I scrutinize its textual and visual components. Arranged in two separate registers are first, on the upper level, an excerpt from the southern drama *The Lute* written by the late Yuan playwright Gao Ming 高明 (ca. 1305–1371) and second, on the lower level, an image depicting a lady sitting at the dressing table in the boudoir, facing a mirror and decorating her hair. The lady is facing the viewer and is located in the pictorial center. The elimination of the door as a boundary between the inside and the outside visually transforms her private space into a "stage" on which her appearance, gestures, and belongings like the hairpins are all "displayed" to the viewer. In the bottom right corner of the image, a drinking guide invites those who are "good-looking" to drink 奉美貌者飲.

When a player draws this card in the game, the participants choose the good-looking ones among them to take a drink. The excerpt, upon close reading, is an aria that suggests the longing of the wife for her husband travelling faraway. There is an impulse, then, to search for the possible interconnections among these elements to deepen the understanding of the object's design principles. Indeed, the visual representation of a beauty dressing her hair in front of the mirror may speak to the card's instructions about who should drink. And by locating the excerpt in the original drama texts, I realize that the scene takes place after the departure of Cai Bojie 蔡伯喈, the male protagonist, for the capital to take the civil service examination. In this scene, the female lead, Zhao Wuniang 趙五娘, is dressing in front of her mirror in the morning, lamenting her husband's absence. The image, in this sense, contextualizes the excerpted aria, while the excerpt in turn informs the atmosphere of the image. If all these elements are taken together as a whole, the image not only pictorially elucidates the dramatic scene, but also visually denotes the characteristics of certain banquet participants, thus further bridging the interior fictional realm and the exterior social space.

Second, contextualization. The interconnection of the text and the image, still framed in a multi-register layout, prompts me to uncover the possible factors that influenced such a design. My viewpoint is moored to contemporaneous print culture. In fact, this layout, which juxtaposes different texts on the same page, is considered characteristic of the commercial woodblock prints of this period. Some books like the aforementioned daily encyclopedias similarly divide the page into two to three "genre or stylistic registers."[30] Closely related to our inquiry are the drama miscellanies, a type of commercial publication named after its major components: a series of

[30] For a discussion of the books with this multi-registered layout, see He, *Home and the World*, especially chapters 1 and 2.

drama excerpts.[31] Extracts from scenes in Yuan and Ming plays occupy one or two registers and alternate with other registers consisting of assorted contemporary textual genres ranging from poems, popular songs, to jokes and literary games. According to He Yuming, in this way the book is turned into a site imitating a private performance space that encompasses at once "theatrical performances and social entertainments."[32] Sharing a similar format, the drinking card too integrates the world of the theater and the world of social acts. It can be understood as conceptualizing a comparable "performance space" through the medium of a portable printed card. There is an even more striking discovery if we take the parallels between the two cultural products seriously. In the selected scene "Wuniang Facing the Mirror, Longs for Her Husband" 五娘臨鏡思夫 from *The Lute* in the drama miscellany *Plucked Brocades of Wondrous Tones* (*Zhaijin qiyin* 摘錦奇音, published in 1611), there is a nearly identical image depicting the female protagonist fixing her hair in her boudoir (fig. 1.6). There are only some minor variations like the missing bonsai in the foreground and the pattern of the bed curtain. Such pictorial appropriation, if still missing an exact origin, all the more attests to the fact that the drinking cards and the drama miscellanies are typical products of the late Ming print culture in which lay the vigorous creativity of the era: without constituting plagiarism, the same texts and images could be circulated, copied, and reproduced in multiple prints.[33]

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[31] This parallel format between the drinking cards and the drama miscellanies is pointed out by Kathryn Lowry. Lowry, notably, mentions this specific card in question. In addition to describing its textual and visual components, she tries to understand it "in the context of the drinking game or of banquet about women of the pleasure quarters," and states that "the image of the woman facing her mirror and the instructions to choose the top beauty were apparently useful for men who sojourned in Nanjing, where the Qinhuai pleasure quarters teemed with courtesans." However, it was possible that the "good-looking" could refer to a male, and there is no basis for relating the game solely to the pleasure quarters. See Lowry, *The Tapestry of Popular Songs in 16th-and 17th-Century China: Reading, Imitation, and Desire* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 135–38.

[32] Yuming He, "Productive Space: Performance Texts in the Late Ming," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2003), 75; *Home and the World*, chapter 2.

[33] Quite a few scholars have paid attention to this characteristic of the late Ming print culture. See, for example, Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), especially chapter 5; He, *Home and the World*, chapter 3 (for He, this circulation and variation can also be across genres): a

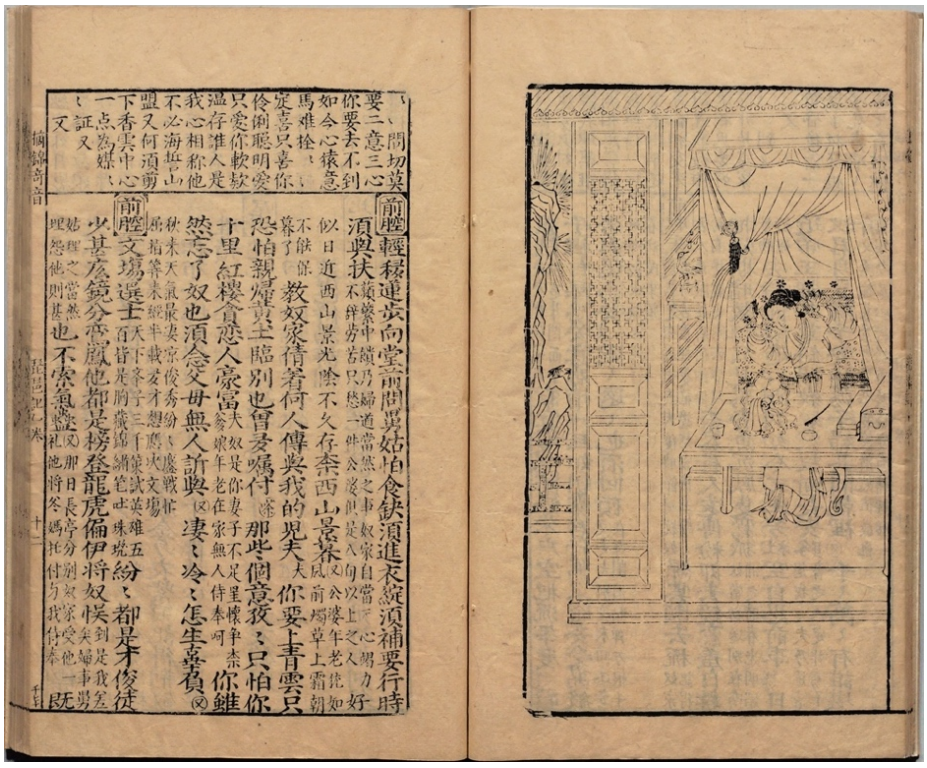

Fig. 1.6 Excerpts from *The Lute* in *Zhaijin qiyin*.
Dunmu tang 敦睦堂 edition (1611). Naikaku bunkō, Tokyo, Japan.

Yet examining only the design and its position in late Ming print culture ignores the fact that the drinking card is, in essence, a piece of game equipment. It was supposed to be shuffled, drawn, handled, viewed, and read together with other cards at a banquet gathering. To trace how these drinking cards were utilized in a game context, or rather, to retrieve the ways drinking card games were played in history, becomes a more fundamental and urgent task for scholars studying the cards. We need the game rules. That being said, the lack of direct textual accounts, and more pivotally, the fact that the card set is incomplete leads us to an impasse in reconstructing how the game used to be played.[34]

shared theme like "Scholar Zhang Jumping off the Wall" could be circulated in its visual, textual, and musical forms via prints.

[34] This set of drinking cards known as "Drinking Cards on Yuan and Ming Drama" (*Yuan Ming xiqu yezi*) was collected and titled by the famous Chinese theater scholar Fu Xihua 傅惜華 (1907–1970). Its name is based on the subject matter shared by all the extant twenty-six cards, as each card, in the same two-register format, centers on one play from either the Yuan or Ming dynasty. For an evidential study on the source materials of the set, see Ma

The seeming impossibility of reconstructing this drinking card game does not make us desist from seeking any traces of the game. At least, it is feasible to step back and look for other clues concerning the rules, equipment, or records of play that may have been preserved. Instead of just aiming at one *individual* game, we turn to a general picture of this *type* of game as a whole. This is a common strategy taken by game historians. Andrew Lo, for example, by surveying the notation books, miscellanies, collectanea, as well as game manuals, is able to "catalogue" the origins, themes, rules, and bibliographies of card games as comprehensively as possible.[35] Predicated on Lo's findings, we are able to infer that this drinking card game can be traced back to as early as the Tang dynasty (618–907). It belongs to a system of drinking games prevalent in the mid- to late Ming. The literati were enthusiastic about the game, an elegant banquet activity that harmonized literature and performance with amusement in their view; as designers themselves, they combined the instructions and literary allusions, and sometimes also invited renowned painters like Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬 (1598–1652) to draw the illustrations.[36] Despite the unknown identities of the producers and the players of our drinking card set, we can *imagine* that its theatrical subject matter would enrich the delight of role-playing in the game, as the players indulged in singing like the female protagonist, acting according to the pictorial representation, while feeling flattered by compliments on their good looks.

Guojun 麻國鈞, "Yuan Ming xiqu yezi kaolüe," 元明戲曲葉子考略, *Zhonghua xiqu* 中華戲曲 18 (1996): 271–91. For reprints of all twenty-six cards, see Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 ed., "Yuan Ming xiqu yezi," 元明戲曲葉子, in *Zhongguo gudai banhua congkan* 中國古代版畫叢刊 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), vol. 4, 3–36.

[35] Andrew Lo is one of the most established sinologists to make great contributions to the history of Chinese playing cards. For his scholarship on playing cards, see Lo, "Amusement Literature," 289–303; "The Game of Leaves: An Inquiry into the Origin of Chinese Playing Cards," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 63, no. 3 (2000): 389–406; "China's Passion for *Pai*: Playing Cards, Dominoes, and Mahjong," in *Asian Games*, eds. Collin Mackenzie and and Irving Finkel (New York: Asia Society, 2004), 216–31, especially 224–26; "Literati Culture," 243–88. For a more comprehensive collection to date that includes all sorts of drinking games throughout the history, see Ma Guojun and Ma Shuyun 麻淑雲 eds., *Zhongguo jiuling daguan* 中國酒令大觀 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1993).

[36] Lo, "China's Passion for *Pai*," 224–26.

A type of literary source to which Lo rarely refers is fiction. In his careful studies of late Ming material culture, art historian Craig Clunas stresses the important evidential function of novels like *The Plum in the Golden Vase* in probing into how late Ming elites and the nouveaux riches engaged with material objects. These lengthy descriptive passages of literary imagination demonstrate the reality of how the objects were used, circulated, and appreciated, supplementing those ideal norms prescribed by the literati in their taste manuals.[37] Fictional representation of the drinking card game adds a livelier and more tangible touch to our pure imagination. We notice that in chapter 15 of *The Lantern at the Crossroads* (*Qilu deng* 歧路燈), an eighteenth-century didactic novel written by Li Haiguan 李海觀 (sobriquet: Lüyuan 綠園, 1707–1790), there is a banquet scene vividly rendering the ways a set of drinking cards were played among the guests, including the two protagonists, Sheng Xiqiao 盛希僑, an educated gentry member, and his close friend, Wang Longji 王隆吉, a merchant's son.[38] The rules of the game are straightforward: one draws and discloses (*jie* 揭) a card from the shuffled pile; and the participants drink according to the instructions on it. In addition to the drinking guideline, as the novel suggests, each card is composed of a corresponding illustration and explanatory poetic lines. Nor does the scene just allude to the card design—it calls attention to some possible scenarios of how a player might interact with the card. Rules are violated, and fellow participants are tricked. Longji, in his turn, draws a card that depicts one aristocrat with a three-stranded beard and a beauty riding on a boat, while the instruction reads that "a merchant should drink a *small* cup of wine" 行商者一小杯. "This portrays the story of Fan Li. He is followed by Xishi.

[37] Craig Clunas, "The Novel *Jin Ping Mei* as a Source for the Study of Ming Furniture," *Orientations* 23, no.1 (1992): 60–68.

[38] The novel was not published until the Republican period. For an in-depth study of the novel, see Daniel Youd, "Illuminating the Everyday: Li Lüyuan's (1707–1790) 'Qilu deng' and Vernacular Moral Realism in the Early Modern Chinese Novel," (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2004).

As he is doing business while making a fortune, dear younger brother, you should drink a *large* cup of wine (*Italics* mine)" 這是范蠡故事，又有西施跟著，生意又發財，賢弟該一大杯. Xiqiao responds, acting as a knowledgeable viewer of the image, a lighthearted commentator of the historical anecdote, as well as a cheater at the game. Longji, a beginner unable to identify the image, takes the instructions as seriously as military commands, only to be forced to transgress the drinking guide upon Xiqiao's insistence.[39]

But on all accounts, we have to admit that any attempt to retrieve a complete picture of the drinking card game at issue is impossible. In this jigsaw puzzle, there must be some insubstantial pieces composed of our own imagination, whether it be the gaming experience of the actual cards or the composition of the fictional cards in the novel. Any claim made on these shaky grounds would seem to be too general to carry much weight in an evidential study of a historical object. However, as I shall argue, what distinguishes games, at least some, from other cultural products is the fact that they are still playable, simultaneously showcasing a continuity yet distance from the past to the present. In other words, by following the rules, even modern people can enact certain games from hundreds of years ago, though perhaps in many cases, we are more aligned with Wang Longji in *The Lantern at the Crossroads*—greenhands at the game—who can only choose to obey the instructions rather strictly.

[39] Li Lüyuan 李綠園, *Qilu deng* 歧路燈 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou shuhua she, 1980), 162–63.

Fig. 1.7 *Encounters with Beauties Drinking Game*.
From *Xinzhai zazu*, *juan* 2, 34:b–35:a.
Library of Congress, Washington DC.

An empirical approach is especially effective when a game has been well preserved, that is, when the rules are comprehensive and the essential equipment for the game is explicit. The *Encounters with Beauties Drinking Game* (*Meiren ling* 美人令, hereafter *Encounters with Beauties*) designed by Zhang Chao is an example (fig. 1.7). The point of raising a new case here is not to introduce another drinking game using tallies; rather, I hope to use this game to gesture to an emphasis on a play-based research method and a reconsideration of positioning us scholars *as* and *among* the players.

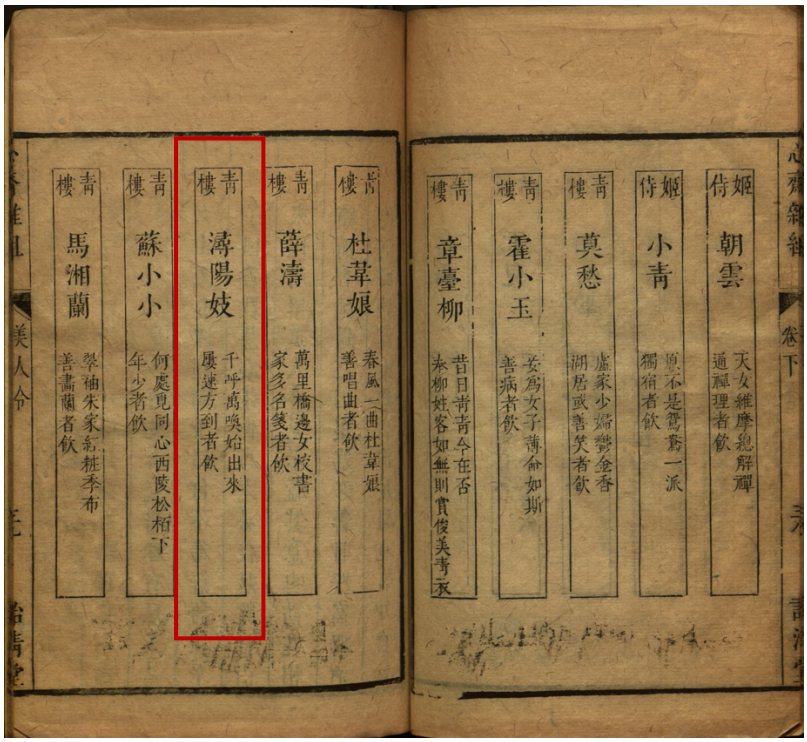

Fig. 1.8 Individual tallies of the *Encounters with Beauties Drinking Game*.
From *Xinzhai zazu*, *juan* 2, 38:b–39:a.

Encounters with Beauties is included together with assorted *xiaopin* 小品 essays and sketches, riddles, and drinking games in *Miscellany of Master Xinzhai*, a collection compiled and published by Zhang Chao in the seventeenth century. In the miscellany, the game starts with a preamble introducing its core conceit: "To invite the prominent ladies of divergent dynasties to join in merry-making on site [at a banquet]" 爰邀異代之名媛，以鼓當場之逸興.[40] All the tallies are replicated on the page in a rectangular shape. They are comprised of two tallies introducing the rules for the chief master (*zhengling* 正令) and the deputy master (*fuling* 副令), respectively; a main tally (*zongchou* 總籌) listing the five categories—fairies (*xian'e* 仙娥), palace ladies (*gongpin* 宮嬪), gentry women (*guixiu* 閨秀), concubines (*jishi* 姬侍), and

[40] Zhang Chao, *Xinzhai zazu* 心齋雜組, Qingyi tang 清詒堂 edition, *juan* 2, 34:a.

courtesans (*qinglou* 青樓); the five name tallies (*lieming chou* 列名籌); and finally, forty individual tallies. Printed without illustrations, each tally consists of the beauty's name at the center, her category on top, as well as a poetic line and a drinking instruction. It is not difficult for us now to discern the interconnectedness of these textual elements that follow the general design principles of other contemporary drinking cards and tallies. The courtesan Xunyang 潯陽妓 (fig. 1.8), for instance, is the protagonist in the *Song of the Lute* (*Pipa xing* 琵琶行) written by the Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846). The line "only after our repeated urging did she appear" 千呼萬喚始出來 deriving from the *Song of the Lute*, in turn, inspires the guideline that "those who arrived only after repeated invitations should drink" 屢速方到者飲.

The detailed rules, along with an exemplary game situation, reify the desire set out in the prologue: "Showing tenderness to the fragmentary, jade-like women, there is no harm in being gentle to a jade cup; asking for willows and seeking flowers, let yourself grope in the dark. Don't cease until you *meet with* [the beauty] when trying to visit her (*Italics* mine)" 憐香惜玉，何妨瑣裏溫存；問柳尋花，一任暗中摸索。訪必遇而後已.[41] A certain number of tallies would be distributed to each player. The participants would take turns looking for the desired beauty according to the number on the dice tossed by the chief master. Then, the player whose turn it is would pick another player and ask them whether they are holding the tally of such-and-such lady by guessing her category and name. Only when the player guesses correctly would they be considered to have been successful in meeting with the beauty, and the drinking instruction would then be triggered accordingly. The acts of throwing the dice, guessing, and turning over

[41] Zhang Chao, *Xinzhai zazu*, *juan* 2, 34:a.

the tallies replace the real visitation and encounter. The tallies become an interface,[42] not just indicating the interrelationship between its own textual components, but upon their enactment serving as a bridge transferring the players from an entertaining reality to an erotic fantasy.[43]

However, simply reading the rules in this way misses the other side of the coin: its nature as a multiplayer social game. The drinking guides continuously bring the players back to reality, invite them to seek corresponding traits among the banquet guests, and remind them that they are not being transported to a fictional world as much as they are conducting what Jesper Juul (an established video game scholar and theorist) terms "a real-life social activity."[44] The situation can be more complex when elements of chance, cheating, and punishment are taken into consideration, which could only be thrown into relief through the process of play.[45] In our case,

[42] I am using the concept "interface" in a broader sense rather than regarding it as a product of the digital age. Interface brings to the fore the form of relations on the one hand and the agency of its user on the other. Cultural theorist Branden Hookway states, for example, that "the interface is a form of relation that obtains between two or more distinct entities, conditions, or states such that it only comes into being as these distinct entities enter into an active relation with one another." Hookway, *Interface* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014), 4. Likewise, media theorist Alexander Galloway considers the interface as "a point of transition between different mediatic layers within any nested systems." More importantly, as a relational effect, it marks a threshold between the inside and the outside, the center and the frame, the text and the paratext, of which the presence is only discernible when the process of transition itself becomes opaque. Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012).

[43] In his comment, Zhu Jushan 朱菊山 who was shown the *design* of the game by Zhang Chao, thought that the concept of the game was more flowery and erotic (*xiangyan* 香艷) than another similar drinking game called *Visiting Flowers* 訪花令. For his comment, see Zhang, *Xinzhai zazu*, 39:b–40:a. It is certain that Zhang Chao must have seen the *Visiting Flowers* game. In a letter, Wang Hongwen 王弘文 (style name: Qixian 器先, fl. seventeenth century) comments that the game, once appreciated and annotated by Zhang, became a charming story (*jiahua* 佳話). The general rule was similar to *Beauty Encounters*: the player was asked to make a guess first; if they succeeded, the drinking instruction would be triggered. See Zhang Chao ed., *Chidu yousheng* 尺牘友聲 (printed 1780), *juan* 8, 16:a-b.

[44] Juul also states, "Breaking the coherence of the fictional world does not so much foreground the way the game projects a fictional world as it foregrounds the rules, the game as an activity. In a multiplayer game, breaking the coherence of the fictional world can work as a foregrounding of the game as a real-life social activity." Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 195.

[45] I played a revised version of the game with fourteen students in the class "Understanding East Asian Games and Play with Pre-modern Literature" at the University of Chicago, in Autumn 2021. I reduced the number of the tallies, replaced the original beauties with figures that the students were familiar with (historical authors and characters they knew, including Harry Potter and Nintendo characters, and so forth), and substituted tea for alcohol. In the end, we paid more attention to the drinking instructions, and the social aspect of the game overshadowed its fantastical qualities. As the chance element was reduced, it was fairly easy to guess correctly and trigger the drinking guide. Students could choose if they wanted to cheat, that is, to pretend that they were not the holder of a specific card. In the end, it became a social game, offering an opportunity for the students to know each other better

play becomes a strategy not only to *feel with* the historical players, but as importantly, to interpret, experiment, and reconstruct the unwritten rules that the game historians keep doing their best to recover. This is applicable to our first game, the "Brocade Palindrome" puzzle, in which the reading guide per se does not tell us *how* to read the entire piece; we, perhaps like the historical reader-player, discover the rules of reading while playing the game. It is not surprising that playing *Beauty Encounters* leads us to question if "meeting with" the beauties would be more enjoyable than failing to do so, because we would have to drink wine as a punishment (*fa* 罰) instead. We may doubt if role-playing a certain beauty really matters, for the players might possibly attend more closely to the drinking instructions. The process of enacting them would already be full of contingency. We would begin to test our presumptions with the implicit rule that " if a player falsely admits to possessing the card, they have to drink a cup of wine as a punishment" 誤承認者罰: Does this refer to a cheating scenario where a player hides their true identity from the "visitor"? Does this mean that the game master will check that player's tally after each round of guessing?

What type of players are we scholars who study the games in history, then? Through this thought experiment of retrieving a drinking game of the distant past, we may notice that there is always a paradox. On the one hand, we have access to a limited amount of evidence; we, to quote Gina Bloom, a historian of early modern British theater, tend to be "less an archaeologist who digs up evidence from the past than gamers who navigate imperfect information in the course of playing with history."[46] With finite information, in other words, we are required to imagine and speculate, or simply, to make guesses. On the other hand, we can obtain information

by following the instructions (The youngest ones should drink; those who went to the library in the morning should drink, etc.).

[46] Gina Bloom, "The Historicist as Gamer," in *Shakespeare in Our Tine: A Shakespeare Association of America Collection*, eds. Dympna Callaghan and Suzanne Gossett (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 223.

from many sources beyond the game itself: the game designer's ideas mentioned in their letters, the gaming experience or imaginary gameplay in the commentaries, notation books, or fictional representations, kindred drinking or gambling games, as well as any historical traces indicating the relevant cultural contexts. We, to follow the claim of Espen Aarseth, a scholar of video games and electronic literature, more or less become cheaters, attempting to learn how to play the game via other sources, ignoring the actual goals, eliminating the possible contingencies and challenges in the gameplay, and sometimes unavoidably, transcending the initial rules by (re)creating our own.[47]

I am indebted to Gina Bloom and Espen Aarseth for positioning scholars as gamers who "do not simply follow the rules that govern these materials and their uses but create the rules in the process of play."[48] However insightful, we may risk making this observation so universal that we are just using "player" as another term to describe a historian. We still must validate *why* it is necessary to view the scholarly approach in this new way. To do so, we need to return to the original contexts, particularly how games were (re)mediated in early modern China. You may have noticed that there is one question that I have left unanswered so far: Why was Zhang Chao's game printed in a book? It is possible to have a predetermined impression that for historians, books such as miscellanies are treated as static archives that "musealize" texts of varied genres. However, I want to emphasize that with books as one format, printed materials,

[47] Espen Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis," *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference*, 2003: 1–7. Meanwhile, according to the philosopher Bernard Suits, gamers can be divided into four categories: players, triflers, cheats, and spoilsports: "It may be said that triflers recognize rules but not goals, cheats recognize goals but not rules, players recognize both rules and goals, and spoilsports recognize neither rules nor goal." Scholars who play games under their own agendas can still be considered to belong to the category of "cheats." However, for game historians, in most cases their first step is to retrieve the game rules which are not necessarily the same as the original ones. Thinking in this way, it is possible to group them as spoilsports, who try to reverse-engineer and design the rules through careful research. See Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 47.

[48] Bloom, *Gaming the Stage*, 61.

exemplified by the games, were meant to be enacted, changed, and recreated under certain rules.[49] On one level, *Encounters with Beauties* is more a design awaiting animation than a record of an actual game. Zhu Jushan 朱菊山 recalled in the comment that he made a set of ivory tallies when being shown the game "composed" (*zhuan* 撰) by his friend Zhang Chao. This is also indirectly suggested by a previous drinking game using tallies in the same miscellany in which Zhang encourages the players not to be confined to the present design if they want to reproduce it.[50]

As Suyoung Son points out in her study of Zhang Chao's publishing enterprise, a printed book for him and his coterie was rarely a fixed product, but often functioned like a manuscript, open to its readers to annotate, revise, and republish.[51] *Miscellany of Master Xinzhai* epitomizes this dynamism of printed books compiled by Zhang Chao not just through incorporating game designs and engaging readerly comments, but also by virtue of its flexible textual circulation. Several sections in the miscellany were reprinted by Zhang Chao multiple times, either as part of large compendia or as separate fascicles of prints. These include *Shu bencao* 書本草, or *Materia Medica Librorum*, a parody of the *materia medica* genre. Instead of categorizing medicines and their effects, it describes the medicinal properties of different literary genres and cautions the readers about how to "take" these books as drugs. In addition to the *Miscellany*, *Materia Medica Librorum* also appears as an appendix to the compendia *Collectanea of a Sandalwood Desk*

[49] This is applicable to studying the theater and performance history in early modern China. One thing to note is that the playtext—neither a prompt script nor an archive or actual performance—encourages the reader to enact the text through imagination facilitated by the detailed stage directions and tune titles. I will discuss in-depth about reading plays in chapter 4 of my dissertation.

[50] Zhang, *Xinzhai zazu*, *juan* 2, 39:b–40:a.

[51] Suyoung Son, *Writing for Print*, especially chapter 1.

(*Tanji congshu* 檀幾叢書), where, speaking to our concern, it is part of a compilation of several playful medicine-related texts.

In a letter to his friend, the renowned pediatrician Cheng Yunpeng 程雲鵬 (style name: Fengchu 鳳雛, 1585–ca. 1670), Zhang Chao facetiously writes: "I, your humble younger brother, have recently made a medicine chest and present it along with my old imprints for your opinion. Inside it, you will find my *Materia Medica Librorum*, with riddles on disease names and medicine names. What do you think, O King of Healing?" 弟新製藥箱一具，並舊刻呈教，內有《書本草》及病名謎、藥名謎，不識大醫王以為何如.[52] We have no way to locate this medicine chest, which would serve as evidence for one of the many private circumstances that Zhang claimed to reprint and circulate his "old imprints" (*jiuke* 舊刻) for his friends. Yet this account is of particular interest in demonstrating the interplay between games, reading, and classified knowledge. Reading books is now fashioned as part of medical knowledge, while this knowledge is required in order to read *through* the riddles' textual surfaces. This logic of setting up new organizational rules, (re)grouping a set of texts, and mobilizing prior knowledge is no longer unfamiliar to us; it is reminiscent of the design of *Encounters with Beauties*, as well as our scholarly approach to the game. If, in this sense, despite various goals, the game principle mirrors that of the printed books, Zhang Chao has already been a game designer *and* a player of his printed texts. As players orchestrating the texts under our own rules of a "game" we call "research," our scholarship is nothing more than a continuation of these endeavors begun during Zhang Chao's time. We are not the first players, nor will we be the last.

[52] Zhang Chao ed., *Chidu oucun*, *juan* 11, 17:b–18:a.

CHAPTER TWO

Reading Games

For those who are good at reading, there is nothing that cannot become a book; mountains and waters are books; Go and wine are books; flowers and the moon are books.
善讀書者，無之而非書；山水亦書也，棋酒亦書也，花月亦書也.
Zhang Chao 張潮 (1650–1709) [1]

A gigantic game of Go whose poems, good or bad, ancient or new, "woven or drawn together," are the black and white stones…
Pierre Lusson, Georges Perec, and Jacques Roubaud[2]

In the final decades of the seventeenth century, Zhang Chao wrote in *Faint Dream Shadows* (*Youmingying* 幽夢影), a collection of short casual maxims: "For those who are good at reading, there is nothing that cannot become a book; mountains and waters are books; Go and wine are books; flowers and the moon are books" 善讀書者，無之而非書；山水亦書也，棋酒亦書也，花月亦書也. If books, the natural landscape, and entertainment exemplified the elegant and cultivated life of the literati like Zhang Chao, this line itself is puzzling because it simultaneously strengthens and problematizes the normal association of books with reading: What is "reading" and "being good at reading books"? What does Zhang mean by "books" here? How can mountains, waters, games, wine, and even the moon be turned into a "book" through "reading"?

[1] Zhang Chao, *Youmeng ying* 幽夢影, Qing Kangxi edition, *juan xia* 卷下, 14:b.

[2] Pierre Lusson, Georges Perec, and Jacques Roubaud, *A Short Treatise Inviting the Reader to Discover the Subtle Art of Go*, trans. Peter Consenstein (Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2003), 9.

To answer these questions, we shall first understand how and why Zhang Chao attached significance to books and the act of reading. In the previous chapter, we saw that for Zhang Chao a printed book was meant to be malleable. Readers actively shaped Zhang Chao's publications as well as his own literary output. He claimed his textual authority through collaboration and interaction with his readers, inviting them to provide suggestions, write commentaries, and add prefaces and postscripts to his works.[3] This holds true not only for his editorial projects but also for his own writings. *Faint Dream Shadows*, which includes the line I cited at the beginning, is an example. A collection of short casual maxims written and published by Zhang Chao, it was considered an innovative book by his contemporaries and later generations.[4] Its creativity lies in attaching Zhang's words with the commentaries of his literati coterie. The commentaries, continuously added to the original woodblocks, kept growing as the book was printed and reprinted multiple times. Readers' commentaries in smaller font size follow each entry; when there is not enough space between the two entries, additional remarks are positioned in the upper margin. In the book page that shows the aforementioned entry (fig. 2.1), in the upper margin, Lu Yunshi 陸雲士 praised Zhang Chao for his wit. Following the entry, other readers gave their interpretations of Zhang's line. For instance, Huang Tailai 黃泰來 (sobriquet: Jiaosan 交三) states that "those who are skillful at understanding things should be viewed like this [as good readers]" 善於領會者，當作如是觀. Jiang Zhilan 江之蘭 (sobriquet: Hanzheng 含徵) writes that "when still in bed at the fifth watch of the night (around dawn) there are innumerable

[3] Son, *Writing for Print*, 51.

[4] Yang Fuji (1779–1816), for instance, praises this in his postscript to *Faint Dream Shadows*: "When ancient people wrote a book, they put commentary in the middle of the text. But interweaving commentary with the text proper is the new style that *Youmengying* creates. Elegant words and lofty intentions respond in concert back and forth, which makes readers feel as though they are sitting in a long row and having conversations with several guests" 昔人著書，間附評語。若一評語參錯書中，則《幽夢影》創格也。清言雋旨，前於後喁，令讀者如入真長座中，與諸客周旋，聆其謦欬. Quoted from Son, *Writing for Print*, 46.

mountains, waters, and books emerging before [my] eyes and in [my] heart” 五更臥被時，有無數山水、書籍在眼前、胸中. Print served as a means for Zhang Chao to create an effective social platform that his fellow literati could use to interact with him and among themselves, and through the form of a printed book, to further publicize such interactions. Therefore, *Faint Dream Shadows* per se embodies a similar statement as Zhang Chao’s other publications: A book, instead of a static end-product for readers to follow the author’s words, comes into existence through a symbiotic and dynamic process of reading, commenting, printing, and reprinting.

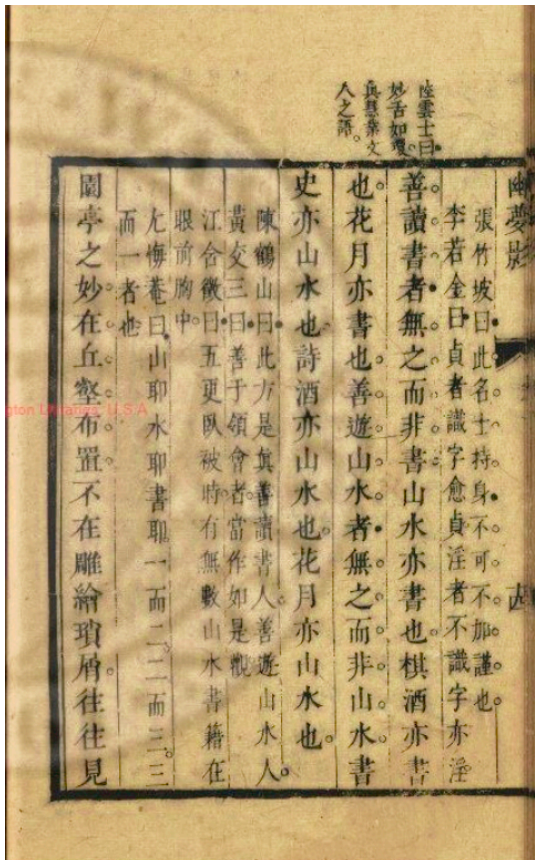

Fig. 2.1 Entry on “nothing not a book” with readers’ comments.
From Zhang Chao, *Youmengying*, Qing Kangxi edition, *juan xia*, 14:b.
University of Washington Library, Seattle.

We may push the statement further: For Zhang Chao, a book is concomitantly material and in flux; it is defined by reading, instead of the other way around. Reading has transformative power, and this is not confined to changing the external appearance of a printed book, as in the mis-en-page of *Faint Dream Shadows*. This claim is validated by his own endeavor to design and publish a collection of reading puzzles: *A Bag of Small Brocades* (*Xi'nang cunjin* 奚囊寸錦; hereafter, *Small Brocades*). The fundamental rule of these reading puzzles is similar to the "Brocade Palindrome" in the daily-use encyclopedia that we played in chapter 1. *Dufa*, which indicates both "regulations" and "methods" of reading, sets up the rules while providing a guideline for the puzzle in which the default goal is to follow the changing word orientations and figure out a seven-word poem. Likewise, Zhang Chao's reading puzzles invite the player to follow a complex non-linear trajectory of words to make out one or more poems, lyrics, or songs.

In this chapter, I invite you to take on this challenge to solve some complex reading puzzles. Please bear in mind that being mesmerized and confused by them is part of the experience. Celebrate any success or failure. Enjoy the moments when your flow of reading is interrupted by these puzzles. Please also remember that although the puzzles we will play are in a printed book, historically they could be circulated separately in manuscripts. Zhang Chao once sent some sketches for friends to try out. Friends would compete with one another on how many puzzles they could successfully read through. A skillful player who mastered the design principles would develop new puzzles on their own. Nevertheless, the reading guidelines attached to each puzzle make it possible for us to join the historical players. While we understand these puzzles through solving them, we experience a series of creative applications of the Chinese writing system. Methods of dissecting and reassembling the graphic components of Chinese characters, disrupting and reorganizing the sentence order become the fundamental ways

to represent, record, and perceive the external world and the things in it. If writing and publishing *Faint Dream Shadows* stands for one of Zhang Chao's attempts to reconceptualize a "book," *Small Brocades* urges us to reconsider what "reading" itself meant for him and a broader early modern public even on the word level. *Small Brocades* thus serves as Zhang Chao's mindful response to his own view of "reading books": Whether it is games or natural landscapes, with the transformative power of reading, those "good at reading" can always turn them into "books."

Designing *Small Brocades*: In-between Text, Image, and Object

Around 1707, Zhang Chao published *Small Brocades*. This collection comprises one hundred reading puzzles.[5] Zhang had long harbored the intention to print such a book, yet for lack of funds, he could only circulate several handmade samples of what he called "playful works" 遊戲之作 among his friends.[6] The name of the book was perhaps inspired by an earlier collection of similar games, *Brocade Fragments of the Turning Sphere* (*Xuanji suijin* 璇璣碎錦) compiled by the early Qing lyric poet and playwright Wan Shu 萬樹 (style name: Hongyou 紅友, 1630–1688).[7] As Zhang notes in the editorial statement, Wan's collection became a prototype

[5] This estimated publication year is based on a dated preface by the female reader An Xianjing 庵賢靜. For an introduction to the three published editions of the book, see Suyoung Son, *Writing for Profit*, 216–18.

[6] Zhang Chao sent such samples to multiple friends, while he kept mentioning that he lacked the financial support to print these games. See *Chidu oucun* 尺牘偶存, *juan* 10, 1:b–2:1; *juan* 11, 6:b; *juan* 11, 17a-b; 19:a.

[7] *Brocade Fragments of the Turning Sphere* embodies a moving history of repeated loss and recovery. As its title "brocade fragments"—a title assigned by its publisher, the monk Honglun 宏倫, a friend of Wan Shu—betrays, the collection has never been complete since Wan Shu's death. These fragments were lost and retrieved multiple times. In the end, in order to avoid another loss and prevent the manuscript from falling into someone's hands as private property, Honglun chose to publish it. Decades later, Yang Lingxiao 楊凌霄, the father of Yang Fuji, obtained a copy of the book. He played the games in the book with his friend Shen Rengfang 沈紉芳, competing with each other on how many poetic lines they could successfully read. The two planned to complete the one hundred images, with each redesigning twenty. However, due to Shen's unexpected death, Yang was ultimately unable to retrieve his friend's designs. Even an attempt to supplement the collection like this was in vain. Though beyond the scope of this chapter, this complex (after)life story of *Brocade Fragments* is worth further exploration

that motivated him to create a version his own: upon discovering some minor flaws in Wan's games, Zhang attempted to figure out the principles and design many similar games himself.[8] Zhang was, so to speak, a reader-player who also became an author-designer.

The notion of "brocades" 錦 shared by both titles clearly alludes to the "palindrome brocade" of Su Hui. Nonetheless, what distinguishes Zhang's brocades is a diversity of imaginative surfaces to which the words are attached. Each surface is rendered as an object (*wu* 物); texts could appear on nearly "any kind of object in the world" 天下之物—a screen, a book cover, a medicine chest, an abacus, prayer beads, and a Go board, among others. Gu Cai 顧彩 (1650–1718), an early Qing playwright and a close friend of Zhang, explicates the design principles of his reading puzzles, especially the clever ways in which words are organically wedded with varied object surfaces:

> The filling and contraction of its words and sentences were all arranged according to the size and shape of the object images. [You] can read it horizontally or backwards. Sometimes, [you] may read it repeatedly without being bored by any repetition; sometimes, sentences may split into pieces without your being aware of any fragmentation. As for the corners and places that borrow one another, all are as if made by heaven and earth. There is no image that was deliberately made similar. Each image exhausts the vicissitudes of change yet never veers away from the guiding principle.
>
> 其字句之盈縮，皆隨物象之大小方圓而佈置之，可以橫讀、倒讀，或屢犯而不厭其重，或割裂而不覺其碎，若其轉關鬬角，彼此互借之處，亦皆如天造地設，非有意於雷同者，極之千變萬化而不離其宗.[9]

insofar as it suggests the ephemerality of such a book of games on the one hand, and calls attention to the issues of its authorship, readership, and ownership on the other hand. All the information is derived from the prefaces and postscripts written by Honglun, Yang Lingxiao, as well as Yang Fuji. See *Xuanji suijin* 璇璣碎錦, in *Zhaodai congshu*, *dingji* 丁集, *juan* 10.

[8] *Fanli*, *Xi'nang cunjin*. Meanwhile, according to Zhang Chao's letter to his friend Nie Sheren 聶攝人, Zhang himself had seen both the manuscript (*xieben* 寫本) and the printed versions (*keben* 刻本) of the book. The printed version includes sixty games, while the manuscript comprises another forty games. Eager to keep a complete version (*quanbi* 全璧) of Wan Shu's collection, Zhang asked Nie to lend him the manuscript so that he could copy them on his own. See *Chidu oucun*, *juan* 10, 2:b.

[9] Gu Cai, preface to *Xi'nang cunjin*.

The notion of "object image" 物象 is worth attending to. The conception of image (*xiang* 象) embodies a complex set of meanings in Chinese philosophical writings. These range from "the appearance of physical things, the images produced in the mind, [to] the suprasensory 'Great Image' (*daxiang* 大象) or 'Image Shadowy 象罔' of the Dao, and the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Book of Changes*."[10] For Gu, the specific use of "image" predominantly foregrounds the discrepancy between an object in pictorial representation and in reality. An image, in other words, denotes a process of visual translation that transforms an object into a depiction resembling the object.[11]

One sleight of hand invented by Zhang Chao is to take advantage of the pictorial qualities of Chinese characters and incorporate them into part of the larger "object image." Gu Cai noticed this crafty design praising how "[Zhang] took images from objects. Some objects were composed of certain words, all of which were integrated into the lines without obvious traces" 取象於物，物所應有一定之文字，皆令攝入句，毫無痕跡.[12] According to Gu, the cunning of Zhang's puzzles lay not just in the integration of word and image, but also the harmonious fusion of the characters into the poetic lines to form a readable whole.

[10] Zong-Qi Cai, "The *Yi-Xiang-Yan* Paradigm and Early Chinese Theories of Literary Creation," in *The Rhetoric of Hiddenness in Traditional Chinese Culture*, ed. Paula M. Varsano (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 341.

[11] For a discussion of the term *xiang* (image) from an art historical perspective, see Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*, 102–4.

[12] Gu Cai, preface to *Xi'nang cunjin*.

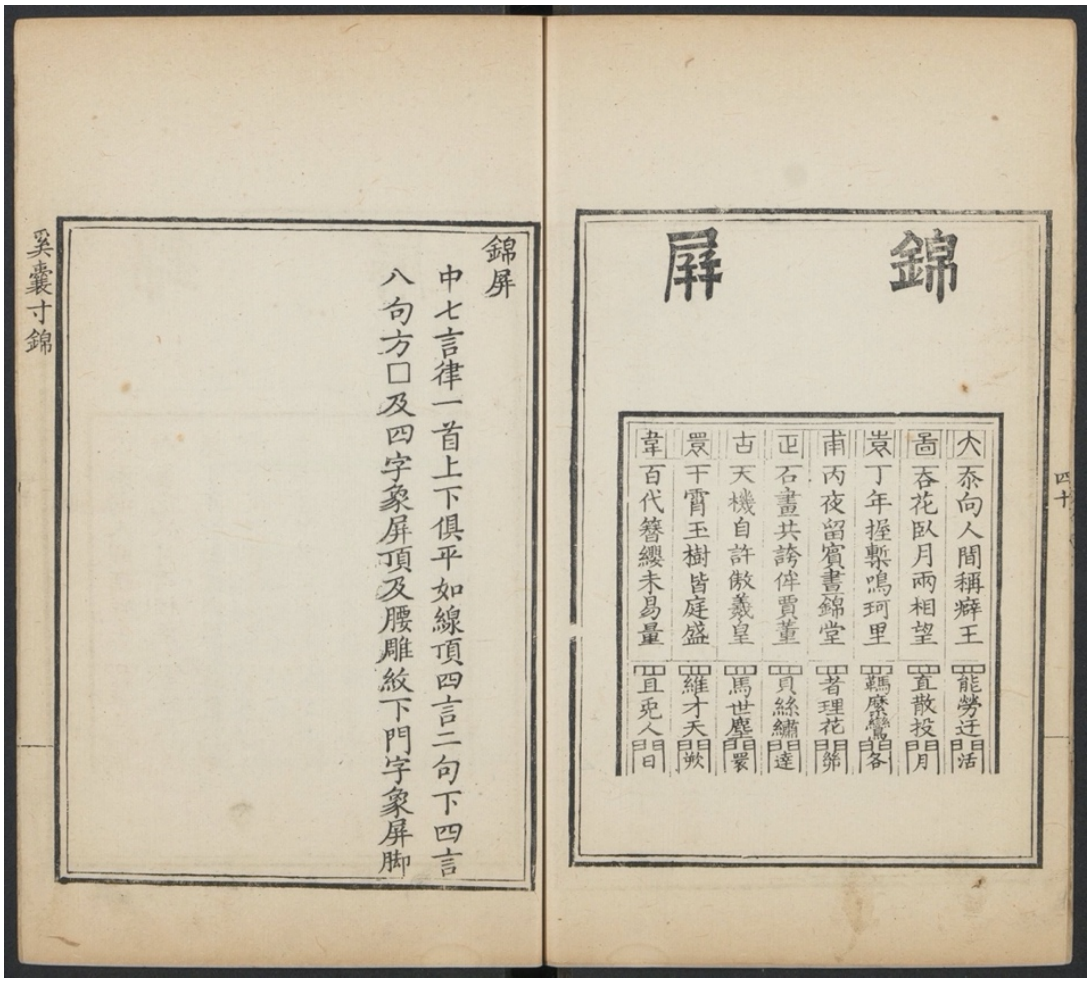

Fig. 2.2 The "Embroidered Screen" reading puzzle.

Fig. 2.3 A twelve-panel screen dated to the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries. From Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture*, 287.

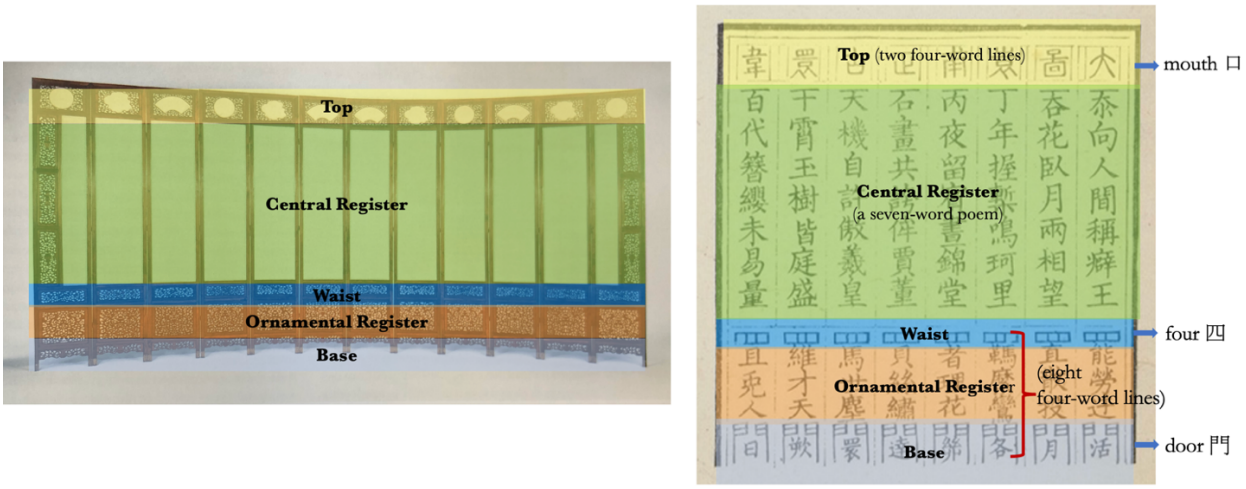

Fig. 2.4 A comparison between an actual screen and the "embroidered screen" reading puzzle. It helps to give a sense of how the graphic components mimic the different registers of an actual screen on the one hand, and of the poetic lines to look for on the other.

One example in *Small Brocades* is this "embroidered screen" 錦屏 (fig. 2.2). What Zhang Chao attempted to visualize is probably the multi-paneled folding screen (*weiping* 圍屏), a type of wood furniture consisting of an even number of panels (fig. 2.3). Each panel, from top to bottom, can be divided into several registers: usually a central register decorated with a painting or calligraphy, a waist, an ornamental register, and a base.[13] In Zhang's rendition, as he articulates in the reading guide on the left page, it is the graphic components—"mouth" (口), "four" (四), and "door" (門)—that "mimic" 象 the top, the carved decoration of the waist, as well as the base of the screen (fig. 2.4). Through these hints, Zhang invites the player to view these characters as visual components of the screen, and not to only pay attention to their semantic meanings.[14] The eyes of the player are trained to look *at* the graphs rather than look

[13] Wang Shixiang 王世襄, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu* 明式家具研究 (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1989), vol.1, 85–86.

[14] To be sure, Zhang is not the only one who executed the pictorial power of Chinese characters beyond their semantic meanings. However, scholarly attention tends to be focused on the modern era, especially on the "concrete poetry" (*tuxiang shi* 圖像詩). In particular, discussions center on the Taiwan concrete poets who

through them. Thus, it would not be hard for one to discern that all the second characters from the top and those above the character "four" share a similar graphic unit—"one" (一) that stands for the upper and bottom borders of the central panels.

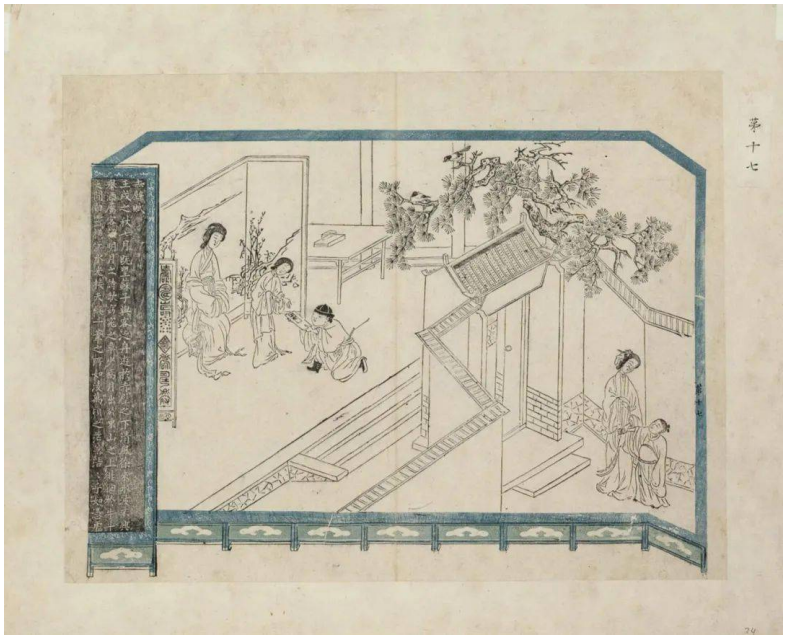

Fig. 2.5 "Yingying receives a letter with news of Student Zhang's having past the examination"; illustration for Act 17 of *The Romance of the West Chamber* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記), Min Qiji 閔齊伋 edition (1640). Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne, Germany.

In this sense, the puzzle unsettles the original distinction between text and image, as the text is turned into image, and the image is pictorially represented by the graphs. The screen is simultaneously a visual representation to be viewed from a distance *and* poems to be read as one zooms in. This text-image symbiosis is further thrown into relief through a comparison with another screen representation (fig. 2.5). The frame of the screen is elaborately illustrated in blue,

rediscovered and experimented with the "multiple uses of Chinese characters: as reactivated pictographs, as building blocks of a graphic shape, and as unlikely resemblances of signs with objects." The so-called "sinographs" thereby become powerful weapons for these literary innovators to search for language modernity and independence especially under the intercultural pressures from the West. See for instance, Andrea Bachner, *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), especially chapter 2.

especially the patterned side band and the delicate screen base.[15] To the left of this screen, one back panel is deliberately displayed with an unnatural and unsymmetrical folding angle, revealing the beginning of the *Rhapsody on Red Cliff* (*Chibi fu* 赤壁賦) written by the Northern Song poet Su Shi 蘇軾 (1307–1101). The front side of the screen itself is an image. Forming a coherent whole, it depicts two groups of figures, one inside the house and one outside, divided by a gate and walls. Within the picture, an eye-catching screen stands behind the young lady and her servants towards the left. It intentionally mirrors the structure of the outer screen—uncovering graphs of the character "longevity" (*shou* 壽) in various calligraphic styles on its back and a landscape painting on the front.

For this "double-screen," the front and back sides are approached differently based on our epistemic habits: we see the image on the front side as a unit and recognize its composition, whereas we read the text on the back sequentially from the top right to the bottom left line by line; we scan the visual depiction rather freely with one's eyes, in contrast to following a relatively strict route prescribed by the literary work; we appreciate the picture spatially, as opposed to experiencing the words temporally. Yet these habits are complicated here, once you realize that the illustration, created by Min Qiji 閔齊伋 (1580–?) in 1640, belongs to a set of twenty colored-prints, each depicting one act from the Yuan dynasty *zaju The Romance of the West Chamber* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記).[16] As a drama illustration, it is the image that needs to be decoded by drawing a connection with the original playtext. The inscribed words, however, should be viewed as decoration; any scrutiny of their semantic meanings distracts the viewer

[15] For a brief discussion of this particular illustration, especially how it comments on the screen both as a material object and as a pictorial medium, see Wu Hung, *Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 258–259.

[16] An additional front piece is a portrait of the play's heroine.

from grasping the gist of this print. That being said, text and image in this illustration still stand as two independent entities. This distinction is marked by the untraversable boundary indicated by the "double-screen" itself: text and image never appear on the same side.

Zhang Chao's "embroidered screen" blurs this boundary through keeping the symbiosis of text and image on one surface. But this design does not obscure the difference between the two mediums. Zhang encouraged two levels of engagement by the player: as an onlooker to the illustration and as a participant in the reading puzzle. Players were only considered a failure when they were unable to figure out the poetic lines (a seven-word regulated verse and two four-word ones) rather than by not realizing that the screen itself is composed of the words. That is to say, even though the reading guide prompts one to view the graphs like "four" (四) and "door" (門) as the pictorial components of the screen, for a successful player, it is essential to recognize that they are the radicals of Chinese characters. They are inseparable from the graphic components below or within to form individual and readable sentences. Accordingly, the lower half of the screen from waist to base forms a four-word verse:

> Exhausted, impractical, positioned as free, escaping to relaxation.
> Restrained to the phoenix pavilion, acting for the flower agency.
> Buying silks and embroidering gates, blaming this mundane realm.
> Seeking talents from the heavenly palace, trapping rabbits from the human world.
>
> 罷勞迂闊，置散投閒。羈縻鸞閣，署理花關。
> 買絲繡闥，罵世塵闌。羅才天闕，罝兔人間。

The ability to dissect and then reassemble the characters is at the core of Zhang Chao's reading puzzle. If we reverse-engineer his design process, it is highly possible that he needed to think up the radicals that could mimic the specific units of a screen first. With the restrictions on these radicals, he then chose suitable words to thread them into meaningful wholes for the player to identify. Gu Cai, in his preface, also hinted at Zhang Chao's train of thought in the game

design: “Meanings arise from the image, and the verses match the theme” 義以象起，詞與題稱.[17] Gu compliments Zhang on how well he integrated text, image, and object (the theme) to design the reading puzzles. Each puzzle required the designer to make subtle calculations so that mapping out an image of an object would be aligned with both the form and content of the text. Only in this way could “meanings” 義 emerge via reading a text arranged according to the “image” 象. To be sure, Gu Cai’s praise may be exaggerated, for at least in the case of the “embroidered screen,” none of the three poems is really related to the screen object. Yet this comment calls attention to a central goal of manipulating characters in Zhang Chao’s puzzles: exploiting the graphic components as a means to bridge the form with the literary content, hence making meanings while filling in the image at the same time.

In Zhang Chao’s reading puzzles, Chinese characters are the basic unit for representing various objects in the world. They belong to encyclopedic categories of “astronomy, geography, stationery, implements, and flowers and birds; their forms are different, variable, and inexhaustible” 天文、地理、文具、器用、花鳥，形象各異，荒忽變幻，不可終窮.[18] In his editorial statement, Zhang Chao provides an even more comprehensive list of the themes covered in *Small Brocades*, including seasons, people, and palaces. This categorization of the one hundred “object images” follows the common thematic organization of knowledge in contemporaneous *leishu* 類書 encyclopedias, even though a close look at the reading puzzles betrays that they do not follow any particular order. Nonetheless, such a categorization playfully aligns *Small Brocades* with other publications that were aimed to perceive, classify, and transmit knowledge of the world.

[17] Gu Cai, preface to *Xi’nang cunjin*.
[18] Gu, preface to *Xi’nang cunjin*.

These reading puzzles remind us of *Word Game.* Its gameworld is solely constructed by Chinese characters, and the player navigates by manipulating the words in creative manners. Words, to recall the game design team's aspiration, constitute an important way of seeing the world. *Small Brocades* also manifests aspects of the world through Chinese characters, both visually and semantically. But the collection must be understood against the broader fashion of manipulating Chinese characters in early modern China: being able to parse the graphs was one of the keys to perceiving and explaining the phenomenal world.[19]

To be sure, you could make a fool of yourself if you were unable to distinguish a graphic component from a character, or word(s) from a pictorial representation. This is epitomized by a joke in the seventeenth-century jokebook, the *Treasury of Laughs* (*Xiaofu* 笑府) compiled by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646):

> A person learning to write the character for ginger (*jiang* 薑) is told that he should write the grass radical (艹) on top, followed by the character one (一) beneath it, followed by the character field (田), then one (一) again, field (田) again, and finally one (一) again at the bottom. After he's finished, he savors the pictograph for a while and becomes suspicious, saying, "That guy is a cheater! There's no such word. This is obviously a pagoda.
>
> 有問薑字如何寫者，對以草字頭，次一字，次田字，又一字，又田字，又一字。其人寫草壹田壹田壹，完，玩之，罵曰："如何誑我！那有此字。分明是一座寶塔兒."[20]

[19] From a scholarly side, the late Ming witnessed the publication of a series of dictionaries that "attempted to reveal a consistent logic underlying the formation of Chinese graphs, which could influence how people acted in the world." These dictionaries were written by scholars of Neo-Confucianism. They believed that the written language is a framework of perception through which they could understand how the sages' minds operated. Interestingly, these dictionaries were also thematically organized like those encyclopedias. See Nathan Vedal, *The Culture of Language in Ming China: Sound, Script, and the Redefinition of Boundaries of Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), chapter 3.

[20] Ping-ching Hsu, *Feng Menglong's* Treasury of Laughs: *A Seventeenth-Century Anthology of Traditional Chinese Humor* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 42.

In this joke, there are three consecutive misunderstandings of the person learning written words: first, misconstruing the abbreviated grass radical on top (艹) (*caozitou* 草字頭) as the grass character (草); second, confusing "the character one" (一) with the homophonic *yi* 壹; and third, viewing the entire erroneous compound as an image that looks like a pagoda (fig. 2.6). The humor of the joke culminates when the person gradually goes more and more astray from the other person's instructions which in turn, reveal some basic requisites for literacy. At least, a literate person was accustomed to explaining how to write a Chinese character by dissecting it into several graphic components including its radical, no matter whether each component speaks to the semantic meaning(s) of the "ginger" character (*jiang* 薑).[21]

[21] It is worth pointing out that *jiang* 薑, and its formal version *jiang* 薑 in the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 belong to the category of "semantic-phonetic" (*xingsheng* 形聲) among the six principles of character formation (*liushu* 六書) by Xu Shen 許慎 (58–148CE), with the grass radical indicating its nature as a plant and *jiang* 彊 suggesting its pronunciation. This gloss is shared in the late Ming dictionary *Zihui* 字彙 and its follower the early Qing imperial dictionary *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典, clearly divergent from the explication in Feng Menglong's joke. See Mei Yingzuo 梅膺祚, *Zihui* (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1991), 414.

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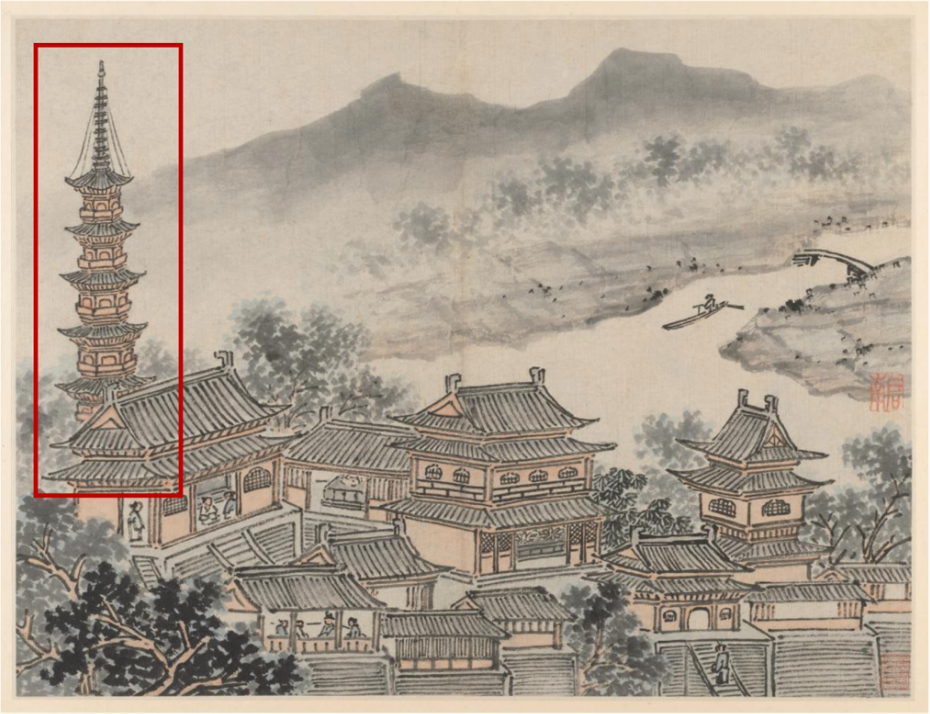


Fig. 2.6 A comparison between the pagoda-like character mentioned in Feng Menglong's joke and a pagoda in an album leaf (from Shen Zhou 沈周 [1427–1509], "Twelve Views of Tiger Hill, Suzhou: The Thousand Buddha Hall and the Pagoda of the 'Cloudy Cliff' Monastery," ink and color on paper, Cleveland Museum of Art).

On the other end, being capable of manipulating Chinese characters does not necessarily require following the "six principles of graphic formation" 六書 based on the framework of graphic analysis in the first-century dictionary, the *Explanation of Simple and Complex Graphs* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字).[22] Rather, how to parse graphs largely depends on one's intention. In addition to the case of Zhang Chao's reading puzzles, the creative manipulation of Chinese written words is also encapsulated in the concept of "sparking" (*chu* 觸, lit. "touch" or "contact") proposed by the seventeenth-century scholar-official Zhou Liangong 周亮工 (style name:

[22] These six principles are: "pictographic" (*xiangxing* 象形), "indicative" (*zhishi* 指事), "compound meaning" (*huiyi* 會意), "phonetic loan" (*jiajie* 假借), "semantic-phonetic" (*xingsheng* 形聲), and "turned and annotated" (*zhuanzhu* 轉註).

Yuanliang 元亮, 1612–1672). Zhou was a member of Zhang's coterie. In 1667, he compiled and published a book entitled *Sparking Characters* (*Zichu* 字觸), a collection of anecdotes centering on the exegesis of Chinese characters. It covers a wide range of situations where character manipulation serves as a method, ranging from dream interpretation and glymphomantic divination, to orthography riddles and witty repartee.[23] "Sparking" is the guiding principle of these assorted anecdotes. Fang Wen 方文 (1612–1669), one of the book's preface writers, takes a stab at defining the ambiguous term "sparking" in the title: "Sparking means to spark [the meaning] in accordance with [your] intention. Induce the evidence and extend it. It needs not be the original meaning of the character" 觸者，隨意所觸，引而伸之，不必其字本義也.[24] Fang's interpretation was mainly based on one of the six principles of character formation, "compound meaning" (*huiyi* 會意): each character is regarded as a combination of several individual characters. For Fang, the key to "sparking" lies not in excavating the original meaning of a character, but in cannily dissecting the character to "extend" it and come up with a new explanation. Thus, the place name or surname Wu 吴 (口+天) can be construed as "supporting a mouth (口) for heaven (天)" 為天承口, and "out" (*chu* 出) can be glossed as "a hill upon a hill" 山上山.[25] But for the complier Zhou Liangong, the concept of "sparking" is not confined to the technique of dissecting characters. Although he does not directly define what he means by "sparking," Zhou provides some clues in his editorial statement that introduces the principles of the six chapters of the *Zichu* in sequential order. The exegesis of the second chapter "Outside" 外

[23] For a book-length comprehensive study of the *Zichu*, see Anne Schmiedl, *Chinese Character Manipulation in Literature and Divination: The* Zichu *by Zhou Lianggong (1612–1672)* (Leiden: Brill, 2020). Chapter 4 of this dissertation will deal more with riddles and their transformations in theater.

[24] English translation modified from Schmiedl, *Chinese Character Manipulation*, 99.

[25] Fang Wen, "*Zichu xu*," 1:b.

部 is of particular importance. It alone stands in for the general fundamentals (*dazhi* 大旨) of the entire book. Zhou puts forward, "The meaning made of 'outside' (*wai*) is no different from 'sparking' (*chu*). That is, [you can] take a character and either dissect it and recombine its components, or connect it with several characters to make an extended meaning" 外之為義，與觸無殊。因一字而離合，連數字為引申.[26] Following Anne Schmiedl's analysis in her study of the *Zichu*, "sparking" here is more concerned with the creative process to realize the true meaning in reality outside the text. Dissecting a character or connecting several characters is a means to accomplish this goal. Most anecdotes in this "Outside" chapter are concerned with glymphomantic divinations. Usually, a well-known diviner dissected one or more characters for someone to make specific predictions. This foretold future, then, is the so-called "outside" that is "sparked" by the diviner. Even so, such a conclusion would risk oversimplifying the actual interpretive techniques applied by these diviners. One account is of particular interest for our discussion here. It concerns Zheng Yangtian 鄭仰田 (1555–1639), who was described by the scholar-official Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664) as a "marvelous person" 異人 talented at glymphomancy.[27]

> When Master Ni Yuanlu 倪元璐 (sobriquet: Hongbao 鴻寶, 1594–1644) was Chancellor of the Imperial Academy, he was at odds with [the Grand Secretary], Wen Tiren 溫體仁 (1573–1639) from Wucheng county, so he intended to resign from the government. Ni encountered Zheng at a banquet hosted by some official. At first, he did not tell Zheng his name, only throwing a red four on a die and asking Zheng to make a divination. Zheng said: "The only fourth-rank official in the capital who grasps power is the Chancellor. Sir, are you Chancellor Ni?" Ni nodded. Zheng responded: "You must be at odds with a power-holder [at court], whose name contains the 'bone' (*gu* 骨) graph—this throw refers to him because a die is made of bone and the edges and corners of each facet cannot be carved incorrectly. Therefore, I know that you are not getting along well. Are you planning to resign? Your wish must come true because the shape of a die resembles the

[26] English translation modified from Schmiedl, *Chinese Character Manipulation*, 176.

[27] For Qian's account of Zheng Yangtian, see Qian Qianyi, "Shu Zheng Yangtian shi" 書鄭仰田事, in *Yuchu xinzhi* 虞初新志 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1986), *juan* 16, 253.

graph ‘mouth’ (*kou* 口), and the [arrangement of] the four dots is like a ‘mouth’ too; together, they spell the character ‘to return’ (*hui* 回).” Afterwards, it indeed came to pass as Zheng predicted.

倪鴻寶先生為祭酒時，與烏程忤，將請告。遇鄭於官人席上，初未通名，取骰子中四紅予卜，鄭曰：“京官四品而掌印者，惟大司成耳。公其祭酒倪公邪？”公頷之。曰：“公必與當事忤，姓名中帶骨字者，其人也。蓋骰子，骨所成，而四面棱角，不能刓圓，以是知不合也。公意慫圖歸乎？必得請矣。以骰體方類口，四亦類口，乃回字也。”後果然.[28]

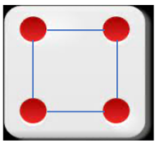


Fig. 2.7 The die’s side with four pips mimics the “*hui*” 回 character.

In lieu of dissecting a character or connecting multiple ones, the rolling of a die initiated the divination process: its four red pips denoted the fourth rank of an imperial official, and its square shape signified friction in the social relationship; even more striking is how two characters were perceived out of this tiny cube. Its material reveals the graphic component “bone” (*gu* 骨), corresponding to the second character *ti* 體 (lit. body) of Wen Tiren’s name. The die’s side with four pips was read as the character *hui* 回 (lit. to return) (fig. 2.7), since the square shape and the arrangement of the four pips composed the two “mouths” (*kou* 口) outside and inside. Once more, an object was translated into words, though with different methods from Zhang Chao’s puzzle; for the latter, specific components of the characters were borrowed to pictorially represent the screen. Whether through its material or its two-dimensional surface, a die as an object becomes readable, like a book waiting to be interpreted. Clearly, this anecdote indicates that Zheng’s reading of a die (its pattern, material, shape, and surface) to make multifarious

[28] “Touzi” 骰子, *Zichu* 字觸, in *Yueya tang congshu* 粵雅堂叢書, vol. 79, *juan* 2, 15:b–16:a. I have a more detailed discussion of dice in chapter 3.

meanings of a real situation could all be regarded as an act of "sparking," while words serve as intermediaries providing the evidence for this reading. Words are not a prerequisite in prescribing a "meaning" 義; quite the opposite, they emerge when the meaning for the real world is reached creatively.

Reading Games: The Case of Go

Fig. 2.8 The “Go Board” reading puzzle.

If the “Embroidered Screen” exemplifies how words are dissected and assembled to weave an object image, the next puzzle, “Go Board” 楸枰 (fig. 2.8), that you will play continues this exploration but also builds on the previous one. By tracing the transformation of Go-related

reading puzzles into a word-only notation system for Go,[29] I invite you to consider how a seemingly disordered thread of words can generate meanings. Zhang Chao and his friend Gu Cai repeatedly boasted about this "Go Board" puzzle in their prefatory materials. A first glance at it reveals that each word is inscribed in a circle, with characters in red standing for white stones and black for black stones. Together, they form nineteen horizontal rows with nineteen vertical columns, corresponding to the number of the grid lines and the 361 intersections of a Go board. According to the reading guide, the reader should figure out a poem composed of assorted literary and historical allusions to Go. Each line consists of five words.

[29] Generally speaking, Go, or *weiqi*, is a strategy game usually between two players. They attempt to surround the opponent's territory by taking turns placing black and white stones on grid on a "19x19" board. Sometimes, people translate Go as chess, but this is misleading. In chess, players move their pieces on a chessboard, but in Go, the stones are usually not moveable unless they are "captured," that is, totally surrounded by the opponent's stones. The game has enjoyed a very long history throughout East Asia until the present, and has been played by men and women, old and young. For an introduction to the game of Go, see Mackenzie and Finkel eds., *Asian Games*, 186–201.

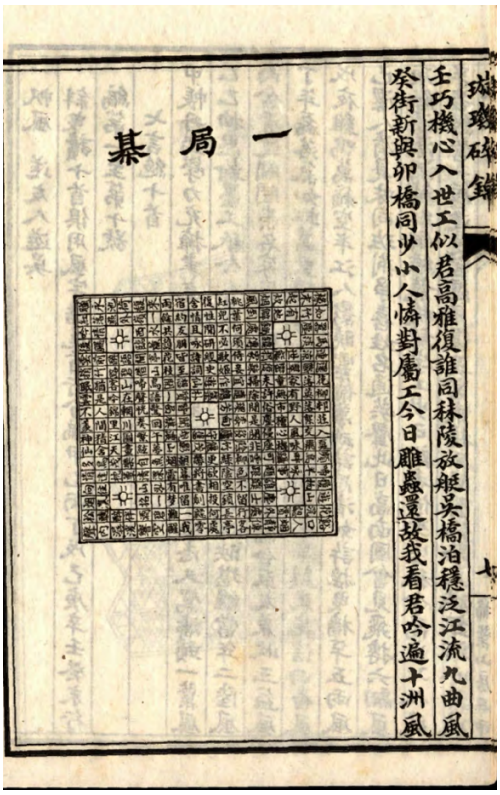
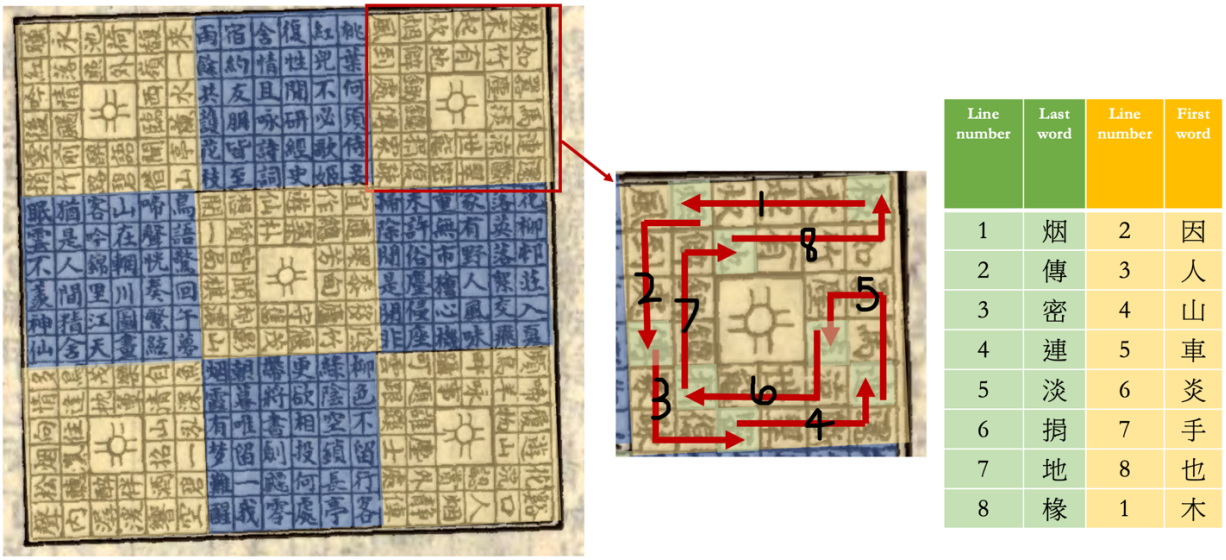


Fig. 2.9 a The "A Game of Go" reading puzzle from Wan Shu's *Xuanji suijin*.



Line number	Last word	Line number	First word
1	烟	2	因
2	傳	3	人
3	密	4	山
4	連	5	車
5	淡	6	炎
6	捐	7	手
7	地	8	也
8	椽	1	木

Fig. 2.9b The whole puzzle is composed of nine poems corresponding to the word orientations. They include five five-word poems (in yellow) and four six-word poems (in blue).
The diagram shows how to read one of the five-word poems by following the word orientation and using the tactic of character dissection and character borrowing. For each line, half of the last word also serves as the first word of the following line (see the table).

Arranging poetry on a board-like surface was not Zhang Chao's invention. Zhang himself admits in his editorial statement that he worked from a prototype in Wan Shu's *Brocade Fragments* by harmonizing the textual content of the poem about Go with the visual resemblance of the game. In the original version (fig. 2.9a), neither the "board" nor the poems are tangential to the game of Go, except for the five so-called "star" points (*shizi wei* 勢子位 or *xing wei* 星位) in the center and at the four corners. In Go, the star points signal the stone positions, and the four corners are usually the first to be occupied in a gambit. Even so, these five points are more important for flagging the areas of the nine poems under the general theme "Mountain Life in a Joyful Summer" 山居夏興. With all the words filled in the grids rather than on the intersections like the Go stones, Wan's game is more comparable to the "Brocade Palindrome" puzzle in the daily-use encyclopedia. It requires the players to follow the word orientation and piece together a poem. Wan deployed an additional tactic: character dissection and character borrowing. In each five-word regulated verse, half of the last word in each sentence also serves as the first word of the following line (fig. 2.9b).

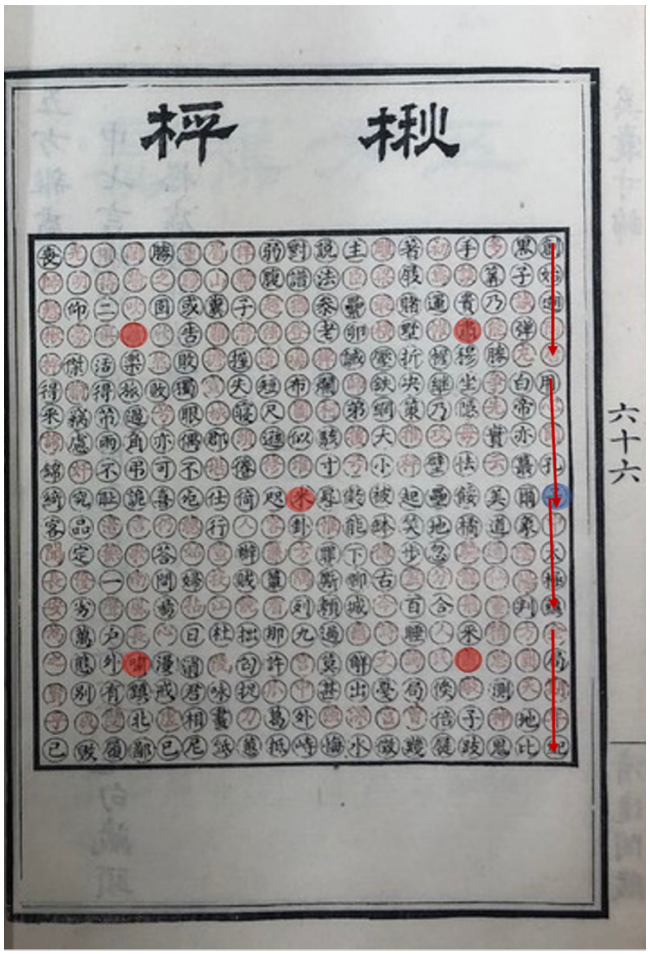


Fig. 2.10 The reading principle of the "Go Board" reading puzzle.
The five star points are marked in red. The arrows marks how the four lines should be read. The word (子→一) highlighted in blue is shared by two lines by using the method of character dissection and character borrowing.

Improving on this prototype, Zhang Chao preserved the five points as well as the character borrowing trick. This time, they are represented by the graphic component 米 embedded in the characters *su* 肃, *xiao* 萧, *xiao* 箫, *xiao* 箫, and close to the character *mi* 米. Hence, the characters can be visually viewed as the five star points and semantically read as part of the poetic lines (fig. 2.10). Without any circular manner of reading, here, the player simply needs to thread the characters linearly, from top to bottom, right to left. Still, to be consonant with the nineteenth rows of a Go board, one character in each column has to be shared to

formulate four five-word lines by using a similar method of character dissection and borrowing as in Wan's prototype. Thus, in the first four lines, the tenth word is not just the last word of the second line, but part of it serves as the first word of the third line. The content alludes to the legends about Go:

> Its origin can be traced to Yao,[30]
> To give your mind something to do, ask Confucius.[31]
> The game contains the secret of the Absolute,
> A complete game is recorded for a whole year.
>
> 創始溯陶唐, 用心聞孔子.
> 一种太極蘊，全局期年紀.

A dual approach to the reading puzzle transpires: looking at the distribution of the black and white stones, or reading the literary allusions line by line. Indeed, a discerning player would never be tricked by the image—a fictitious representation that looks like a game of Go—for they know that winning Zhang Chao's game of reading pivots on delving into the poetry directly.

[30] Yao was one of the first five legendary emperors. He was believed to have invented the game of Go for son Danzhu 丹朱.

[31] This comes from one of Confucius sayings in the *Analects*: "The Master said, Stuff yourself with food all day, never give your mind anything to do, and you're a problem! There's gambling, isn't there? There's Go, isn't there?—It is wiser at least to busy yourself with these" 子曰:飽食終日，無所用心，難矣哉！不有博弈者乎？為之猶賢乎已. English translation modified and quoted from Burton Watson trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 124.

Fig. 2.11 “Playing Go” 彈棋圖 (partial) from *Jinling baimei* 金陵百媚 (preface dated 1618). Naikaku bunkō, Tokyo, Japan.

According to Zhang Chao, Go manuals (*qipu* 棋譜) were a major source of inspiration for him to inscribe characters on Go stones. In general, a Go manual, whether in a manuscript or printed book format, is usually a collection of historically renowned or legendary games, as well as critical techniques or patterns (*shi* 勢). In this sense, a manual plays multiple roles as an archive, a learning tool, and a visualization of Go’s innumerous variations. The flourishing of the printing industry in early modern China stimulated the proliferation of individual Go manuals, along with excerpts from the Go manuals in daily-use encyclopedias or in comprehensive game manuals. The wide availability of these manuals in turn popularized knowledge of the game among a broader population of various social classes. Interestingly, in *Beauties of Jinling* (*Jingling baimei* 金陵百媚, preface dated 1618), a late Ming courtesan catalogue that ranks courtesans in Nanjing according to the civil examination system, an illustration of the junior top graduate (*zhuangyuan* 狀元) depicts the courtesan Kou Bai 寇白 sitting in a garden space

surrounded by blossoms and a Taihu rock, playing Go by herself (fig. 2.11). Although the empty seat on the lower left corner may have implied her absent opponent—a male client or a fellow courtesan—in this illustration, she was more likely pondering the game on her own. Following her line of sight, we see a Go manual in book form spread out next to the actual board, though we cannot ascertain whether she is trying to "revitalize" a famous match of the past or practicing some effective tactics from the book.

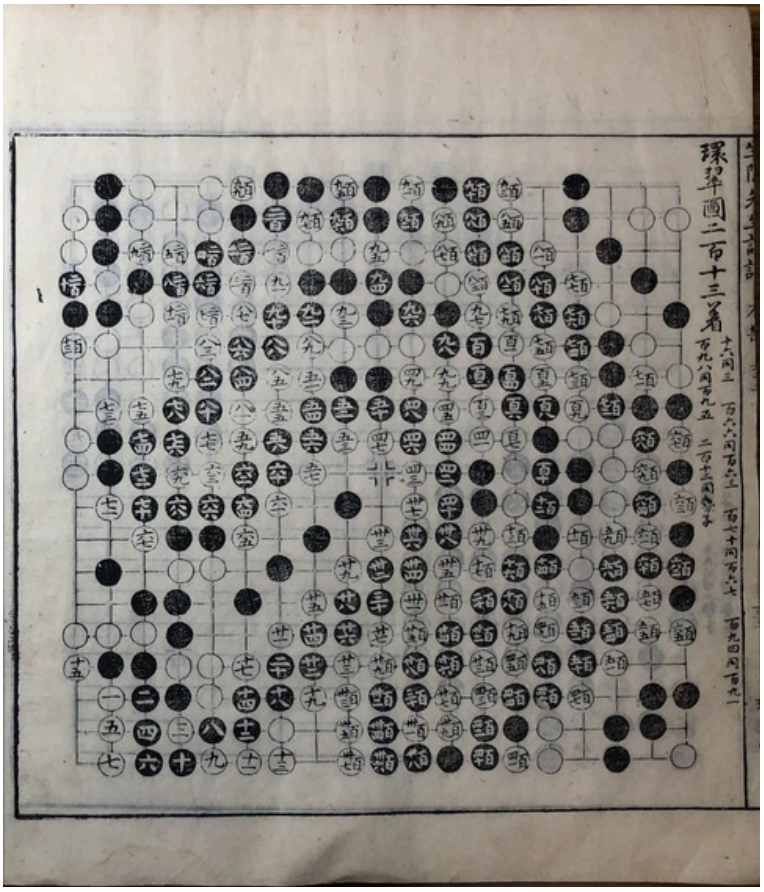


Fig. 2.12 A Go image in a Go manual, from Wang Tingne 汪廷訥 (ca.1569– after 1628) ed., *Zuoyin xiansheng jingding jiejing yipu* 坐隱先生精訂捷徑弈譜.
Huancui tang 環翠堂 edition (1609). Naikaku bunkō, Tokyo, Japan.

The illustration in *Beauties of Jinling* provides us with a glimpse of the form, usage, and possible readership of a Go manual in early modern China. If we compare it with any extant contemporaneous Go manual, we will likely be amazed at the meticulousness of the illustrator.

Rather rare to find in woodblock prints, even the inner layout of the manual is carefully rendered. A close look at an actual Go manual reveals that each page is usually occupied by an image of the game board, with black and white stones positioned on the grid intersections (fig. 2.12). What is missing in the illustration in the courtesan catalogue are the star points and the numerical Chinese characters—two components spotlighted in Zhang Chao's puzzle that have been replaced with other words. In fact, it is such a numbering system that makes it possible to reanimate the static Go images in manuals; by following the numbered order on the stones, any Go game, technique, or pattern represented on the page can be reproduced on an actual board.[32]

These images of a board and the positioned stones are called a "Go image" (*qiyu* 棋圖). They are the medium for reanimating Go games, and the numbers on the stones are notations of the sequence. Go images were the principal method of recording and reproducing Go games even prior to the print age. The use of Go images for preservation can be traced back as early as the Tang dynasty (618–907). In the *Collected Tales of the Strange* (*Jiyi ji* 集異記), a mid-Tang collection of stories of the strange composed by Xue Yongruo 薛用弱 (fl. ninth century), there is an account of how Wang Jixin 王積薪, a Hanlin academician and renowned Go player who served in the court of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756), learned extraordinary Go skills from two mysterious ladies when lodging at their place on a trip south to Shu 蜀. Despite its anecdotal and fictional nature,[33] what is worth attention in this tale are the ways in which Wang overheard and

[32] It is noteworthy that early modern literati used different verbs to describe the action of "reproducing" a Go game through a Go manual. A general survey of the prefatory texts to the late Ming and early Qing Go manuals demonstrates that one could "open and read" (*zhanyue* 展閱) a manual, "proceed in order" (*an* 按) a historically famous game according to a manual (Qian Zeng 錢曾, *Dushu minqiu ji* 讀書敏求記, *juan* 3), or "deduce according to a manual" 就譜而演 (Shao Dong 邵棟, *Yuju cangji* 玉局藏機, *fanli* 凡例), etc. With a lack of current scholarship, it is worth continuing to explore the usage and circulation of Go manuals as important cultural products against the backdrops of the entertainment culture, print culture, and book history in early modern China.

[33] The tale is discussed by Sarah M. Allen from the perspective of gossiping a historical figure, together with a series of historical accounts mentioning the same anecdote. She also touches on its structure features shared

recorded a game played by the two women. Standing outside their house, Wang suddenly heard the voice of the elder lady inviting her young daughter-in-law to spend the night playing Go with her. To Wang's astonishment, the game was played in complete darkness, and even more surprising, the two women were in separate rooms. Announcing the stone's coordinates on the grid board—"East Five, South Nine" 東五南九 followed by "East Five, South Twelve" 東五南十二—compensated for playing "blind." In turn, this made it possible for Wang (the audience) to evoke the game in his mind and later transcribe the coordinates of each move into written notes. Although how Wang "secretly recorded" the game is unstated, the end of the tale reveals that "an image of this specific game still exists today, though common people could never understand the puzzle and solve it" 至今棋圖有焉，而世人終莫得而解矣.[34] Even the Go master Wang Jixin failed. Although he spared no effort to reconstruct the game according to his notes, to the end he remained bewildered at how the old lady won nine more stones within only thirty-six turns. Like many other Tang dynasty strange tales, the story ends with the two ladies vanishing together with the residence, and perhaps nothing other than the notes and the Go image remaining as the sole material trace of this unusual encounter. Yet comparable to the anecdotal essence of the tale as a piece of hearsay written down by Xue Yongruo, the unfathomable notes are in the end proof of the extraordinariness of the game itself and the account in general.

If we step back, we can see that the tale raises a basic question about how a game of Go can be played, recorded, and reproduced without visually depicting a board and stones. The grid arrangement, as the tale suggests, led to a coordinate system wherein each intersection was

by many contemporaneous strange encounter tales. See Allen, *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip, and Lore in Narratives from Tang Dynasty China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 116–17, 143–44. For the story see Xue Yongruo 薛用弱, *Jiyi ji* 集異記, Ming Jiajing 嘉靖 edition (1522), 1.2a–3b.

[34] Xue, *Jiyi ji*, 3:b.

represented by two coordinates, namely, the number of the vertical line (*lu* 路) plus that of the horizontal line. Besides using the four directions to indicate the four sides, a board could also be divided into four even areas marked by *ping* 平 (lower left), *shang* 上 (upper left), *qu* 去 (upper right), and *ru* 入 (lower right)—originally terms for the four tones of the Chinese language (fig. 2.13). Words sometimes substituted for the numbers. The northern Song literatus Xu Xuan 徐鉉 (916–991) was credited with designating each of the nineteen lines by a character, hence "*ri ri*" 日日 signifying the central point.[35]

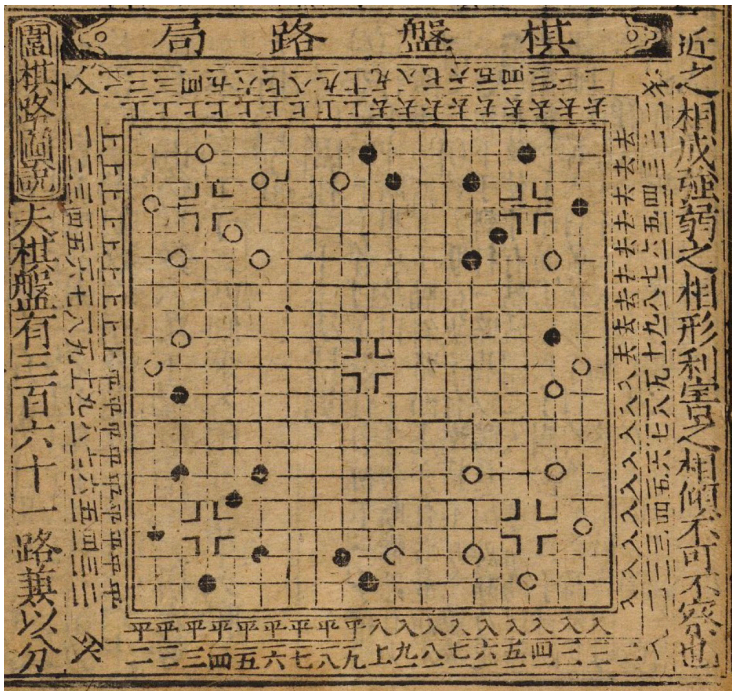
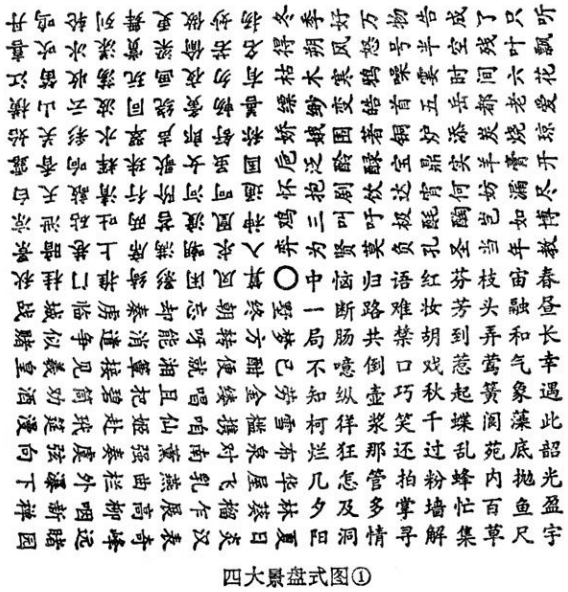


Fig. 2.13 A Go board marked by *ping*, *shang*, *qu*, and *ru*.
From *Miaojin wanbao quanshu*, Anzheng tang edition (1612).

[35] This coordinate system is recorded in *Zhenzhu chuan* 珍珠船 (*Peral Boat*), a notation book written by the late Ming literatus Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639). According to Chen, as the four-area system always led confusion, Xu Xuan adjusted it by assigning each line with a character. Respectively from the first line to the nineteenth line, they were "一天，二地，三寸，四時，五行，六宮，七斗，八方，九州，十日，十一冬，十二月，十三閏，十四維，十五望，十六相，十七星，十八松，十九客." Apparently, the word selection was purposeful, as the character with its corresponding number form a meaningful phrase. One of the exceptions is the character "pine" (*song* 松) which could be dissected into "ten" (*shi* 十), "eight" (*ba* 八), and "gentleman" (*gong* 公). Here, "*shiba song*" 十八松 was possibly alluding to this character dissection.



四大景盘式图①

Fig. 2.14 A modern reconstruction of the word-only coordinate system.

In one extreme version of this coordinate system, each of the 361 intersections except for the central point is represented by a different word. As the modern reconstruction demonstrates, four poems are arranged on a "19x19" grid with the words arranged in four orientations (fig. 2.14). In fact, this develops from the seventeenth-century fad for reading puzzles. More specifically, it belongs to a particular reading puzzle known as "poetry board" (*shiping* 詩枰) or "poetry inscribed on a board" (*xiepan shi* 寫盤詩), namely, one or more poems organized in the format of a Go board, with words arranged in different orientations. In 1609, Wang Tingne 汪廷訥 (sobriquet: Master Zuoyin 坐隱, ca.1569– after 1628), an Anhui merchant, playwright, publisher, and Go aficionado printed a Go manual for sale in his privately-owned publishing house Hall of Encircled Jade (*Huancui tang* 環翠堂).[36] Using square paper specially designed to

[36] In the title page of this manual, the central advertisement states that it is "complemented by the words, poems, *ci* lyrics, songs, and *fu* rhapsodies presented by famous masters from all over the land. These writings are carved in all known script forms without omission. Buyers are cautioned to check that their copy contains 593 sheets to ensure their complete satisfaction " 訂譜全書乃活套分類全局棋譜，並海內名公贈言詩詞歌賦，真草篆隸無不備具，共計五百玖拾陸張，買者須查組數方為全玩.

Scholarship on Wang Tingne mainly centers on is publishing business, especially the delicate illustrated books published by his Huancui Tang, with very little attention paid to his fond for Go. Most scholarship has been

appropriate the shape of a Go board, this *Manual of Shortcuts for Playing the Game of Go* (*Zuoyin xiansheng jingding jiejing yipu* 坐隱先生精訂捷徑弈譜) was further transformed into a social space. In the manual, prefaces, poems, lyrics, songs, and rhapsodies written by Wang's coterie in various calligraphic forms, together with a series of reading puzzles, largely outnumber the Go images. Remarkably, the manual proper does not conclude with a Go image but with a "poem on a plate" (*panzhong shi* 盤中詩) recounting the scenery of his own garden (fig. 2.15). Wang claimed that it followed the particular palindromic form of a poem inscribed on a round plate attributed to the wife of Su Boyu 蘇伯玉 in the Jin dynasty (266–420). Yet this is actually a "poetry board." An invisible Go board with a "19x19" grid substitutes for a circular plate. When "inscribed" on this invisible board, the poem becomes a reading puzzle no different from the ones we have seen before where the orientation of the words serves as the key to reading the text through.

written by art historians, see for instance, Lin Li-chiang, "Wang Tingne Unveiled through the Study of the late Ming Woodblock-Printed Book *Renjing Yangqiu*," *Bulletin de l'Ecole francaise d'Extreme-Orient* 95/96 (2008–2009): 291–329; Mao Rongrong 毛茸茸, *Renjian weike ci: "Huancui tang yuanjing tu" xinkao* 人間未可辭：《環翠堂園景圖》新考 (Hangzhou: Zhongguo meishu xueyuan chubanshe, 2014).

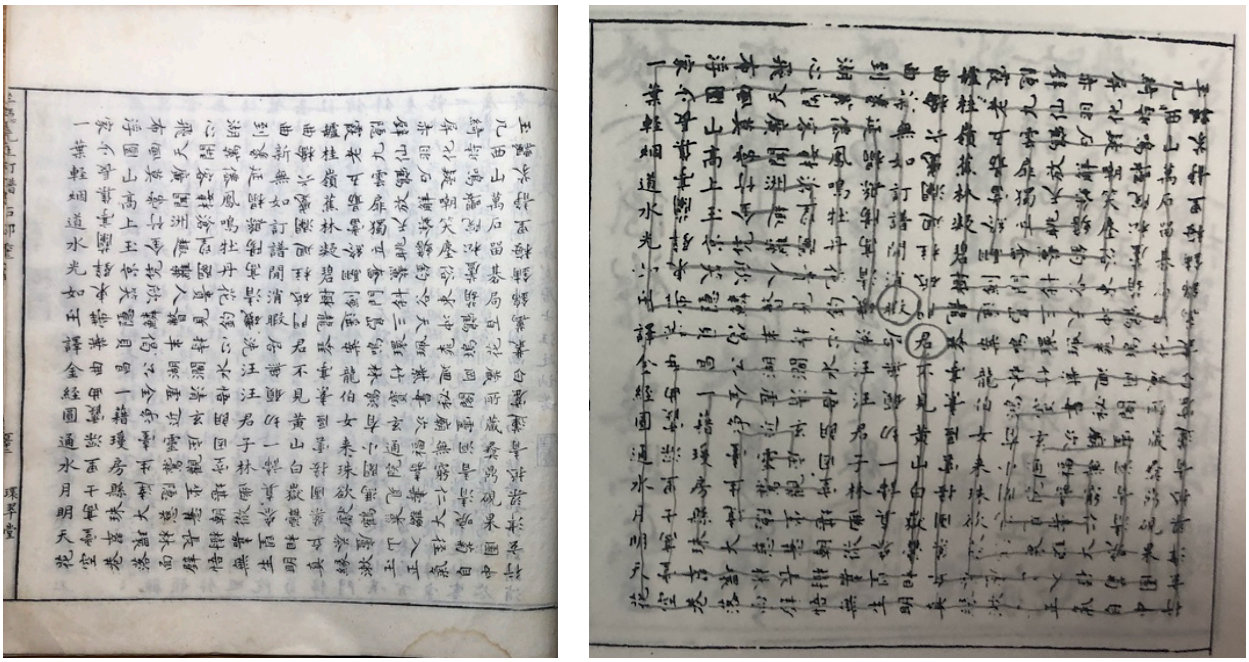


Fig. 2.15 “A Poem on a Plate” from *Zuoyin yipu.*

In the winter of 1725, Wu Xinche 巫信車 (style name: Hegu 鶴谷, fl. eighteenth century), whose identity is otherwise unknown, spent three months editing and finally publishing a revised edition of the *Manual of Three-Stone Handicaps* (*Shou sanzi pu* 受三子譜). Sixty-nine years had passed since the manual was first completed by the late Ming Go master Guo Wennian 過文年 (style name: Bailing 百齡, 1587–1660). It endured after a series of losses and rediscoveries during the turmoil of the dynastic transition. In addition to revising the missing parts of the manual, Wu further reformed the notation method. He modified the original Go images to a word-only coordinate system following the “poetry board” format. As an advocate for this system, Wu explains that a player could

> look at the words in the manual following the order of first a white stone and then a black one, and then refer to the positioned words in the original board. It is clear and straightforward, without any risk of making a mistake. One would also avoid the trouble of looking for [the numbered stones]. Compared to the usual Go manuals, mine takes less time and will not harm the eyesight.

> 凡打譜者，白先黑後看譜上之字，依次著於盤上之字，明白爽快，並無錯誤之疑，且免尋覓之苦，不比平常弈譜多費時光，有傷目力也.[37]

Whether historical readers found this notation method efficient is unknown, but the rarity of the extant manuals applying such a system most likely implies its small audience. As Wu mentions, this notation system consists of "(four) ancient poems written on a Go board" 寫枰古詩 (四首). Each poem, which starts with one of the four seasons, is a celebration of the philosophical depth and technical sophistication of the game of Go. They are inscribed on a Go board in four orientations like the mark "卍" ("*wanzi*" 万字; see fig. 2.14 for a modern reconstruction). The users of the manual should "learn [the poems] by heart and think carefully"熟讀細味. Only when the users have grasped the secrets embedded in these poems can they begin to apply them as a notation system. The last of the four poems reads:

> The north wind blows snow away; in the winter coldness, only pine trees are awake.
> In a tiny room, [people] warm the tasty wine, circling around the stove while drumming on the board.
> [The game] carefully exhausts the images of heaven and earth, originally corresponding to the zodiac degrees (three hundred and sixty degrees).
> While [the forces of] Yin and Yang wax and wane, it is easy for speculations to be ambiguous.
> Meticulously exploring the utmost depth, looking around to embrace the four corners.
> Ambushes lurk amid supportive strategies, be cautious to avoid careless defenses.
> [You should] expect winning without losing, these must initiate one to covet.
> When facing danger, [you] also need to be calm, for still waters run deep.
> If [you] desire [your] techniques to reach the level of immortals, please consult the image of the game between [that legendary] mother and her daughter-in-law.
>
> 北風吹亂雪，冬寒松獨蘇。密室暖醽醁，敲枰圍火爐。
> 細窮天地象，躔度本相符。陰陽互消長，推測易模糊。
> 精微探至奧，顧盼周四隅。策應左右伏，戒謹防范粗。
> 預期得毋失，肯令萌覬覦。遇險亦沉寂，大智乃若愚。
> 技巧通仙道，請看姑婦圖.[38]

[37] Lin Jianchao 林建超 ed., *Yilun* 弈論 (Beijing: Jingji kexue chubanshe, 2017), 463.
[38] Lin ed., *Yilun*, 462.

After describing a game set inside a cozy room on a wintry night, the poem shifts to the essence of Go, highlighting the board design and game variations corresponding to cosmology. From the fifth couplet onward, the focus turns to a series of general gameplay strategies and advice. The entire poem culminates in the image of the legendary game between the two ladies in Wang Jixin's story. Now it becomes an allusion standing in for all exceptional techniques matching the level of immortals.

Upon being transformed into a coordinate system, the poems were destined to become disordered. Each word signifies a coordinate on the board, and every game generates a sequence of words corresponding to the stone positions. Here is how the system might have worked. Let us take the first ten moves in fig. 2.12 as an example and translate them according to the modern reconstruction of the word-only coordinate system (fig. 2.14). What we see are ten Chinese characters: "*pu wai liu yan xin*, *yuan du gao qi feng*" 瀑外柳咽新遠睹高奇峰. To make sense of these seemingly disordered and insignificant words, we need to decode the words and figure out the stone positions on the board. Then, we can further make sense of them: the first ten moves show how the white stones are trying to free themselves from the encirclement of the black stones.

These disordered words, in this sense, set up a new order which is only discernible when one knows the working of the word-only notation system. They train readers in a new way of reading: one needs to correlate the words to the stone positions first; only then could narratives about the contested territories, waxing and waning tensions between the two players, as well as winning and losing be decoded and emerge. Of course, the secret of Go is already contained in the four poems, but it only becomes tangible when they are applied to notate the games and turned into disordered word sequences. This is an extreme case: with words as the basic unit, a

reading game (a puzzle requiring one to link the poetic lines according to the changing word orientations) is ultimately developed into a medium by which to read games.

How to Play Go with a Ghost

I will conclude this chapter with an account by the eighteenth-century scholar–official Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724-1805) in his notation book *Random Jottings from the Cottage of Close Scrutiny* (*Yuewei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記). If the Go image in Wang Jixin's story materialized an extraordinary game between two mysterious ladies, it was in this eighteenth century account that this world and the otherworld could communicate through writing and reading words, thus making Go playable between a human being and an invisible ghost. Ji Yun's account concerned the defeat of a ghost by Cheng Nianlun 程念倫, a top Go master during the Qianlong reign, in a Go game sometime between 1753 and 1754 when he was staying at Ji's residence in Beijing. But here the ghost never appeared. Rather, the game was realized through spirit writing (*fuji* 扶乩), a practice of passive writing through a planchette favored by the Ming and Qing literati to communicate with supernatural beings of various kinds.[39] Here is how the game began:

> The first moves of the ghost [who claimed to be talented at Go] were quite baffling. Nianlun suspected an impenetrable gambit devised by supernatural intelligence, and feared for his reputation. He pondered and brooded, and was reduced to sweating and trembling before he resolved to place his own counters, though still with his heart in his mouth. However, as the game went on, he seemed to decide there was nothing out of the ordinary in the ghost's play, and he launched an attack that comprehensively routed the ghost's troops. At that the room exploded in an uproar.

[39] For studies on spirit writing, see for example, Goyama Kiwamu 合山究, "Min Shin no bunjin to okaruto shumi" 明清の文人とオカルト趣味, in *Chūka bunjin no seikatsu* 中華文人の生活, ed. Arai ken 荒井健 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1994), 469–502; and Vincent Goossaert, *Making the Gods Speak: The Ritual Production of Revelation in Chinese Religious History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2022).

初下數子，念倫茫然不解，以為仙機莫測也，深恐敗名，凝思冥索，至背汗手顫，始敢應一子，意猶惴惴。稍久，似覺無他異，乃放手攻擊，乱仙竟全局覆沒，滿室嘩然.[40]

In the end, through the planchette, the ghost confessed his deception. He had only pretended to be the Daoist master Zhang Sanfeng 張三豐; he had limited knowledge of Go, and was merely a wandering spirit who had dropped into the spirit writing session to seek pleasure.

Indeed, the comic turn of this account mocks a more common narrative regarding supernatural Go players: as manifested in the tale of Wang Jixin, the unintelligibility of an immortal's moves always indicates their exceptional Go skills. But a question remains: without sitting face to face, how could the two players participate in the contest via spirit writing? Ji Yun's explanation demystifies the whole narrative:

> As for a Go manual, the number corresponds to the [order of] the stones. For *xiangqi* 象棋 (literally "elephant" or "figure" chess), the number accords with the [intersection of] the vertical and the horizontal lines. To play Go with a spirit and a planchette, the numerical method for *xiangqi* is followed. For example, the intersection of the ninth vertical line with the third horizontal line would be written as "nine-three." And so on.
>
> 凡弈譜，以子紀數。象戲譜，以路記數。與乩仙弈，則以象戲法行之。如縱第九路橫第三路下子，則判曰:"九三。"余皆仿此.[41]

To be sure, this answer will come as no surprise after our explorations of more complex notation systems for Go games. Yet what is of importance here is that this story reveals that when a physical Go board was replaced by a planchette, whether it was a tray of sand or a piece of paper, the acts of writing, reading, and responding to the words stood in for placing the stones by turn. This account, together with the examples throughout the chapter, brings to the fore how games could reflect on and prompt multifarious textual engagements on a word level. These

[40] Ji Yun, *Real Life in China at the Height of Empire: Revealed by the Ghosts of Ji Xiaolan*, trans. David E. Pollard (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2014), 79–80.

[41] Translation modified from Pollard trans., *Real Life in China at the Height of Empire*, 79.

engagements that we can call "play," ranging from dissecting and reassembling Chinese characters to decoding a sequence of disordered words, become means to perceive, record, and make sense of the real world. If, according to Zhang Chao, there is nothing that cannot become a book for those who are good at reading, I want to suggest that this does not only imply a changing and extensive view of "reading books" in early modern China. The versatility of Chinese written characters as pictorial, semantic, and syntactic units fueled a wide range of creative reading methods that took place beyond the book pages. It is games that throw these methods into relief.

Ji Yun's account can also be read as a foil to the author-reader interactions. The author was comparable to the invisible spirit in the story whose words alone were present. If that is the case then what moves would readers make in reaction to these words? In the following chapters, we will continue to explore this question while moving from the graphic and sentence levels to the narratives in short stories and dramas. Unlike the reading puzzles with explicit *dufa*, the latter usually offer implicit reading guides. This leads us to two other reading games, namely, gambling and riddling. Please keep reading, as the games continue.

CHAPTER THREE

The Romance of Gambling

Lives are lost over the love of money,
For money and life are rolled into one.
總為惜財喪命，方知財命相連.
Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646)[1]

The romance of gambling is in the episode,
as the gambler seeks this particular moment again and again
and resists combining episodes into a longer narrative,
a narrative that would perforce suggest walking away from the tables.
Jessica Richard[2]

If possible, please take out a pair of dice. Closely scrutinize, handle, and toss them. What do you see and feel? In the previous chapter, in the anecdote between Chancellor Ni Yuanlu and diviner Zheng Yangtian, a die was turned into an object to be read carefully, of which every aspect—its shape, material, and dot pattern—could be a message hinting at one's fate. Here, let us return to this anecdote from the *Zichu* and reread it with another question in mind: What does it tell us about dice, the things you may be toying with just now?

> Ni encountered Zheng at a banquet hosted by some official. At first, he did not tell Zheng his name, only throwing a red four on a die and asking Zheng to make a divination. Zheng said: "The only fourth-rank official in the capital who grasped power is the Chancellor. Sir, are you Chancellor Ni?" Ni nodded. Zheng responded: "You must be at odds with a power-holder [at court], whose name contains the 'bone' (*gu* 骨) graph—this throw refers to him because a die is made of bone and the edges and corners of each facet cannot be carved incorrectly. Therefore, I know that you are not getting along well. Are you planning to resign? Your wish must come true because the shape of a die resembles the graph 'mouth' (*kou* 口), and the [arrangement of] the four dots is like a 'mouth' too; together, they spell the character 'to return' (*hui* 回)." Afterwards, it indeed came to pass as Zheng predicted.

[1] For the English translation, see Feng Menglong ed., *Stories to Awaken the World*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 804.

[2] Jessica Richard, *The Romance of Gambling in the Eighteenth-Century British Novel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 46.

(倪) 遇鄭於官人席上，初未通名，取骰子中四紅予卜，鄭曰：“京官四品而掌印者，惟大司成耳。公其祭酒倪公邪？”公頷之。曰：“公必與當事忤，姓名中帶骨字者，其人也。蓋骰子，骨所成，而四面棱角，不能刓圓，以是知不合也。公意慫圖歸乎？必得請矣。以骰體方類口，四亦類口，乃回字也。”後果然.[3]

As we infer from this passage, the die was a cube made of bone, and the pips for four were red. Is this the case with the dice in your hand?

In Chinese, dice are usually called *tou* 骰 or *touzi* 骰子. The radical *gu* 骨 (bone) of the character *tou* denotes their material, while *shu* 殳 serves as a phonetic component. *Tou* might have once been used interchangeably with the verb *tou* 投 to describe the act of tossing or throwing a die. This nomenclature did not come into being until the Tang dynasty, however. Before that, dice were called *qiongce* 琼筴 or *qiong* 琼, indicating the beautiful jade as their raw material, as is evidenced by the radical *yu* 玉. This terminological change was largely in alignment with the modification of the dice's shape and material in the Tang dynasty: from oblong to cubic, and from jade and stone to bone and sometimes ivory. As the late Ming scholar and bibliographer Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551–1602) pointed out, during his time, dice had six sides and a total of twenty-one dots—not dissimilar to those of the Tang dynasty.[4] The pips for four, in particular, were supposed to be painted crimson; sometimes, four red beans—also known as love beans (*xiangsi zi* 相思子)—were inlaid into the surface instead. Such a configuration is epitomized in a couplet written by the late Tang poet Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (812–870) and quoted by Hu: “A lovely die is inlaid with red beans. Do [you] know about my longing

[3] “Touzi,” *Zichu*, *juan* 2, 15:b–16:a.

[4] Hu Yinglin, *Shaoshi shanfang bicong* 少室山房筆叢 (Guangzhou: Guangya shuju, 1920), *juan* 40, 12:a. For an overview of dice in the game cultures in Asia, see Mackenzie and Finkel eds., *Asian Games*, 39–44.

penetrating to the bone?" 玲瓏骰子安紅豆，入骨相思知不知.[5] In the second line, the word "*xiangsi*" 相思 refers simultaneously to the love beans and yearning desire. "Love beans/longing penetrating to the bone" 入骨相思 thus serves as a double entendre, literally denoting the bone material and the inlaid red beans of a die, while figuratively indicating the female protagonist's deepfelt longing for her lover. The absence of a subject in the last line, moreover, suggests an ambiguity of addressee. If this is a question posed to a lover, couldn't it also be posed to the die itself and taken literally: as an inanimate object, does it know that the beans are inlaid in its body?

"A die is an unconscious object" 骰子是無知之物, the seventeenth-century author, playwright Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680) claimed, as if responding to the query in Wen's couplet. Yet this is nothing more than a statement quickly subverted by Li Yu himself. As he continued, although a die is nothing but a tiny unconscious cube, it can still become a devil (*yaonie* 妖孽).

> If you do not disturb it, it is merely some dry bones with thirty-six possibilities of pip combinations.[6] Once it entangles you, these dry bones will become some wronged ghosts, its six faces becoming six iron chains, and the thirty-six combinations becoming thirty-six Celestial Rectifiers.[7] It will tie you up, killing you or saving you as it wishes. Even though you are strong enough to move mountains and raise tripods, unless you arrive at the Wu River,[8] it will never let you off.

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[5] In fact, Hu Yinglin's quote reads "A lovely die is inlaid with red beans. [You] do not know about my longing penetrating to the bone" 玲瓏投子安紅豆，入骨相思知也無. There are two discrepancies between Hu Yinglin's quote and the original couplet. First, *tou* is written as 投 with a "hand" radical rather than 骰 with a "bone" radical. Second, the end of the second line reads "there is no knowledge" 知也無 rather than "do you know" 知不知. This changes the tone from a rhetorical question to a statement. English translation modified from Huaichuan Mou, *Rediscovering Wen Tingyun: A Historical Key to a Poetic Labyrinth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 179; *Wen Tingyun quanji jiaozhu* 溫庭筠全集校註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 874.

[6] If Li Yu was referring to the six-side dice (twenty-one pips in total), the number thirty-six probably indicates the possibilities of pip combinations with two dice, that is, a result of six times six.

[7] The "Thirty-Six Celestial Rectifiers" (*sanshiliu tiangang* 三十六天罡) refers to a group of perilous cosmic powers. See Mark R.E. Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Network, and the History of a Ming Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 69–70.

[8] The Wu River 烏江, as well as the forces to "move mountains" and "raise tripods," are allusions to Xiang Yu 項羽, King of Chu 楚 who, though strong enough to raise tripods, killed himself on the bank of the Wu River

> 你若不去惹它，它不過是幾塊枯骨，六面鑽眼，極多不過三十六枚點數而已；你若被它一纏上了，這幾塊枯骨就是幾條冤魂，六面鑽眼就是六條鐵索，三十六枚點數就是三十六個天罡，把人捆縛住了，要你死就死，要你活就活，任有拔山舉鼎之力，不到烏江，它絕不肯放你.[9]

Once animated, it is the ghost-like die that "entangles" (*chan* 纏) the human subject. Like a wronged ghost, the essence of a die lies no longer in its appearance but in its malevolent effects on the person who initially "disturbs" (*re* 惹) it and is now entirely vulnerable to its impact.

This paragraph itself can be read as a moral admonition. Through personifying a die, Li Yu intended to warn his reader against the harm of gambling addiction. Indeed, according to the late Ming and early Qing scholar-official You Tong 尤侗 (1618–1704), gambling wasted people's time, drained their minds, depleted their property, and even led to the political turmoil during the Ming-Qing dynastic transition.[10] The early modern Chinese discourse on gambling is frequently intertwined with such moral didacticism, teaching people to keep a distance from this evil conduct.

What is omitted in this passage is the element of chance. If chance as a force of contingency was left out at the price of moral didacticism, in early modern China it was also considered to be subordinate to fate (*ming* 命)—a power beyond human control.[11] Similarly in

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when most of his soldiers were defeated during the war against Liu Bang 劉邦. For a detailed account of Xiang Yu, see Sima Qian, "Xiangyu benji" 項羽本紀, in *Shiji*, *juan* 7, 295–341.

[9] Li Yu 李漁, *Wusheng xi* 無聲戲, 148.

[10] You Tong 尤侗, *Jiedu wen* 戒賭文, in Zhang Chao, *Zhaodai congshu bieji* 昭代叢書別集. Qing shikaitang ben 清世楷堂本 (1844), 1:a–3:b. It is noteworthy that legally, both the Ming and Qing administrations prohibited gambling through empire-wide codes, but these mandates had such limited impact that people in the late Ming and early Qing were continuously fond of gambling in both public and private venues. For the Ming and Qing codes on gambling, see Guo Shuanglin 郭雙林 and Xiao Meihua 蕭梅花, *Zhongguo dubo shi* 中國賭博史 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1996).

[11] A similar statement is made by Roger Caillois: "[The Chance games] are all games that are based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary. […] [Chance/*Alea*] signifies and reveals the favor of destiny. The player is entirely passive: he does not deploy his resources, skills, muscles, intelligence." See Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 17.

eighteenth-century France, to roll a die "was to recognize a dialectic between individuals deciding their actions and a larger, engulfing world of forces over which humankind was powerless."[12] Li Yu's rendering of the changing power relationship between a die and a potential gambler may, too, resonate with this perception. Once a gambling game had started, the gambler was already trapped in passivity, letting destiny decide the personal outcome of victory or defeat.

It is my gambit to open this chapter by tracing the transformations of dice from concrete objects to abstract literary renditions, from the materiality to their embodied ideas of destiny and morality. Here and for the whole chapter, my wager is that dice in the literal and figurative senses have the power to generate new possibilities of narrative content and form, hence encouraging new ways to read them. This opening shows that tiny cubes though they are, dice also capture the essence of human desire, agency, and fate, and mediate these aspects through words, verse, and prose. Furthermore, as I shall demonstrate, "dice" exert effective generative power on short stories.[13] In this site where ordinary life and extraordinary events are frequently

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[12] Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth–Century France* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 2–3. According to Kavanagh, starting in the seventeenth century, the discourse on gambling in Europe experienced a shift from ascribing chance to destiny to celebrating the existence and uncontrollability of chance. This is closely related to the Enlightenment during this period.

For other studies on the literary and theatrical representations of gambling and chance in early modern Europe, see for instance, Alison James, *Constraining Chance: Georges Perec and the Oulipo* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2009); Jesse Molesworth, *Chance and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Realism, Probability, and Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Richard, *The Romance of Gambling in the Eighteenth-Century British Novel*; Katherine Steele Brokaw, "The Roll of the Dice and the Whims of Fate in Sixteenth-Century Morality Drama," in *Games and Theatre in Shakespeare's England*, 89–113.

[13] In fact, Li Yu's passage serves as a prologue to a short story in which a gambling game is the central theme. When the narrator directly addresses the audience by using the pronoun "you" (*ni* 你) multiple times, the reader is gradually guided into a fictional realm wherein a ghost makes a gambling game host lose all the money he gained from other gamblers. The story, titled "A Living Person Pays the Gambling Debt for a Ghost" 鬼輸錢活人還賭債, was first published in Li Yu's short story collection *Wusheng xi* 無聲戲 (*Silent Operas*). It was republished in Li's second short story collection *Liancheng bi* 連城璧 (*Priceless Jade*), under a new title "Innocently Tricked into a Trap; Accountably Losing the Entire Fortune by a Ghost's Deception" 受人欺無心落局，連鬼騙有故傾家. I have discussed the story elsewhere, especially how the ghost character is considered a manifestation of heavenly force that controls the game's outcome. See Chen, "Ghostly Dicing: Gambling Games and Deception in Ming-Qing Short Stories," in *Games and Play in the Chinese and Sinophone Cultures: From Past to Present*, eds. Li Guo, Douglas Eyman, and Hongmei Sun (Seattle: University of Washington Press, forthcoming).

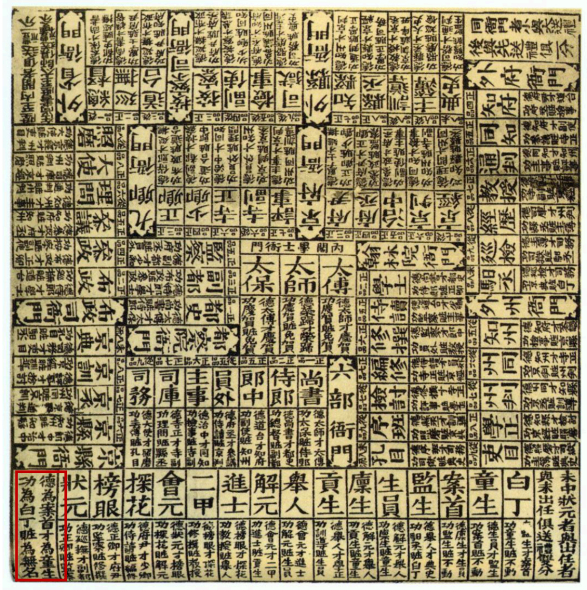
intertwined, authors develop new narrative structures to link separate, and usually contingent, incidents together. I refer to this type of structure as "episodic narrative structure" to parallel the episodic randomness embedded in every round of dicing. These stories, exemplified by "For One Penny, A Small Grudge Ends in a Stark Tragedies" 一文錢小隙造奇冤 (hereafter, "For One Penny") in Feng Menglong's *Stories to Awaken the World* (*Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恆言) and "The Confidence Men" 念秧 in Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) *Liaozhai's Records of the Strange* (*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異), will be the focus of this chapter.

Gambling, especially its related aspects of chance and fate, balance and repayment, inspires authors to explore these new models of causality. Departing from the current scholarship on gambling in literature, my aim is not simply to seek the social, ideological, or economic implications of the representations of gambling in these stories.[14] For "The Confidence Men," in particular, the game itself is nothing but a swindle, requiring the reader to keep a distance from the fictional illusion. The significance of these stories does not lie in the symbolism of the game within an imaginary world. Rather, I suggest that the stories demand an active, skillful reading, through which the reader learns to comprehend the implications of chance vis-à-vis life. Whereas gambling is a game of chance whose outcome a player cannot control, reading the stories nonetheless grants the reader agency to "play" with the narrative: to calculate the balance, to trust or doubt the words, and to look for the moral message embedded by the author. Before delving into the stories, let me start by introducing a specific type of gambling game. It is called the official promotion game—a game that Ni Yuanlu was so fond of that he even invented one of

[14] As far as I know, Paola Zamperini is the only literary historian working on the representations of gambling in early modern Chinese literature. However, since her work is still unpublished, I have not been able to grasp the whole picture of her arguments and objects of study.

his own. The game, in the most literal sense, offers us a compelling case of how dice can serve as a powerful narrative generator.

Dice Generated Narratives



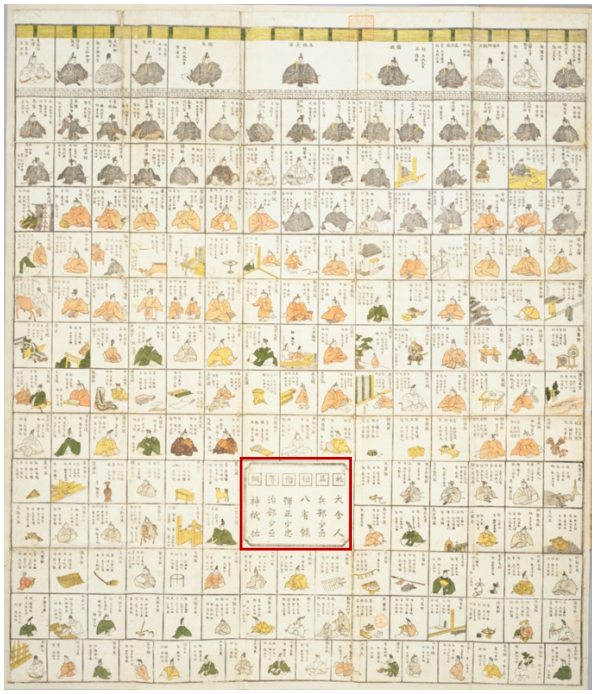


Fig. 3.1a Left: Board of the Official Promotion Game. Late nineteenth century, Hebei Province. Woodblock print on paper, 51×51 cm. From Laing, "Chinese Pictorial Board Game Prints," 79.

Fig. 3.1b Right: *E-sugoroku* Board of an Official Promotion Game. Late nineteenth century. Woodblock print on paper, size unknown. National Diet Library, Japan.

The starting point of the game is outlined in red. In either case, the number of pips on the dice are represented by virtues/wrongdoings (left) or the different words for "rank" (right). A player's initial position is determined by a throw of the dice. This metonymic effort to transform chance into something else will be explored in this chapter. Here, it suggests a shared design principle between the Chinese and Japanese promotion games.

In addition to Go, official promotion games (known as *shengguan tu* 升官圖 or *caixuan* 彩選 [lit. selection through dice]) are among the best-preserved board games played in premodern China. Surviving rule books, prefaces, and ephemeras of printed game boards help

reconstruct its history of how and why the game was played, who designed and enjoyed it over a period of one thousand years. Compared to Go, a strategy game of which the players attempt to surround the opponent's territory by taking turns to place black and white stones on the grid of a wooden board, official promotion games belong to the snakes-and-ladders type of games, in which players throw dice to move their game pieces on a paper board.[15] Instead of players' agency and skills, it is luck that promotes or demotes players in a fictional bureaucracy. The extant boards, usually dating only to the relatively recent past of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, showcase their careful design: official titles from low to high, are arranged in a centripetal spiral manner, with the top posts positioned at the center (fig. 3.1a).

A similar promotion game can be found in contemporaneous *e-sugoroku* 絵双六 in Japan (lit. painted double-six)—a type of board game popular throughout Japanese society with the flourishing of print culture from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.[16] Despite the probable impact of Chinese prototypes, in the Japanese version (fig. 3.1b), official posts from low to high are laid out hierarchically rather than centripetally. Each player jumps forward (*tobi* 飛び) or falls back from one square to another, hoping to be the first to reach the top center (*agari* 上り) and become the *Daijyō daijin* 太政大臣 (Chancellor of the Realm).[17] In her study

[15] Tracing the historical development or probing into any practical details of board games in Chinese history is beyond the scope of this section. There have been a couple of studies and surveys on board games in China. Some major scholarship includes Andrew Lo, "Official Aspirations: Chinese Promotion Games," in Mackenzie and Finkel eds., *Asian Games*, 64–75; Carole Morgan, "The Chinese Game of *Shengguan tu,*" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 204, no.3 (2004): 517–32; Song Bingren 宋秉仁, "Shengguan tu youxi yange kao" 陞官圖遊戲沿革考, *Taiwan shida lishi xuebao* 台灣師大歷史學報 33 (2005): 27–78; Lo, "An Introduction to Board Games in Late Imperial China," in Irvin Finkel ed., *Ancient Board Games in Perspective* (London: British Museum Press, 2007), 125–32; and Ellen Johnston Laing, "Chinese Pictorial Board Game Prints," *Arts Asiatiques* 70 (2015): 77–86.

[16] Masukawa Kōichi 増川宏一, *Sugoroku* すごろく, vol.2 (Tokyo: Hōsei daigaku shuppankyoku, 1995).

[17] For the sake of my discussion, I have completely omitted the religious counterparts to these secular board games. Called "Selection of Immortals" (*xuanxian tu* 選仙圖) or "Selection of Buddhas" (*xuanfo tu* 選佛圖), these games, like the official promotion games, consist of a board, dice, and several game pieces, in which players throw the dice to get a promotion or demotion on their path to the immortals' realm or Buddhist paradise. For current scholarship, see May-Ying Mary Ngai, "From Entertainment to Enlightenment: A Study on a Cross-Cultural

of another *e-sugoroku* game with a Buddhist Pure Land theme, Charlotte Eubanks comments on the narrative potential of this kind of board game. For Eubanks, the game board can be regarded as an alternative textual container to books. Playing it becomes a "socially embedded, physically embodied, and materially entangled" reading experience.[18] As players symbolically traveled among the different squares on the board, they "read themselves as characters in a spatially-arranged narrative" about Buddhist teachings.[19] However, important questions still remain to be addressed: What narratives were the players actually reading? Did chance bear any cultural implications other than generating "randomness of movement" as Eubanks suggests?

Here I use the official promotion games to give some preliminary answers to these questions. The first example is the preface to *Touzi xuange* 骰子選格 (*Rules for Selection through Dice*) written by the late Tang scholar-official Fang Qianli 房千里 (fl. ca. 840).[20] It records a promotion game among some *jinshi* 進士 scholars that Fang witnessed in the spring of 838. Instead of speaking about each round, Fang summarized the progression of individual players at the end of the game:

> There were some among the guests who ended up as a guardsman or a clerk, while there were others who honorably became prime ministers and generals; there were some who had successively gained good reputations but then were unable to rise again while there

Religious Board Game with an Emphasis on the Table of Buddha Selection Designed by Ouyi Zhixu of the Late Ming Dynasty" (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 2011); Beverley Foulks McGuire, "Playing with Karma: A Buddhist Board Game," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 10, no.1 (2014): 4–29.

[18] Eubanks, "Reading as Patterned Play," 40–75.

[19] David Morgan, "Divination, Material Culture, and Chance," quoted from Eubanks, "Reading as Patterned Play," 68.

[20] The concept of *ge* 格 is worth noting. Many of the official promotion games are referred to as *ge*, while others are mostly called *tu* 圖 (image). *Ge* can be interpreted as the squares that compose the game board but can also mean rules in a more abstract sense. This notion of *ge* is shared with another type of text that gained popularity in the Ming and Qing dynasties: *gongguo ge* 功過格 (translated as ledgers of merit and demerit). As Japanese Sinologist Sakai Tadao explains, *ge* in *gongguo ge* means (moral) standards and rules (*guiju*, *guizhun* 規矩, 規准) laid out in a numerical format (*geshi* 格式). I will discuss more about *gongguo ge* and its close connection with vernacular literature in early modern China in the following section of this chapter. See Sakai Tadao 酒井忠夫, *Chūgoku zensho no kenkyū* 中国善書の研究 (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1960), 378.

were others who began in humble positions but soon were promoted swiftly to high positions.

卒局，座客有為尉掾而止者，有貴為相臣、將臣者，有連得美名而後不振者，有始甚微而飆升於上位者.[21]

For Fang, the players' ups and downs throughout the game shed light on how different political careers unfold in reality. More importantly, the involvement of dice to decide a person's path in the game substantiated his viewpoint that the fluctuation of any career trajectory in real life was "unrelated to being wise or foolish, but merely to the divinations of [tossing] odds or not" 不繫賢不肖，但卜其偶不偶耳,[22] that is, good or bad fate. The verb "to divine" (*bu* 卜) suggested that the act of tossing dice was more than simply a mechanism of generating a random number to decide a player's move. Rather, as the pips were turned into signs to foretell one's fate, rolling dice, in religious scholar David Morgan's words, becomes "a method that reveals an agency greater than human beings," with the principal task being "to rule out human manipulation."[23]

[21] For English translation, see Ngai, "From Entertainment to Enlightenment," 42; Fang Qianli, *Touzi xuange*, in *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), vol.4, *juan* 760, 3502.

[22] Fang, *Touzi xuange*, 3502.

[23] Morgan, "Divination, Material Culture, and Chance," 503. In fact, there has been a long tradition of linking gambling (dicing) with divination in multiple places around the world. In China, this tradition can be traced back to the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*). In consultation with *Yijing*, divination was conducted by tossing three lots to form two sets of trigrams of which the symbolic meanings were respectively explained. Another convincing example is the board game *liubo* 六博 (literally, six rods) once popular in the Han dynasty. Archaeological findings have well-evinced that the game board shared the same design with the contemporaneous divination board. In addition, scholars also point out that a few domino manuals were also used as divination manuals in early modern China, suggesting a close connection between gambling and divination, as well as a complex system of text, image, number, and cosmology. For detailed discussions on this connection, for instance, see Mark Edward Lewis, "Dicing and Divination in Early China," *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 121 (2002): 1–22; Bréard, "How to Quantify the Value of Domino Combinations? Divination and Shifting Rationalities in Late Imperial China," 499–529; and Brandon Dotson, Constance A. Cook, and Zhao Lu, *Dice and Gods on the Silk Road: Chinese Buddhist Dice Divination in Transcultural Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2021). Notably, *Liubo* has long been of scholarly interest in the fields of art history, history, and religious studies. Art historian Lilian Lan-Ying Tseng studies the connection between divination via the TLV diagrams and the *liubo* game, mainly based on archaeological findings. See Tseng, "Yinwan hanmu *boju zhan* mudu shijie" 尹灣漢墓《博局占》木牘試解, *Wenwu* 文物 no.8 (1999): 62–65; "Representation and Appropriation: Rethinking the TLV Mirror in Han China," *Early China* 29 (2004): 163–215, this article focuses more on the TLV bronze mirror as a cultural sign of "auspicious mentality" of the Han. Historian Mark Lewis, on the other hand, traces the textual accounts on *Liubo* and argues for an innate connection between gambling and divination, see Lewis, "Dicing and Divination in Early China"; also Li Ling 李零, "Ba Zhongshan wangmu chutu de

The game inspired Fang to develop a similar one of his own. Other than divining a player's fate, dicing further evoked an embodied reading experience of literary works. What the game was actually like has already faded into oblivion; only a list of official titles has been preserved. That said, in the preface, Fang mentioned how the game enabled him to indulge in a moment of prestige and honor atop the bureaucratic ladder that would usually take decades in reality to climb. Interestingly, according to Fang, the game gave him an opportunity to share the experience of King Mu of Zhou centuries ago as recounted in the *Liezi* and Student Lu in the recently written *Zhenzhong ji* 枕中記 (*Tale within a Pillow*). In these accounts, both the protagonists enjoyed power and glory in a dream, only to discover after waking that it had all been an illusion. Indeed, Student Lu's dream was not dissimilar to a player in an official promotion game: He was gradually promoted to Prime Minister from a *jinshi* scholar, risked losing his life when he was designated to be killed by his opponents; after this injustice was corrected, he was promoted to the top position again until his death at the age of eighty. By means of game, illusion and reality, the fictional characters and Fang Qianli became one. "Surely I am this person" 吾果斯人也, Fang exclaimed, asking rhetorically, "Who knows if some brief moments of happiness are not better than several years of glory?" 安知數刻之樂，果不及數年之榮耶?[24]

In Fang's view, playing the game evoked at once a real life experience and an embodied reading experience of these writings on "other species and insignificant creatures" 異類微物. This perspective was in common with later discourses on official promotion games. Fang's

liubo qiju: yu Yinwan *Boju zhan* de sheji bijiao" 跋中山王墓出土的六博棋局：與尹灣《博局占》的設計比較, *Zhongguo lishi wenwu* 中國歷史文物, no.1 (2002): 8–15.

[24] Fang, *Touzi xuange*, 3502.

comment is unique for its specific reference to the two dream accounts, while others perceived such a game more as an aid to learning history, especially the bureaucratic system in official histories.[25] Many promotion games can be regarded as a product of a careful reading of these historical texts, which in turn, facilitated a better understanding of history. This is exemplified in the game *Han guan yi* 漢官儀 (*Official Bureaucracy of the Han Dynasty*) designed by Liu Ban 劉攽 (style name: Gongfu 貢父, 1022–1088), a renowned Northern Song official and historian.[26] According to Liu's postscript to the game, when he was still an adolescent, he had collected a series of historical accounts about the promotion and demotion of Western Han scholar-officials and developed them into a gambling game (*boxi* 博戲). The game quickly gained popularity after his elder brother Liu Chang 劉敞 (style name: Yuanfu 原父, 1019–1068) wrote a preface to it. Over four decades later at the age of sixty, Liu Ban, then Magistrate of Haozhou Prefecture, revisited the game and refined the imperfect rules designed by an immature teenager "who could still not read [the texts] deeply and thoroughly" 讀書未能精熟.[27] The well-preserved three-volume rule book of *Han guan yi* invites us to explore more in depth how and what narratives can be generated and read through playing the game, especially given that a player's experience

[25] The early Qing scholar Liu Xianting 劉獻廷 (1648–1695) gave the game high praise saying, "I spent the New Year at the official bureau. During the day, I heard people tossing dice, playing the official promotion game, and laughing noisily in the hall. I did not know why all the scholar-officials were so enthusiastic about it. I wanted to select the official titles from the Han dynasties, the Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern dynasties, respectively, as well as the Sui, Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, and design a game board and an illustrated handbook for each period. I put them in the school building. I spent my pastimes playing them whenever I had a break during festivals, was ill or after class. Over time, I had mastered the rules of selections and examinations in officialdom throughout the historical dynasties. The game had facilitated me to read history. It was far more worthy than gambling and playing Go" 予在衡署中度歲，日聞堂中競擲"陞官圖"喧笑，不知此中有何意味，而諸公耽之至此。予欲取兩漢、魏晉南北朝、隋唐宋元之選舉職官，各为"陞官圖"一紙，《陞官圖說》一冊，置學舍中，節日暇時，病餘課畢，以此消遣。久之，而歷朝選舉職官考課銓選之法，皆了了矣，亦讀史之一助也，賢於博弈遠矣. See Liu Xianting, *Guangyang zaji* 廣陽雜記 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1957), *juan* 4, 104.

[26] Like many other official promotion games, its physical game board has already been lost, with only the rules and official titles in three volumes preserved. The current edition is a late Qing reprint of the Song dynasty manuscripts with an 1824 preface.

[27] "Shu *Han guan yi* hou" 書漢官儀後, in *Han guan yi*, *juan shang*.

is largely undergirded by chance (i.e. the dice)—here referring to luck, contingency—that itself is redefined by the specific game design.

Compared to its Tang dynasty predecessor, the core of the game remained largely unchanged: the pips of two dice tossed by a player determined whether the player was promoted or demoted. But the extant rules reveal Liu's mindful engagement with the historical accounts. Take the opening round "Selection" (*xuanju* 選舉) as an example: in this round, each player was assigned an initial official position via dicing (fig. 3.2). If someone threw two "four" pips (the pattern referred to as "*tangyin*" 堂印), they could be "recommended as worthy and good in the examination,[28] selected as the top candidate, and awarded the position of Advisory Counsellor" 舉賢良對策，擢為上第，拜諫大夫. They would receive a reward of fifty coins from each player.[29] If the dice turned out to be two "ones," the player would "fail the examination" 報聞罷 and be eliminated from the game—and they had to add (*na* 納) twenty coins to the prize pool as a penalty. Only when the player chose to make a new wager could they rejoin the game. Whereas these descriptions of a political path still seem to replicate set phrases in historical writings, others are traceable to specific official biographies. The scenario of two "sixes," for instance, "to become an Erudite because of studying the *Spring and Autumn Annals*" 以治《春秋》為博士,[30] was directly quoted from the biography of the Western Han politician and philosopher Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記).

[28] This examination system was first proposed by Dong Zhongshu in his "Examination Essay of the Worthy and Good" 舉賢良對策.

[29] *Han guan yi*, *juan shang*, 1:b.

[30] *Han guan yi*, *juan shang*, 1:b.

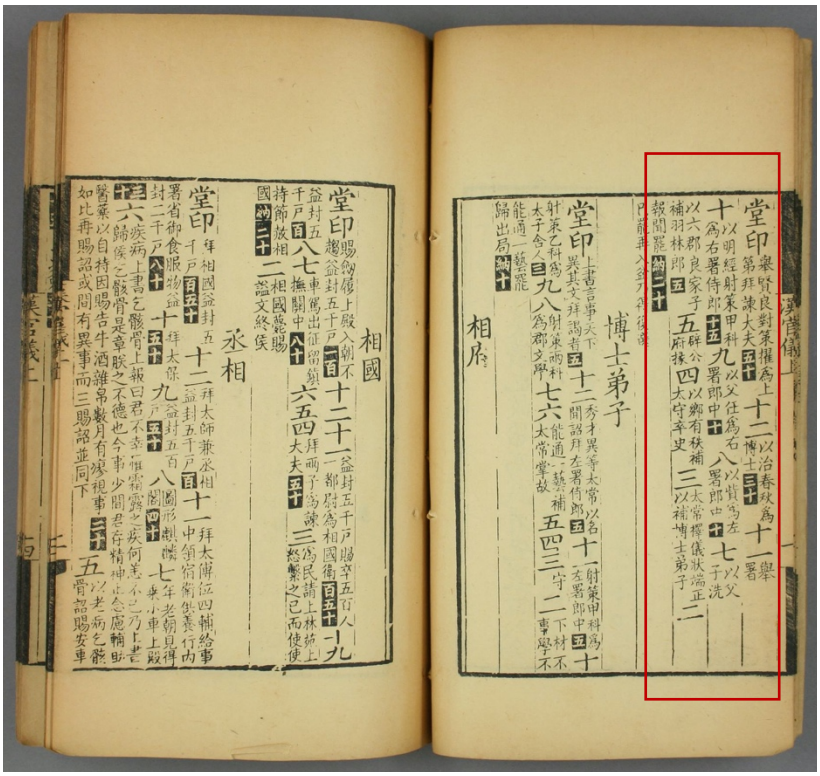


Fig. 3.2 Instructions for the first round “Selection” in *Han guan yi*.
Muxi tang 穆西堂 edition (preface dated 1824; reprint of a Southern Song dynasty manuscript [1139]). Waseda University Library, Tokyo, Japan.

These descriptions specify both the official position and the reason for this career path—whether it be succeeding in the examination or studying history. This design principle of *Han guan yi* was made explicit in an account by the Southern Song bibliographer Chao Gongwu 晁公武 (1101–1180) when he commented on an anonymous four-volume *Collection of Selection through Dice* (*Caixuan ji* 彩選集) from his book collection:

> As for Liu Ban [Gongfu], his design was based on the bureaucratic system of promotion and demotion in the Western Han (206 BCE–8CE) while adopting lines concerning the reasons for promotion and demotion in historical biographies to annotate the official positions. Because of this, at the end of a game, one could compose a biography corresponding to these words. [Liu’s game] was the most elegant and refined among the gambling games.

至劉貢父獨因其法，取西漢官制陞黜次第為之，又取本傳所以陞黜之語註其下，局終遂可類次其語為一傳，博戲中最為雅馴.[31]

In Chao's remark, the cleverness of *Han guan yi* lay not just in Liu's annotating each round of dice rolling with lines selected from the official historical biographies, but in the narrative potential that these lines provided. It was possible for the rolls of the dice to generate a biography for each player by the end of a game. In fact, there is a "Biography" (*liezhuan* 列傳) section attached to the last volume of the rule book (fig. 3.3), including three biographies: those of Sir Emptiness 亡是公, Mister Nothing 烏有先生, and the Master of Quill Grove 翰林主人. While prototypes for these three figures could be found in the Western Han rhapsodies,[32] their punning names betray their fictional identity: none of them existed in actual history, of course.

[31] Chao Gongwu 晁公武, *Junzhai dushu zhi* 郡齋讀書志 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), vol.5, 50–51.

[32] Sir Emptiness and Mister Nothing are the two protagonists in *Shanglin fu* 上林賦 (*Rhapsody on the Imperial Park*) by Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (ca. 179–117 BCE). The Master of Quill Grove, which actually refers to a writing brush, is from *Changyang fu* 長楊賦 (*Rhapsody on the Tall Poplars Palace*) by Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53–18 BCE).

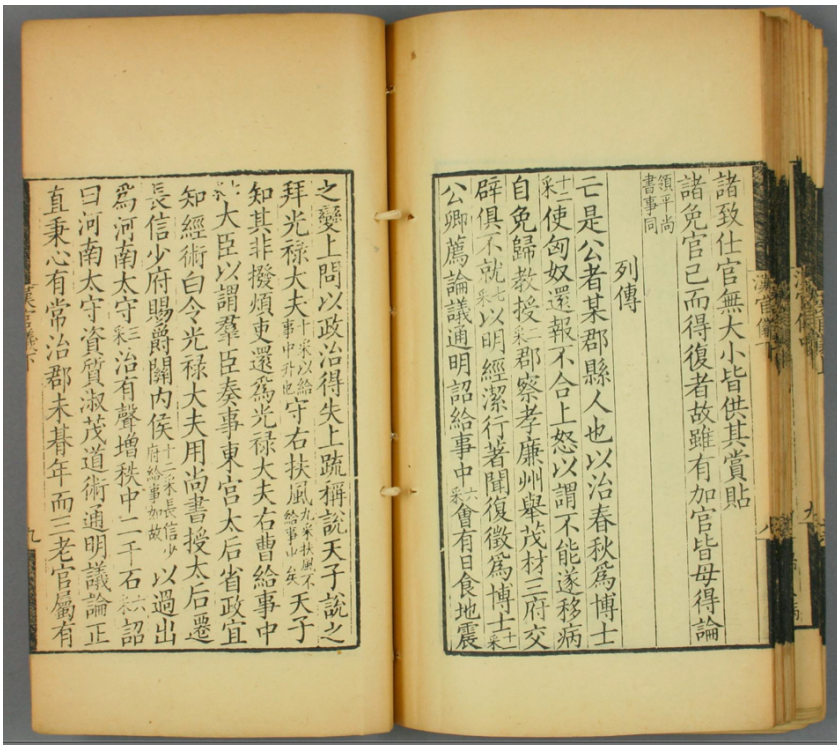


Fig. 3.3 “Biographies” attached to *Han guan yi*.

What is the life of Sir Emptiness like, then? Here are the first several lines of his biography:

> Sir Emptiness was from such-and-such a county in such-and-such a prefecture. He became an Erudite because of studying the *Spring and Autumn Annals* [twelve pips]. He was sent to the Xiongnu as an ambassador. When he returned, he did not conform [to the emperor’s intent]. The emperor was irritated, considering him to be inept. Therefore, Sir Emptiness resigned on the pretext of illness.[33] He returned home and became a teacher [two pips].
>
> 亡是公者，某郡縣人也。以治《春秋》為博士 [十二采]。使匈奴，還報，不合，上怒，以謂不能，遂移病自免，歸教授 [二采].[34]

The number of pips in parenthesis exposes the truth. Recalling the game instructions mentioned earlier, it is not hard to recognize that this biography is a combination of the lines that correspond

[33] This line was quoted from the biography of Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (199–121 BCE) in *Shiji* with little adjustment: “He was sent to the Xiongnu as an ambassador. When he returned, he did not conform to the emperor’s intent. The emperor was irritated, considering him to be inept. Therefore, Gongsun Hong resigned on the pretext of illness” 使匈奴，還報，不合上意，上怒，以為不能，弘乃病免歸. See *Shiji*, *juan* 112.

[34] *Han guan yi*, *juan xia*, 8:b.

to and annotate the pips tossed by a player. If this is a fake historical biography, it is nevertheless a documentation of a player's gaming process, whether or not there was such a game played in reality. To put it differently, by reading the biography line by line, what we can trace is not only life stories about historical figures, but also a player's fate determined solely by casting the dice.

In the previous chapter, we saw how Chinese characters served as a basic unit to create new forms of texts that asked for readerly interactions that were different from the common linear reading experience. The word-only notation system of Go was initially four poems inscribed on the intersections of a grid on a 19x19 game board. Each word corresponded to a specific coordinate on the board. Thus, every game would generate a sequence of disordered words drawn from the poems; the game writes itself through this notation system. In turn, reading such a string of words means decoding the stone positions and reconstructing a game narrative, whether a story of battles over the players' territory, intellectual competition, or mood swings. The largest difference between *Han guan yi* and the word-only notation system of Go is the involvement of the dice as a narrative generator. Notably, the aspect of chance embodied in every toss of the dice is largely overshadowed by the lines based on official histories. A narrative disguised as an official biography obscures the contingency of dicing as the actual driving force. Through these quotations, the game shifts our focus to the historical human deeds and their possible results.

Still, the entries of the game instructions together with the biographies reveal an alternative way to view *Han guan yi*, that is, through numbers. A numbered black block is attached to each annotation, marking the quantity of coins a player could gain or lose in each round. Similarly, the parentheses in the three biographies betray the number of pips that a player tosses. Indeed, if one side of *Han guan yi* is a game to facilitate learning history, the other side

discloses the fact that it is a gambling game (*boxi*) in essence. *Han guan yi* invited multiple ways of engagement. A player could read a combination of reorganized fragments from the official history that diminished the causal factor of contingency; as various life stories unfolded before their eyes, they experienced and made sense of the logic of Han dynasty bureaucracy. Meanwhile, indulging in those numbers, a player submitted to chance; as Jessica Richard, a literary scholar in British literature points out, they "reveled in the unknowability of the outcome, yet hoping that at the very least the force of their desire to win will control the outcome."[35]

The case of official promotion games demonstrates how dice function as an apparatus to generate narratives, while the causal relations in these narratives were often transformed from contingency (dice tossing) to either nonhuman forces (invisible heavenly order) or human choices (virtues and behaviors). I suggest that the two short stories we will focus on also be regarded as "dice-generated narratives." Of course, their authors never wrote these stories by rolling dice. What I mean by "dice" here is figurative, referring to the shared episodic randomness embodied both in tossing the little cubes and structuring the narratives. Specifically, the two stories in question center on gambling in different ways. As in the case of the official promotion games, the stories unfold episode by episode, and the reader is trained to reconsider the implications of chance that move the narrative forward. Undermining the direct admonition against gambling, these stories are turned into a playground in which the reader is both an onlooker of all the happenings yet a "player" with the episodic narrative structure.

Chance and Calculation

[35] Richard, *The Romance of Gambling in the Eighteenth-Century British*, 46.

The first story that I am turning to, "For One Penny," tells how a coin-tossing gambling game between two teenagers leads to the death of thirteen people.[36] In fact, this summary oversimplifies the story's complexity. Its episodic structure makes it impossible to recapitulate the happenings in few sentences. The challenge of a plot summary is attested to by the difficulty in determining the protagonist(s). Unlike most vernacular stories that spotlight one or two main characters, "For One Penny" unfolds by entangling nearly twenty characters, as the narrator's focus shifts incessantly from one group to another (chart 3.1). This unusual arrangement of characters and the narrative structure also speaks to the supposition that the story itself may be a rare case in *Stories to Awaken the World* ; according to literary historian Zhao Jingshen 趙景深, it may be regarded as an original work whose author did not consult any precedents in classical tales.[37] At least, the difficulty in tracing source tales suggests that this story may be less constrained by these texts. The latter are in the style of historical writings (mainly biographies) which, as we have already seen in the previous section, normally prescribes a concentration on the life of one central figure.

As I will demonstrate, the key to understanding "For One Penny" is to parse the logic of its episodic structure; the clues about how to approach this structure lie in the opening scene of a seemingly frivolous gambling game. The gambling game and its following narrative episodes alike are full of contingency, but chance again is reframed into human agency vis-à-vis heavenly retribution. The author invites the reader to engage with the story through *suan* 算 (to count,

[36] The English translation is based on Yang and Yunqin trans., *Stories to Awaken the World* with minor modifications. For the Chinese text, see Feng Menglong ed., Gu Xuejie 顧學頡 collated, *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恆言 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979), 708–737.

[37] Quoted from Tan Zhengbi 譚正璧 ed., *Sanyan liangpai ziliao* 三言兩拍資料 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), 542.

calculate, and foretell). As readers are trained to "calculate" the fate of the characters by linking individual episodes together, they are asked to think about what chance means in life.

- Coin-tossing gambling game between Zhang'er 長兒 and Zaiwang 再旺 (son of Liu Sanwang 劉三旺)
- A quarrel between Yang-shi 楊氏 and Sun Daniang 孫大娘; the suspicion of Qiu Yida 丘乙大; the death of Yang-shi (1)
- Yang-shi hanged herself in front of Bai Tie's 白鐵 house; Bai Tie moved Yang-shi's corpse away at the house of Mr. Wang 王公
- Qiu Yida sues Liu Sanwang and Sun Daniang to the court for hiding his wife's corpse
- Mr. Wang moved Yang-shi's corpse away with the help of his servant Xiao'er 小二 at the riverbank
- Zhu Chang 朱常 and his servant Bu Cai 卜才 discovered the corpse and conspired to take advantage of it for a land dispute with Zhao Wan 趙完 (father of Zhao Shou 趙壽). A fight between servants of the Zhu's and those of the Zhao's (including Tian Niu'er 田牛兒). Bu Cai pretend that Yang-shi is beaten to death during the fight.
- To frame Zhu Chang up and avoid being sued, Zhao Shou kill the old servant Ding Wen 丁文. This is witnessed by Mrs. Tian 田婆, mother of Tian Niu'er. Mrs. Tian is killed by Zhao Shou to cover up his act of murder. (2, 3)
- Zhao Wan warns his servant Zhao Yilang 趙一郎 to keep the secret. Mrs. Tian is found dead. Zhu Chang and his servants are sent to the court.
- Zhu Chang and Bu Cai are interrogated for their crime. No conclusion is reached.
- Mr. Wang is coincidentally killed by Xiao'er, as the latter wants to blackmail him for money. (4)
- Xiao'er is caught and died in prison. (5)
- Bai Tie dies of illness.(6) Zhu Chang and Bu Cai's lie is exposed, because Yang-shi's corpse isn't decomposed.
- Sun Daniang dies of illness. (7)
- Zhu Chang and Bu Cai die of illness in prison. (8, 9)
- Zhao Yilang intends to threaten Zhao Wan and Zhao Shou so as to be with Zhao Wan's concubine Ai Da'er 愛大兒. Zhao Wan and Zhao Shou conspires to kill Yilang, but is overheard by Ai Da'er. Yilang sues Zhao Wan and Zhao Shou for murdering Ding Wen and Mrs. Tian, while exposing his adultery. Death of Zhao Wan, Zhao Shou, Zhao Yilang, and Ai Da'er 愛大兒 (10, 11, 12, 13)

Chart 3.1 Summary of the plot of each episode in the main story of "For One Penny" (Number of deaths in parenthesis)

The Gambling Game

The main story of "For One Penny" is set in Jiangxi Province during the Ming dynasty.[38] In Jingdezhen 景德鎮, Qiu Yida 丘乙大 and his wife Yang-shi 楊氏 earn a living by making porcelain pieces—an industry this small town had been renowned for since the Yuan dynasty. One day, Yang-shi gets a stomachache. She gives her fourteen-year-old son, Zhang'er 長兒, one penny and asks him to buy her some prickly ash seeds at the market. However, this errand is cut short since on his way to the market, Zhang'er runs into thirteen-year-old Zaiwang 再旺, son of

[38] Although the narrator does not articulate specifically when the story takes place. It can be implied that it is set in the Ming dynasty because the Raozhou Prefecture 饒州府, Jiangxi Province did not exist until the Ming dynasty.

Liu Sanwang 劉三旺 who is a porcelain base craftsman and a neighbor of the Qiu family. Zaiwang asks Zhang'er if he wants to play heads or tails with the coin as they often did.

This "coin tossing" game 擲錢 was a gambling game. Players took turns flipping a certain number of coins, and won by getting either all heads or all tails (called a "complete accomplishment" 渾成) or an alternation of heads and tails (called a "tail alternation" 背間). The winner was then rewarded with money or actual objects from the prize pool. The game can be traced to as early as the Northern Song dynasty then commonly known as *guanpu* 關撲. Sometimes, it served as an alternative type of monetary transaction: if the customer won the game, they could get the commodities—usually food—from the peddler for free.[39]

For Zhang'er and Zaiwang, tossing coins is only a frivolous children's game that involves no serious economic gain or loss. As Zhang'er has only one penny, Zaiwang proposes that he also contribute one. Whoever tosses two tails wins both coins. They lose both coins if they toss two heads. If it is one head and one tail, the game is nullified. The narration of the game can be divided into two parts. The reader first follows the narrator in witnessing Zhang'er winning one round after another, earning twelve coins altogether from Zaiwang. Yet his gains evaporate in the second half, when the narrator informs the reader of the outcome directly: Zhang'er loses not just the coins he had won but also even the single penny his mother had given him to buy medicine.

Readers in Feng Menglong's time would not be surprised at the twisting progression of the game between Zhang'er and Zaiwang, for what is described in the story largely corresponds to the popular discourses on gambling in the late Ming dynasty. In fact, Zhang'er violates the

[39] For a detailed study of the game rules and its cultural meanings, see Otani Michiyori 大谷通順, "Yuan zaju suo miaoxie de guanpu fengsu: zhiqian dubo de wenhua hanyi" 元雜劇所描寫的關撲風俗：擲錢賭博的文化含義, in *Zhongguo chuantong wenhua yu Yuandai wenxian guoji xueshu yantaohui huiyi lunwenji* 中國傳統文化與元代文獻國際學術研討會會議論文集, ed. Beijing shifan daxue guji yu chuantong wenhua yanjiuyuan 北京師範大學古籍與傳統文化研究院 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 597–612.

taboos listed in the treatises on gambling that were circulated at the same time as *Stories to Awaken the World*. These treatises set out assorted gambling tricks and strategies. Among them is *Tricks and Traps in Whoring and Gambling* (*Piaodu jiguan* 嫖賭機關) compiled by Shen Hongyu 沈弘宇 (fl. seventeenth century).[40] Written in colloquial rhymes for easy memory, its section on gambling gives practical instructions on the game etiquette while warning against any potential traps set by fellow gamblers, hosts, and swindlers.

That Zhang'er wins first and then loses would not have been unpredictable. As *Piaodu jiguan* admonishes, "There must be a defeat among multiple victories; wouldn't there be a win after losing repeatedly?" 屢勝之中，必有一敗；疊輸之後，豈無一贏? The succeeding comment, "Victory and defeat are the norms for an army, as winning and losing are cyclical" 勝負兵家之常，輸贏循環之理, further resonates with the narrator's remark "a favorable wind does not last forever; a victorious army does not stay victorious" 風無常順，兵無常勝.[41] Zhang'er epitomizes the type of gambler that the treatise warns against who cannot "recognize the situation" 識局. After two rounds of victory, "the easy wins woke up the gambler in [Zhang'er]" 動了賭興. Even though he should have left after winning the twelve coins from Zaiwang, Zhang'er is "tempted again" 貪心又起 by the handful of coins that Zaiwang takes out of his pocket. Neither does Zhang'er terminate the game while losing all the money he had won.

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[40] Shen Hongyu 沈弘宇, *Piaodu jiguan* 嫖賭機關 (Manuscript dated to the Republican period, now housed at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Asia, University of Tokyo, Japan). In addition to the edition I am referring to, there is a two-volume printed edition published by Jude tang 聚德堂 now housed at the National Library in Beijing. The text could also be found in the fifth *juan* in *Xinke shishang huayan qule tanxiao jiuling* 新刻時尚華筵趣樂談笑酒令 published by Xiong Chongyu 熊沖宇 in the late Ming dynasty.

More scholarly attention has been paid to the section on whoring, which is believed belonging to a family of brothel instructions called *Piaojing* 嫖經 (*Classic of Whoring*). These instructions were widely circulated as individual books, in courtesans' poetry anthologies, daily encyclopedias, and drinking game manuals. For a discussion and translation of *Piaojing*, see He, *Home and the World*, 261–73.

[41] Feng Menglong, *Xingshi hengyan*, 713.

He still hopes that, with the one penny at hand, he can "win that [extra] money back like the first round" 像初次贏將轉來.[42] No matter whether he wins or loses, Zhang'er cannot stop. He runs completely counter to what *Piaodu jiguan* suggests: "To win is to recognize the situation, terminate if possible to do so; to lose is to see the opportunity, stop if possible to do so" 贏要識局，可以决則决。輸要見機，可以止則止. "Being greedy refers to not recognizing the situation, and completing the battle cannot be counted as seeing the opportunity" 貪多謂不識局，盡戰豈是見機—indeed, this articulation of the suggestion in the treatise more or less serves as a direct criticism of Zhang'er and his conduct.

The boy violates another taboo: gambling in an unstable state of mind. The game between Zhang'er and Zaiwang, as the narrator states, exemplifies that "those who win in gambling depend on their state of mind" 得以氣勝. The notion of *qi* 氣 emphasizes one's subjective mood rather than objective, uncontrollable luck. Zhang'er becomes audacious and greedy after several rounds of victory. Yet once the game is against his wish to win, he is too stingy (*lin* 吝) to lose any more coins and his "will [to win] was gone" 氣便索然. Zaiwang, in "a state of indignation" 一股憤氣 and boosting his courage, "naturally ended up the winner" 自然贏了.

The mind (*xin* 心), according to *Piaodu jiguan*, is one of the four essential body parts (the others are eyes, hands, and mouth) that are required in a gambling game:

> *Fourth: The mind should be present*
>
> When gambling, [one] should be clear about the key positions.
> This is completely based on the presence of the mind and intention.
> [One] should deliberate carefully when accepting another's fortune or buying a wager,
> There are pitfalls during the give and take.

[42] Feng, *Xingshi hengyan*, 713.

If you lose control of your mind, chaos must ensue. This is an omen of a loss.
If one uses their mind to make plans and bid for victory,
Winning and losing will all be expectable.

四要心到

賭錢機軸要知道，全憑心志用得到。
受盆買注自參詳，放去收來有窟竅。
方寸亂，必胡冒。此行定是輸錢兆。
運籌決勝肯心經，輸贏不出吾所料.[43]

With an attentive mind, one can judge, control, and predict the situation; contrastingly, with the mind upset, one will only make a mess of the situation and will be destined to lose. Temper is even listed as being of primary importance in the *Thirteen Chapters of the Classic of Playing Cards* (*Paijing shisan pian* 牌經十三篇), a treatise compiled by Feng Menglong on the thirteen key strategies for playing cards—another common gambling game in the late Ming. *Paijing* possibly mocked the eleventh-century *Thirteenth Chapters of the Classic of Go* (*Qijing shisan pian* 棋經十三篇) that discusses the Way of victory and defeat in the game of Go and was in turn written after the style of the thirteen-chapter *Way of War by Master Sunzi* (*Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法). Instead of starting with the design of the game equipment and its corresponding cosmological symbolism as its Northern Song prototype did, *Paijing* positions the players' mood and conduct at the outset. According to Feng, a "gentleman" (*junzi* 君子) should not "juggle with chance, act upon self-will, give up [his] aspirations, rely on sheer luck, or be jealous behind others' back" 毋舞機，毋使氣，毋墮志，毋僥倖，毋陰嫉; he should not "be conceited when winning," nor "be stingy when losing" 得毋驕，失毋吝.[44] Although *Paijing* and "For One

[43] Shen, *Piaodu jiguan*, *xia juan*, 3:b.

[44] Feng Menglong, *Paijing shisan pian* 牌經十三篇, in *Feng Menglong quanji* 馮夢龍全集, ed. Wei Tongxian 魏同賢 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), vol.10, 1.

Penny" deal with different gambling games, there is some obvious overlap in the usage of vocabulary like *qi* (will, state of mind) and *lin* (stingy) to describe a gambler. Undoubtedly, Zhang'er belongs to the type of gambler that Feng Menglong himself might not have been sympathetic toward.

That said, the scene between Zhang'er and Zaiwang cannot be viewed simply as a faithful representation of how people gambled and perceived gambling in their everyday lives. This would neglect its position as the opening episode in a longer story about life and death. Even though from the plot summary chart above, this scene seems quite minor and occupies a very limited diegetic space in the main story, it serves as a key to understanding the episodic narrative structure of "For One Penny" as a whole. Only when we draw a connection between the story and gambling can the potential engagement of the reader with this unique narrative structure transpire.

Calculation and Episodic Narrative Structure

For literary scholar Keith McMahon, "For One Penny" exemplifies the peculiarity of seventeenth-century vernacular fiction, particularly because it can be regarded as "a case study or theoretical model for linkage and causality."[45] According to McMahon, the key to understanding the story lies the interstices or openings that link the plot in a logical way. Such interstices are indicated by the word *xi* 隙 (translated by McMahon as "rift") in the title: this is literally manifested by the "mouths and doors" in the story—gossips and quarrels on the one hand, and doorways as the places of assorted incidents on the other; they are the "*pozhan* 破綻 (interstices)

[45] Keith McMahon, *Causality and Containment in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 41.

through which one cause engenders yet another effect."[46] However, there is no justification for why McMahon chooses images of mouths and doors to discuss the manifestation of causality in the story. Besides, he is inclined to view the plot development as spontaneous. He neglects the episodic structure of the story and the extreme contingency within some episodes. What is characteristic of this story and rarely found in other vernacular stories is that the narrator chooses to relate each occurrence episode by episode, with distinct signposts such as "now, back to [talk about]" 再說/且說 marking its beginning, and almost always with the same comment "because of that one penny, another life was over" 只因這一文錢上，又斷送了一條性命 completing the narration. In this way, each episode concludes with a remark that emphasizes the causal relation between the fatal incidents and the minor gambling game. However, by singling out these episodes, the unprecedented contingency starts to become apparent.

Let us return to the plot chart. Each "bullet-point" unit is one episode. Among these episodes, there is an extreme case concerned with the corpse of Yang-shi. As the story continues, since Zhang'er loses the last penny that his mother, Yang-shi, had given him, he starts to fight with Zaiwang, demanding that Zaiwang return that coin. After recovering from the stomachache, Yang-shi goes out and witnesses the two wrangling with each other. Upon hearing her son's explanation, she scolds Zaiwang on behalf of Zhang'er, and Zaiwang turns to his mother, Sun Daniang 孫大娘, to complain about what happened. This leads to a quarrel between Yang-shi and Sun Daniang. Sun takes this opportunity to accuse Yang-shi of adultery, only to be overheard by Yang's husband Qiu Yida. Out of rage, the potter cannot help but to demand that his wife to hang herself to prove her innocence. Driven to desperation, Yang-shi takes his words seriously and commits suicide. Later, her corpse is exploited by the landlord Zhu Chang 朱常

[46] McMahon, *Causality and Containment*, 41.

and his servant Bu Cai 卜才 in a land dispute with another landlord, Zhao Wan 趙完. Bu Cai pretends that Yang-shi was his wife and claims that she was beaten to death during a conflict with Zhao's servants. But the lie is exposed unexpectedly at court when the magistrate investigates the actual cause of Yang-shi's death. To everyone's surprise, even though it has been months since Yang-shi died,her corpse has not decomposed, and the clear imprint of the rope can still be seen around her neck. Even the narrator conveys his astonishment to the audience:

> Now, don't you agree that what happened next was *the strangest thing* in the world? Everyone thought that the corpse should have decomposed by this time. As it turned out, however, it was so well preserved that it looked as if it were still alive. (*Italics* mine)
>
> 天下有這等作怪的事。只道尸首經了許久，料已腐爛盡了，誰知都一毫不變，宛然如生.[47]

As a result, Zhu Chang and Bu Cai are sentenced for their wrong deeds and soon die of illness in prison.

No matter how extraordinary an episode may be, what obviously remains unavoidable is the end result: death. Indeed, if we recall the remark at the end of each episode, we can recognize an emphasis on the number of deaths. This stress on numbers is clear in the narration of the gambling game. The narrator reports the gains and losses between Zhang'er and Zaiwang. He traces and calculates the total amount of coins in Zhang'er's hand for the audience: from one to three, to twelve, and in the second half of the game, he directly announces, "each had a few wins and a few losses" 雖則中間互有勝負, but "in the end, [Zaiwang] won back all twelve pennies,

[47] Feng Menglong, *Xingshi hengyan*, 731. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into the possible connection between "For One Penny" and its paired story "Over Fifteen Strings of Cash, a Jest Leads to Dire Disasters" 十五貫戲言成巧禍 which have received much more scholarly attention. Nevertheless, it is still worth pointing out how "Fifteen Strings" could be relatable to "For One Penny" in terms of the issues of coincidence, retelling, and storytelling. In fact, I would suggest that "Fifteen Strings," through a story that stages the (re)telling of the occurrence by the characters in a central place, comments on the very practice of storytelling in *huanben* stories.

leaving Zhang'er with his mother's single penny" 到結末來，這十二文錢，依舊被 (再旺) 復去，長兒剛剛原剩得一文錢.[48]

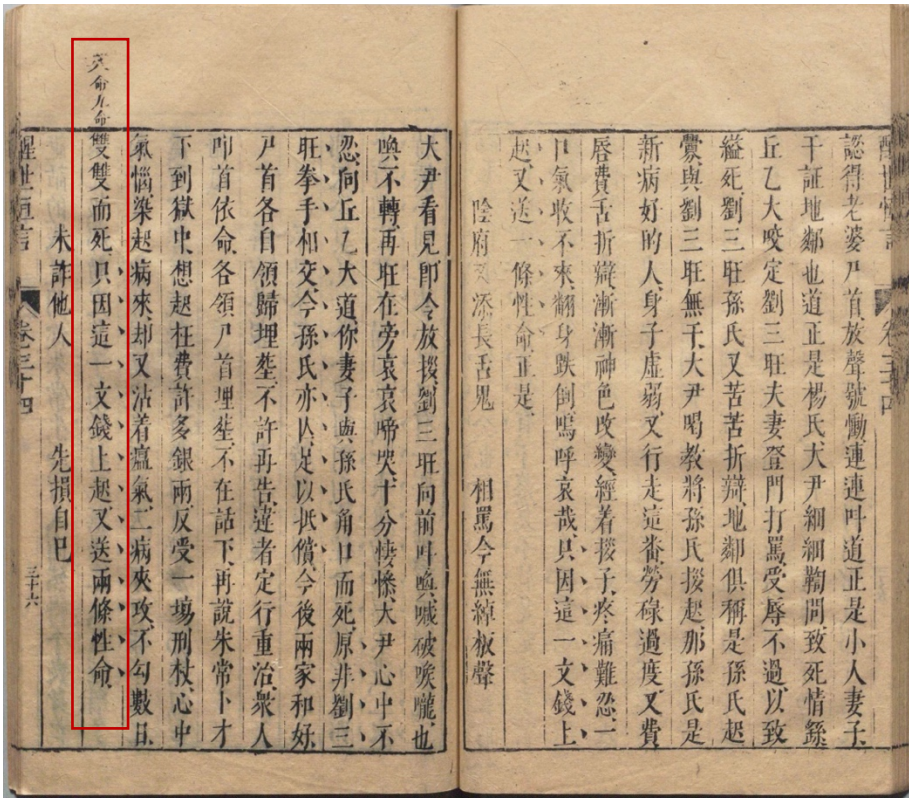

Fig. 3.4 Keyi Jushi's comment on the number of deaths, from *Xingshi hengyan*, printed by Ye Jingchi 葉敬池 in 1627. Naikaku bunkō, Tokyo, Japan.

In the narrative following the gambling game, the reader is made to witness and take the place of the narrator in calculating the death toll. There is one reader who obviously did so. In the margin above nearly all the narrator's ending remarks for each episode, the commentator Keyi Jushi 可一居士 (Retiree Keyi) counted the number of deaths (in the plot chart, shown in the parenthesis), marking "the first life" 一命, "the fourth life" 四命, "the eighth and the ninth lives" 八命、九命, and so forth (fig. 3.4).[49] Keyi Jushi's calculation could be considered as a

[48] Feng, *Xingshi hengyan*, 712.

[49] Scholars still have not reached a conclusion regarding the identity of Keyi Jushi. One hypothesis is that the commentator was none other than Feng Menglong, the compiler of *Xingshi hengyan* himself. See for instance,

readerly response to the narrator's rhetorical question posed immediately after the gambling game. When Yang-shi finds her son Zhang'er fighting with Zaiwang for the penny, the narrator chooses to pause the storytelling and forewarn the reader of impending disaster: "Yang-shi's stupidity led to major tragedies; as these tragedies developed, *how many lives* were taken, one after another? (*Italics* mine)"單因楊氏一時不明，惹出一場大禍，展轉的害了多少條性命.[50] To be sure, such a statement may have been rhetorical and employed to arouse the reader's curiosity and grasp their attention. Yet, Keyi Jushi takes these words literally, as he simply follows the narrator and starts counting the deaths, without even doubting whether it was actually the penny or Yang-shi that leads to the ensuing deaths of the characters. After all, calculation is a gesture toward linking the individual incidents together. It foreshadows the narrator's final verse of the entire story: "The fight was over only one penny; a small grudge led to *a series of* tragedies (*Italics* mine)" 相爭只為一文錢，小隙誰知奇禍連.[51]

What is underscored by calculation is a predictable destiny for the characters. As calculation becomes a method that makes the result of each episode outweigh the process, the reader is trained by the narrator to expect the fate of these characters (i.e. death) while counting

David L. Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary*, 272–273. If this is the case, both Keyi Jushi and the narrator can be viewed as characters constructed by Feng. What the commentator is doing is comparable to conspiring with the narrator to track the plot development for the reader and to reveal "[the author's] conception of the stories." (Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction* Commentary, 273).

These comments, in turn, have had an impact on the commentary practices of Jin Shengtan 金聖嘆 (1608–1661), especially on his predilection for counting the number of diverse narrative elements: in his comments on the novel *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (*Water Margin*), for example, Jin counts how many bowls of wine Wu Song drinks, how frequently the narrator mentions a stick, or a curtain, just to list a few. For specific examples, see Jin's comments in chapter 22 and 23 in the 70-chapter *Shuihu.zhuan*. As far as I know, there is still no scholarship on numeration as a commentarial method for either *Xingshi hengyan* or Jin Shengtan. There is only one piece of scholarship that touches on this issue: Xu Zhongrong 許中榮, "Lun 'Jin ben' *Shuihu* de 'chongfu' xushu jiqi yiyi" 論金本《水滸》的重複敘述及其意義, *Zhongnan daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 中南大學學報（社會科學版) 22, no.2 (2016): 159–65.

[50] Feng Menglong, *Xingshi hengyan*, 713.

[51] Feng, *Xingshi hengyan*, 737.

the death toll. This becomes transparent in a fictional conversation between the narrator and the imagined audience prior to the last episode in the story:

> [Audience] Storyteller, let me say something: Granted that Zhu Chang died a tragic death and his family was destroyed because of his maliciousness—but Zhao Wan and his son brutally killed two innocent people and falsely charged two others of crimes, and yet they slipped through the net of justice and got to live in peace and affluence. This goes to show that the karmic reach of heavenly principles has its limits.
> [Narrator] Dear audience, have you heard these sayings?
> [Audience] What sayings?
> [Narrator] "Good is returned with good; Evil is returned with evil.
> It is not that retribution is lacking, But you must wait for the right timing."
> Heaven remembers everything. Since time immemorial, has Heaven ever missed its mark? Zhao Wan and his son slipped through the net of justice and enjoyed peace and affluence partly because their destined years of good fortune were not up, partly because the right time had not arrived, and also because this poor storyteller has only one mouth and one tongue. When I tell of what happened on this side, I can't attend to what happened on that side, can I? *I will have to take up the retributions one by one.* (*Italics* mine)
>
> 說話的，我且問你，朱常生心害人，尚然得個喪身亡家之報，那趙完父子活活打死無辜二人，又誣陷了兩條性命，他卻漏網安享，可見天理原有報不到之處。看官，你可曉得，古老有幾句言語麼？
> 是哪幾句？
> 古語道："善有善報，惡有惡報。不是不報，時辰未到。"那天公算善報，個個記得明白。古往今來，曾放過那個？這趙完父子漏網受用，一來他的頑福未盡；二來時候不到；三來小子只有一張口，沒有兩副舌，說了那邊，變難顧這邊，<u>少不得逐節還你一個報應</u>.[52]

Here, the audience is even one step ahead of the narrator in suggesting the fate of Zhao Wan and his son. Rather than receiving information passively from the narrator, they are able to foresee that the characters entangled with wrongdoings will die.

If death toll is counted, the conversation between the narrator and the imagined audience betrays the real target of calculation indicated by the idea of *baoying* 報應 (retribution). It is fate that needs calculation. As Karl S. Y. Kao points out, *bao* 報 (requital) and *baoying* reflect one of

[52] Feng, *Xingshi hengyan*, 733.

the central ideological values in the late Ming and early Qing that determine the narrative structure of many short stories. *Baoying*, in particular, helps to "make sense of the irrational or the non-rational, sometimes absurd, occurrences by giving them an interpretation according to higher law of causality than the visible causation in the empirical sense." For Kao, it is the invisible heavenly forces that cause the incomprehensible, paradoxical, and uncanny "destined coincidence" in the stories, "a chance happening that is neither fortuitous nor contingent" but is determined by imperceptible causal laws.[53] Retribution, as recognized by the imagined audience in "For One Penny," explains the death of Zhu Chang, along with Yang-shi's unimpaired body.

In the previous section, I mentioned how gambling and divination have long been intertwined with each other, and how the chance element in gambling games was usually configured as either divinatory or human agency. Here in "For One Penny," we see again chance presented as retribution. If the characters' fate is predictable in the story, it also becomes calculable in the discourse on retribution. What is perhaps lurking in the background of vernacular stories is the prevalence of morality books (*shanshu* 善書) circulated as moral didacticism. In particular, the late Ming witnessed the widespread and use of the *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit* (*Gongguo ge* 功過格), a moral handbook that intended to provide guidance on daily behavior through quantifying a person's conduct. In this way, the users of the *Ledgers* were endowed with agency to change their fate.[54] A person would earn corresponding points for merit (*gong* 功) while losing points for demerit (*guo* 過). Consequently, they would end up with receiving a good or bad fortune this life in retribution for the total amount of points they

[53] Karl S. Y. Kao, "*Bao* and *Baoying*: Narrative Causality and External Motivations in Chinese Fiction," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (*CLEAR*) 11 (1989), 135.

[54] For significant studies of *Gongguo ge*, see Sakai Tadao, *Chūgoku zensho no kenkyū*; and Cynthia J. Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

obtained. A direct connection between the *Ledgers* and vernacular fiction is demonstrated most tellingly in *A Sequel to The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Xu jin ping mei* 續金瓶梅), a novel written by the early Qing loyalist author Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢 (1599–1669). The novel imagines the reincarnated lives of the protagonists from the novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase*.[55] Among the prefatory materials that frame the novel proper, what deserves attention is the "Ledger of Merit and Demerit" based on *Taishang's Tract on Stimulus and Response* (*Ganying pian* 感應篇), a popular morality book officially promoted by Emperor Shunzhi during Ding's time, together with Ding's "wordless interpretation" 無字解 of it. Notably, the numerical aspect of merit and demerit is concretized through the dots attached to each specific deed. These dots are not found in any earlier version of *Ganying pian* (fig. 3.5). For instance, "committing homicide to seize property" 殺人取財 is equal to seven dots of punishment, worse than "endangering others to keep oneself safe" 危人自安 that corresponds to six dots of punishment. Even though the significance of these dots remains implicit, they denote the levels of reward or penalty for various behaviors, thereby visualizing the very statement in *Ganying pian*: "Those who make mistakes will have one period in their life deducted for a major misdeed, and one count for an incidence of minor misconduct. All these mistakes correspond to large or small numbers" 凡人有過，大則奪紀，小則奪算，其過大小有數.[56] Here, both *ji* (period) and *suan* (count) refer to a time unit within one's lifespan, yet clearly, they still prescribe an act of

[55] For a discussion of *Xu jin ping mei*, see Xiaoqiao Ling, *Feeling the Past in Seventeenth-Century China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021), especially chapter 4.

[56] Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢, *Taishang ganying pian wuzi jie* 太上感應篇無字解, in *Xu jin ping mei* 續金瓶梅, in *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 古本小說集成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), vol.71, 1.

calculation.[57] In the opening remarks to chapter 4 in *A Sequel*, Ding further cites *Ganying pian* and explicates its calculation mechanism through the narrator's voice:

> There is a deity between heaven and earth that governs people's demerits, who deprives of one's count according to the severity of the misconduct. If the count is subtracted, a person will experience poverty and material loss frequently encountering suffering and misery; they will be detested by others, followed with punishment and disaster. A person dies when the count is exhausted.
>
> 天地有司過之神，依人所犯輕重，以奪人算。算減則貧耗，多逢憂患，人皆惡之，刑禍隨之，算盡則死.[58]

This substantiates the existence of an invisible divine force that observes a person's behavior and manipulates their lifespan. It further explains *suan* (count) as a principal measure of one's (mis)fortune, and the exhaustion *suan* signals death.

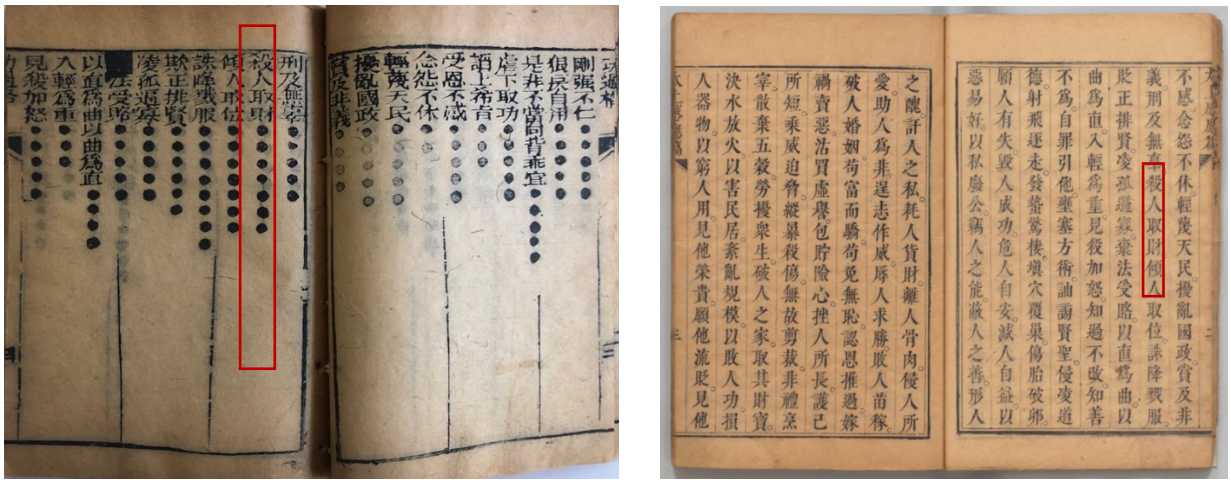

Fig. 3.5 A comparison between the entry "committing homicide to seize property" 殺人取財 prior to *Xu jin ping mei* (early Qing edition; Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia Library, University of Tokyo, Japan) and that in *Ganying pian* (1656; Naikaku bunkō, Tokyo, Japan).

[57] A similar argument is made by literary historian Hsiao-chen Hu, who analyzes the notion of "calculation" in *Xu jin ping mei*, as related especially to life, money, and commodities in the novel. As Hu points out, *Xu jin ping mei* foregrounds the practice of calculation through the characters' entanglement with money, and their corresponding fate also bespeaks the accuracy of retribution. See Hu Hsiao-chen 胡曉真, "*Xu jin ping mei*: Ding Yaokang yuedu *Jin ping mei*" 《續金瓶梅》：丁耀亢閱讀《金瓶梅》, *Zhongwai wenxue* 中外文學 23, no.10 (1995): 90–93.

[58] Ding, *Xu jin ping mei*, 85.

To be sure, while *bao* and *baoying* are manifested by the characters' deaths, "For One Penny" never overtly states this has to do with such a lifespan calculation. But arguably, in the story, the working of retribution is already been informed by the gambling scene, especially in terms of the attention to the total amount of gain or loss, a shared episodic randomness, and balance and repayment. The conversation between the narrator and the imagined audience foregrounds the latter two aspects. In response to the doubt cast by the audience who are waiting for retribution for Zhao Wan and his son, the narrator offers the following explanations: first, they still have some years destined for good fortune; second, it is not the perfect time for the two to die; and third, the narrator is constrained by the medium of storytelling in that he can only focus on one group [of characters] at a time. The narrator thus replies, "I will have to take up retribution and *return to you one by one*" 少不得逐節還你個報應. The verb *huan* 還 (to return, repay) implies a balance of owing and paying off, a state already indicated in the gambling scene. In order to coax Zhang'er to join the game, Zaiwang entices him saying, "If you win, you're lucky. If you lose, I'll lend one to you. Just remember to *pay me back* next time (*Italics* mine)" 你若贏了是造化，若輸了時我借與你，下次還我就是.[59] Of course, recalling the plot, we are certain that Zaiwang is just lying. Nevertheless, Zhang'er does experience accumulation and the return of both money and fortune as he first wins twelve coins and then loses them all to Zaiwang.

Interestingly, right above Zaiwang's words, the commentator Keyi jushi stated: "It is said that gambling leads to robbery and adultery leads to killing. As it turns out, however, gambling can also lead to killing" 聞賭近盜，奸近殺，誰知賭亦近殺也.[60] Positioned at a moment

[59] Feng, *Xingshi hengyan*, 711.
[60] Keyi Jushi's comment in *Xingshi hengyan* (printed by Ye Jingchi, 1627), *juan* 34, 6:a.

before the game starts and much earlier than the narrator's foreshadowing of the characters' death, this comment seems abrupt at a first glance. Given that the game is nothing other than a frivolous children's game, why was Keyi Jushi equating gambling to homicide? In fact, the saying "gambling leads to robbery and adultery leads to killing" may possibly have come from the narrator's remark in a story from Feng Menglong's second story collection, *Stories to Caution the World* (*Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言). In this "Prefect Kuang Solves the Case of the Dead Baby" 況太守斷死孩兒, the narrator opens the main story with this proverb. In the story, the female protagonist, Shao-shi, is tricked by her servant Degui into committing adultery with Zhi Zhu. Out of fear that her immoral behavior will be exposed, she kills her baby when it is born, only to create an excuse for Zhi Zhu to blackmail her for money. Angry and regretful, Shao-shi cannot keep from killing Degui and hanging herself. Whereas the saying summarizes these occurrences in this earlier story, it becomes rather perplexing when placed in the context of "For One Penny": What is the connection between gambling and killing? Who is killing whom, and how?

To seek a reasonable answer to these questions, we return to the conversation and look for traces of how the author possibly wrote the story. If the conversation suggests a delay by the narrator in completing the telling of the story and it comes later than what the audience would have predicted, this can also be understood as the author's disclosure of an episodic mode of storytelling and writing, especially when the phrase "episode by episode/one by one" 逐節 is used. The final episode shows that to put Zhao Wan and his son to death—to equitably "repay" the moral debts they owe—a new character Ai Da'er 愛大兒 is introduced as Zhao Wan's young concubine; in turn, Ai Da'er is involved in the "death game" when her adultery with servant Zhao Yilang 趙一郎 is exposed. If this episode is read as a deliberate addition by the author to

maintain the moral balance, we may push the interpretation even further and apply this narrative-generation mechanism to the entire story. So long as new characters are involved, new events can take place that result in death based on a calculation of moral balance. Accordingly, the main story itself can be continuously expanded episode by episode, each of which embodies a tension between chance (new possibilities for events involving the characters) and control (the predictable outcome of these events—that is, death). In this way, the author invites the reader to join this death game, calculate the characters' fate, deprive the characters who have committed wrongdoings of their lives, and learn the mechanics of retribution. Foreshadowing this death game is the gambling scene, witnessed and reported by the narrator: there, we have already been informed something similar—a monetary balance of give and take via round after round of random coin tossing.

The narrator concludes "For One Penny" as follows:

> Even though every injustice has its perpetrator and every debt its debtor, how would Yang-shi have died if there had been no fight over that penny? Without Yang-shi's corpse, Zhu Chang would not have tried his blackmail ruse. That one little penny led to *thirteen deaths in all.* The point of this story…is to advise people not to begrudge their money and to control their tempers. (*Italics* mine)
>
> 雖然是冤各有頭，債各有主，若不為這一文錢爭鬧，楊氏如何得死？沒有楊氏尸首，連朱常這詐害一事，也就做不成了。總為這一文錢，卻斷送了十三條性命。這段話…奉勸世人，捨財忍氣為上.[61]

Although the narrator attempts to frame the whole story as a butterfly effect, the episodic structure casts doubt on the extent to which these events were innately interconnected. In fact, this narrative structure works hand in hand with the "double-calculation" that the reader is prompted to engage with: calculating the death toll while balancing the characters' karmic retribution. In other words, it is actually through such calculation that the chance events are

[61] Feng, *Xingshi hengyan*, 736–37.

linked towards the end. Doing the mathematics entices the reader to keep reading until they figure out the total number of deaths. As long as the calculation continues, these episodes even have the potential to be extended, regardless of the possible extraordinariness and randomness within each episode. Thus, reading the story is separate from figuring out the moral message the narrator finally conveys: the lesson that "people should not be begrudging with their money, and they should control their tempers" is revealed directly once the reader reaches "thirteen" toward the end.

Chance and Deception

Let us pause for a moment and reconsider how a die works. If you throw your dice, they will stop at a random combination of numbers shown on their upper surfaces. With a normal die, the probability of rolling from one to six is equal. But this probability in gambling can become uneven by using special "loaded dice" 藥骰 filled with lead. This cheating instrument avoids randomness and ensures the user's victory. Thus, it has been frequently exploited by swindlers to scam people out of their property. Yet, the next story that I will focus on, "The Confidence Men" by Pu Songling, turns this deception upside-down. Instead of ensuring a gambling outcome via using specially made dice and other tricks, the story turns a swindle into a game of gambling, and in so doing, reintroduces the element of chance.[62]

Pu Songling's writings on gambling have often been understood as articulating moral admonitions.[63] Indeed, Pu begins his "Essay on Gambling" 賭博辭 by stating outright that

[62] Another *Liaozhai* story on deception to be considered in a similar light is "The Sting" (*Juzha* 局詐) in *juan* 8.

[63] See for instance, Judith T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 89; Wang Jianping 王建平, "Cong *Liaozhai zhiyi* kan Pu Songling de fandu gongxian" 從《聊齋誌異》看蒲松齡的反賭貢獻, *Pu Songling yanjiu* 蒲松齡研究, no.1 (2017): 43–103.

gambling results in the loss of entire fortunes and atrocious behaviors.[64] The essay was both circulated independently and attached as a comment by the Pu, the Historian of the Strange 異史氏, to the story "The Gambling Charm" (*dufu* 賭符) in *Liaozhai zhiyi*.[65] In the story, a gambling charm is bestowed by a Daoist priest on an addicted gambler. Per the priest's instructions, the charm was to be used to recover previous economic loss. But against the priest's words, the gambler continues to gamble until he notices that the charm has already disappeared. While it is usually the Historian of the Strange that remarks on the stories in *Liaozhai zhiyi*, here the tale itself becomes a kind of annotation to Pu's lengthy comment about the benefits of quitting this harmful pursuit.

"The Confidence Men" is different. In this story, there is neither a gambling addict nor detailed moral teaching. It centers on how a group of swindlers defraud Wang Zixun 王子巽 of his money, and Wu Anren 吳安仁, with the assistance of a fox spirit, wins the money back from the same group. Similar to "For One Penny," the story is structured episodically, with a fake gambling game being among one of the many episodes of deception. While deception usually involves lies or actions planned beforehand, randomness is retained in each episode throughout the story. "The Confidence Men" invites the reader not to calculate characters' karmic

[64] There is another manuscript entitled "Essay on Quitting Gambling" 戒賭文 in the collection of Ryōsai bunko 聊齋文庫 at Keio University, Japan. Tracing the ugly behavior of gamblers, the essay admonishes people not to gamble by stating that the activity is the utmost in evil and easily leads to theft, adultery, and murder. However, although the manuscript is attributed to the so-called "Scholar of the Strange from Zichuan" 淄川異史士, the content is the same as You Tong's essay of the same title mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, with the last few sentences omitted that ascribe the dynastic fall to gambling.

[65] More evidence is necessary to determine whether the essay or the commentary came first. According to Sheng Wei 盛偉, "Essay on Gambling" 賭博辭 was copied individually and included in the *Prose Anthology of Master Liaozhai* 聊齋文集. Sheng also mentions that there is another manuscript of the essay in Ryōsai bunko that combines the "Lyric on Gambling" 賭博詞 with "A Pedant's Self-Mockery" 學究自嘲. This "Lyric on Gambling," which I discuss in detail later in this section, is in fact another version of the folk song suite usually titled "Pretty Yaksha" 俊夜叉 written by Pu Songling. It is different from this essay. For Sheng Wei's note, see *Pu Songling quanji* 蒲松齡全集 (Beijing: Xuelin chubanshe, 1998), vol.2, 1375.

retribution, but to witness the constant dialectic between chance and control. This tension lies not just within the episodes, but also in the ways these episodes are framed in relation to each other. For the reader, the experience is about interpretive uncertainty; the allure of reading the stories lies in its similarity to playing a metagame of gambling: it is the uncertainty about a precise message from the author that entices the reader to continuously flip through the pages, hoping that at some point they can discover the truth.

A short story with an episodic structure, "The Confidence Men" provides another example for exploring the so-called "dice-generated narratives," especially how the narrative structure can prompt possible readerly interactions as related to chance. Gambling again serves as the key to understanding the structure of the story. Yet unlike "For One Penny" in which a gambling game leads to a series of episodes about life and death, the connection between gambling and the story narrative is less explicit in "The Confidence Men," and lies in the ways the story might have come into being. It is to these possible sources of inspiration for Pu Songling that I now turn.

Enticement to Gamble

Little is known about how "The Confidence Men" was written, except that Wang Zixun was actually Pu Songling's friend Wang Minru 王敏入 (style name: Zixun) in Zichuan 淄川, Shandong Province and the story's first half is supposedly based on his personal experience.[66] Yet this fact cannot explain why the anecdote about Wang is paired with a second half that involves a fox spirit. Unlike most *Liaozhai* stories, the Historian of the Strange presents his

[66] For the friendship between Pu Songling and Wang Minru, see Yuan Shishuo 袁世碩, *Pu Songling shiji zhushu xinkao* 蒲松齡事蹟著述新考(Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1988), 91–99.

opinions prior to, not after, the narrative proper of "The Confidence Men." His remarks, thus, frame both Wang Minru's experience *and* the extraordinary second half; Wang's encounters in turn become a specific case of what the Historian of the Strange refers to as "*nianyang*":

> The Historian of the Strange says: Even though [the confidence men] randomly meet [you], their words are as sugary as the sweet wine. Their approach is gradual, but the pull of their deception is profound. If you think that they are like your old friends when you first meet, you will suffer an unexpected disaster and lose your money. They set traps whenever opportunity appears, and their methods of deception are not always the same. It is commonly said that these people infiltrate by pleasing you with [their] words. They are called *nianyang*. Nowadays, there are many *nianyang* on the way northwards to the capital, and their victims are numerous.
>
> 異史氏曰：萍水相逢，甘言如醴，其來也漸，其入也深。誤認傾蓋之交，遂罹喪資之禍。隨機設阱，情狀不一；俗以其言辭浸潤，名曰"念秧"，今北途多有之，遭其害者尤眾.[67]

In this definition of *nianyang*, the potential parallel between swindling and gambling is suggested through the notion of *ji* 機 (opportunities). If gamblers submit to chance and hope for a winning outcome each round, swindlers are likewise prone to such "hopeful repetition"[68]—to use Jessica Richard's expression—to approach their target "gradually" (*jian* 漸), taking the chance that at some point, the person will fall into their trap.

While no other known writings by Pu Songling similarly center on "*niangyang*," the term does appear elsewhere. In a folk song suite "Lyrics of Gambling" (*Dubo ci* 賭博詞), the narrator describes how "upon seeing that he [the protagonist] possessed some money, his disreputable friend would "*nianyang*" him from time to time, and then, he could not make a decision" 狐朋狗

[67] Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 (Huijiao huizhu huiping ben 會校會注會評本) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011), 4.564.

[68] Richard, *The Romance of Gambling in the Eighteenth-Century British Novel*, 45.

友見他有了錢，三番五次地念秧他，那主意也就拿不定了.[69] The verb *nianyang*, as the narration suggests, directly points to a verbal enticement to gamble.

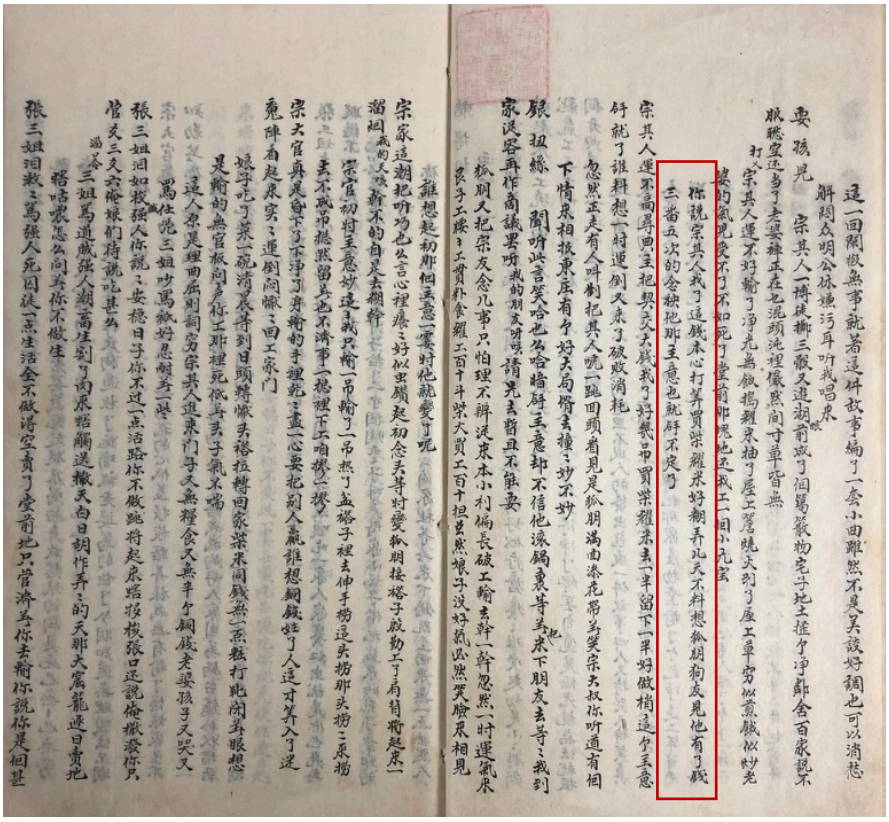

Fig. 3.6 “Lyrics of Gambling” 賭博詞.
Unpublished manuscript copied in the early Republican period.
Ryōsai bunko 聊齋文庫, Keio University, Tokyo.

“Lyrics of Gambling” is preserved in a manuscript (fig. 3.6). Its content shares much with another folk song suite, “Pretty Yaksha” (*Jun yecha* 俊夜叉). Without additional evidence, it is still hard to identify the actual authorship and date of this manuscript. The “Year of the Wood Rabbit (*yimao*) in the reign of Kangxi” 康熙爺乙卯年 (1675) is mentioned in the lyrics; it may

[69] “*Dubo ci*,” 賭博詞, unpublished manuscript copied in the early Republican period (call no. CL@RYOSAI@704), 1:b. According to Sheng Wei, there are at least five manuscripts of this folk song suite (*liqu* 俚曲), and most are under the title “Pretty Yaksha” (*Jun yecha* 俊夜叉). Further comparison of these manuscripts is necessary. For my study, the main source of reference is Lu Dahuang ed., *Liaozhai liqu ji* 聊齋俚曲集, in *Pu Songling ji* 蒲松齡集, vol.2 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 1099–1108 and Sheng Wei ed., *Pu songling quanji*, vol.3, 285–96.

possibly narrow the range of when the song suite was produced.[70] Despite all these uncertainties, my discussion below suggests a possible connection between the "Lyrics of Gambling" and "The Confidence Men." This connection is indicated not only by the shared vocabulary like "*nianyang*," but also by the shared central theme of gambling, especially given that the act of enticing one to gamble and the ghostly image of an addicted gambler are both reconfigured into the renditions of the swindlers in "The Confidence Men." At least, by unraveling these points of connection, I want to propose a hypothesis: it is either Pu Songling who was inspired by this song suite to write a tale about a swindle, or someone who had read the *nianyang* story revised it into the ballad.[71]

Let me unpack the "Lyrics of Gambling" by contextualizing it with contemporaneous writings on gambling including those by Pu Songling himself. Set in the Zichuan county during Pu's time,[72] the lyrics unfold between Zong Qiren 宗其人 (written as Qiren 亓人 in "Pretty Yaksha"), a gambling addict, and his shrewd wife Zhang Sanjie 張三姐. It centers on Sanjie rebuking her husband to persuade him to quit gambling. In addition to these two protagonists, there is a third character worth attending to: the so-called "disreputable friend" 狐朋 (literally, "fox friend," also written as *hupeng* 胡朋 ["random friend"] in "Pretty Yaksha,") who plays a key role in seducing Qiren into gambling. The seduction by this "disreputable friend" is as straightforward as Zaiwang's invitation in "For One Penny." Both underscore a profitable or at

[70] This is the same with "Pretty Yaksha."

[71] Notably, scholars have been discussing how Pu Songling recast some of the classical stories in *Liaozhai* into the form of vernacular ballads, instead of the other way around. See, for instance, Allan H. Barr, "*Liaozhai zhiyi* and Chinese Vernacular Fiction," in *Reading China: Fiction, History, and the Dynamics of Discourse. Essays in Honor of Professor Glen Dudbridge*, ed. Daria Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 36n51.

[72] Indicated by "Kangxi yimao" (1675).

least harmless economic outcome from gambling. *Hupeng*'s words make Zong stop hesitating about whether he should talk to his wife first before joining a game:

> With little investment, [you can] usually generate great profit,
> [You should] spend the money on a wager.
> Luck comes suddenly;
> Then [you will] carry silver ingots in your girdle, obtain strings of coins,
> And sell hundreds and thousands *dou* of grain,
> to buy dozens and hundreds bundles of firewood.
> Although [your wife] has a bad temper,
> [seeing this,] she will welcome you with a smiling face.
>
> 從來本小利偏長，破上輸去幹一幹。
> 忽然一時運氣來，銀子上腰，錢上貫，
> 糧食糴上百千斗，柴火買上百十擔。
> 雖然娘子沒好氣，必然笑臉來相見.[73]

The narrator reminds us at the very beginning of the "Lyrics" that "among the inhuman deeds, gambling is the first; it is such nonsense that one expects to earn money [through it]" 不成人賭博第一，望贏錢真是糊(胡)謅.[74] The appealing claim by the *hupeng* is merely some artful words. Not only does Qiren lose all his money, but his wife Sanjie also scolds at him when he returns home empty-handed, with no cash, grain, or firewood.

Earlier in the late Ming dynasty, "enticement to gamble" (*yindu* 引賭) was already a major type of swindle.[75] *Piaodu jiguan*, for instance, specified twelve tricks of "an acquaintance's enticement" 相識誘人, with verbal temptation like the *hupeng*'s lie listed first.

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[73] In "Pretty Yaksha," the Chinese text reads "從來本大利就長，破上大本幹一幹。忽然一朝運氣轉，銀上包，錢上串，柴火買他百十捆(柴禾買他幾百屧), 糧米買他百十石。縱然娘子沒吃飯，情管笑臉來相見." Lu, *Pu Songling ji*, 2.1101 and Sheng, *Pu Songling quanji*, 3.287.

[74] This is the same with the opening of "Pretty Yaksha."

[75] The term "Enticement to Gamble" is borrowed from *Dupian xinshu* 杜騙新書 (*The Book of Swindles*) compiled by Zhang Yingyu 張應余 (fl. 1612–1617). The book is a collection of classical tales on the topic of fraud during the late Ming dynasty. "Enticement to Gamble" is among one of the twenty-four types included in the book. For a general introduction of *The Book of Swindles*, see Zhang Yingyu, *The Book of Swindles: Selections from a Late Ming Collection*, trans. Christopher Rea and Bruce Rusk (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), xiii–xxxvi.

Similar to the *nianyang*'s approaches, especially regarding their gradual, indirect, and multiple steps, is a trick called "enticement via framed traps" 圈局誘法:

> If they want to be acquainted with you and get money from you,
> they always act polite and respectful.
> They accompany you as you enjoy the lakeshore scenery,
> wandering through open fields and obscure villages.
> Arranging ahead one or two gamblers;
> Meeting with them en route, you join in wine and drinking games.
> When you are half-drunk, they ask you to gamble.
> When you respond that you don't have wager, they take care it on your behalf.
> From below [they] drill the dry dice;
> Even if you were an immortal, you could never win.
>
> 思慾相識贏你，必來禮貌恭敬。
> 與你遊湖玩景，閑步曠野荒村。
> 一二擲手，先行安頓。
> 及至相逢，飲酒行令。
> 半酣特際，要賭輸贏。
> 你回言沒彩，他替你應承。
> 枯頭[骰]打鑽與下生，那怕你神仙不得贏.[76]

The circuitousness of the trick clearly echoes the Historian of the Strange's words: "Their approach is gradual, but the pullof their deception is profound" 其來也漸，其入也深. Everything you experience—the hospitality of your "friends," the gamblers they invite, and perhaps even the dice—is an illusion. If you fall in the trap designed by these swindlers, you will sink into complete passivity. This reminds us of Li Yu's hyperbolic statement about dice: once you are "entangled" (*chan* 纏) by them, you can no longer determine your life and death. Indeed, as the admonition in *Piaodu jiguan* continues, the swindlers will keep bothering you from time to time. These "hungry lice" 餓虱子 never care about what you are losing, whether you are pawning your fields, selling your child, or even trading yourself in.

[76] Shen, *Piaodu jiguan*, *juan shang*, 8:b–9:a.

When *Piaodu jiguan* was circulated, this kind of trap was also carefully depicted by several short story authors. One example is from "Court Gentleman Shen Buys a Laugh for Three-Thousand Taels; Lord Wang Lays a One-Night Trap" 沈將仕三千買笑錢, 王朝議一夜迷魂陣 in Ling Mengchu's 凌濛初 (1580–1644) *Slapping the Table in Amazement, Second Collection* (*Erke pai'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇). The story was adapted from an anecdote in the Song dynasty strange account collection *Records of the Listener* (*Yijian zhi* 夷堅志). It tells about the experience of Court Gentleman Shen, a playboy who "squanders money like dust," and loses all his property in a gambling game that turns out to be a swindle by a group of rascals. After befriending Shen, the group invites him to spend the night at Lord Wang's residence. There, Shen is enticed by one of the swindlers, Zheng Shi, to join a gambling game with several beauties. The game turns out to be a trap in which Shen's fate is set: lose the game and surrender his money.[77]

However, in Ling's adaptation, the swindlers are not depicted as the decisive factor in Court Gentleman Shen's loss. Instead, it is Shen himself that directs his own fortune, and the swindlers, in a subsidiary position, only play the simple role of deciding when to terminate the game through their trickery. Ling's elaboration makes clear Shen's initiative in joining the game:

> Although the dice have no consciousness, they are incredibly efficacious and go with people's feeling and desire. At first, Court Gentleman Shen was in luck, and the "win" wager followed him. Therefore, every time he tossed the dice, he won. After he rested for a while, an omen of failure came upon [him]. Moreover, as Shen somehow felt sorry [for

[77] The prologue story is also related to gambling, particularly its interplay with fate and retribution. In this account, a physiognomist foretells that Ding Shi 丁湜, a Northern Song gambling addict and scholar, will achieve the top honors in the civil service examination, but he changes his prediction two days later. This is a heavenly punishment, because Ding has won six million *qian* through gambling; only by returning the ill-gotten gains and quitting gambling could he win the sixth place in the examination. Both this prologue story and the main story were adapted from *Yijian zhi*. Ling Mengchu's story was further adapted into the four-act *zaju* play, *Maixiao jujin* 買笑局金, in *Sumen xiao* 蘇門嘯 which includes a total of twelve *zaju* plays by Fu Yichen 傅一臣 (fl. seventeenth century) all based on Ling's vernacular stories. Unlike Ling's story that does not reveal the swindle until almost the end, the play informs the audience of the swindlers' plan in act 2, "Contrivance" (設計). I have discussed Ling's story in Chen, "Ghostly Dicing."

> the beauties] and would rather lose [to them], his spirit felt quite deflated. Furthermore, he felt it enchanting that the mistress looked angry when energized, and thus he fell mesmerized. Distracted, he was completely defeated on the [final] throw.
>
> 這骰子雖無知覺，極有靈通，最是跟著人意興走的。起初沈將仕神來氣旺，勝采便跟著他走，所以連擲連贏。歇了一會，勝頭已過，敗色將來。況且心理有些過意不去，情願認輸，一團銳氣已自餒了十分了。更見那小姬氣忿忿、雄糾糾，十分有趣，魂靈也被他吊了去。心裡忙亂，一擲大敗。[78]

More complicated than the original version "Shen pinched [the dice] and tossed them, and he lost" 沈撚一擲, 敗焉 in *Yijian zhi*,[79] this representation displaces deception as the real impetus of the game. We recall the notion of *qi* emphasized by Feng Menglong. In "For One Penny," the changing state of mind serves as one of the determinants of Zhang'er's loss. Here, the instability of the gambler's state of mind is further projected on the unconscious dice that are efficacious enough to go with the gambler's feeling and desire.

Likewise, in "Lyrics of Gambling," the *hupeng*'s verbal enticement would not have worked without Qiren's gambling addiction. But as his attitude towards gambling changed, he was able to turn down the *hupeng*'s invitation. This is thanks to his wife's complaint that occupies a major part of the song suite. Not only does Sanjie grumble at Qiren's loss, but gambling is blamed as toxic through her voice. For her, gambling is worse than theft or robbery, in that it is full of traps. Behind the honeyed words is always the risk of loss—of owing debts of property and even life. Her words, noticeably, give a sketch of Qiren as a gambling addict (referring to as "a gambling ghost" 賭博鬼 in other manuscripts) who always breaks his promise to quit the game: "[You have] dark black rims of the eyes, a dark red face; [you] wear a dog skin

[78] Ling Mengchu 凌濛初, *Erke pai'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), 102.
[79] Tan ed., *Sanyan liangpai ziliao*, 789.

and beat a clapper; [you said] you would not gamble yesterday, but you still did so until daybreak"烏黑眼，烏紅臉，被著狗皮打著板。昨日到說不賭來，一賭賭到天打完.[80]

The dark black and red rims of the eyes are turned into a physical mark of the gambling ghosts in the *Liaozhai* story "Wang Da" 王大. In this tale, Li Xin invites Zhou Ziming to gamble with two ghosts who used to be Li's fellow gamblers when they were alive. Unfortunately, Zhou and the two ghosts are caught on the spot by the City God. As punishment, their middle fingers are chopped off, and their eye rims dyed in black and red. As long as they bribe the escorts, these marks can disappear. Stingy and greedy, only Zhou refuses to do so. Hence, after returning to the human realm, he finds his finger falling off, and the rim of one eye is painted black and the other red. Still reluctant to repay his gambling debts to the ghosts, his soul is arrested and taken to the court of the City God again. Not until he demands to appear in his family members' dream and asks them to burn twenty bundles of paper money for him is he ultimately released and returns to life. But from then on, "Zhou gambles as usual, with his four fingers, as well as red and black rims of the eyes" 周以四指帶赤墨眼, 賭如故.[81]

If the entire story of "Wang Da" intends to convey a message that in terms of gambling, "there is no difference between this world and the netherworld,"[82] the experience of Zhou Ziming also poses the question of how to recognize a real gambling ghost. In the underworld, the red and black eyes determine which ghost is a gambler; yet this mark is no longer effective in the

[80] In "Pretty Yaksha," also written as "dark rims of the eyes, red rims of the eyes" 烏黑眼，烏紅眼.

[81] Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 11.1538.

[82] Allan Barr, viewing the story together with the following comment by the Historian of the Strange, does not focus on the aspect of gambling, but sees "Wang Da" as a fictional satire on the irresponsible officials during his time. For this argument, see Allan Barr, "A Comparative Study of Early and Late Tales in *Liaozhai zhiyi*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45, no.1 (1985): 167–168. A similar strange account on gambling among ghosts can be found in the anecdote "The Gambling God Called Mi Long" 賭錢神號迷龍 *Zibu yu* 子不語 (*What the Master Would Not Discuss*) by Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1797).

human realm, for people would only "snicker at" 掩笑 such an unpleasant look. Rather, as the narrator exclaims, it is by the unchanging addiction to gambling that "a gambler is recognized to be non-human" 此知博徒之非人矣,[83] and for Zhou, his appearance only adds another layer of ghostliness. In reality, according to the nineteenth-century commentator He Shouqi 何守奇, "it is very common to see gamblers with red and black rims of the eyes, and there are still those, who even with their fingers chopped off, don't repent" 賭兒眼帶赤黑圈，比比皆然，仍有截指而不悛者.[84] After all, a gambling ghost is a metaphor for an addictive gambler, with the red and black rims of the eyes figurative to describe a gambler's obsession and lifelessness. Pu Songling painted a more detailed portrait of such a ghostly gambler:

> They are intimate with those licentious friends, lingering throughout the eternal night. Emptying their pockets and pouring out their casesthey suspend their money in the dangerous air; shouting for the winning patterns, they beg for efficacy in the evil dead bones.
> Tossing dice, like rolling beads; handling cards, like holding a round fan.
> Sometimes peeping at others and sometimes looking at themselves, they wear out their ghostly eyes; showing weakness openly and using strengths secretly, they exhaust their stealthy tricks.
> When guests waiting at the gate, they are still lingering at the game; when their house on fire, they are also glaring at the bowl.
> Forgetting food and giving up sleep, they are long enchanted as addicts; wearing out tongue and drying up lips, their appearance is those of a ghost.
>
> 爾乃狎比淫朋，纏綿永夜晚。
> 傾囊倒篋，懸金於嗌嚽之天。呵雉呼盧，乞靈於淫昏之骨。
> 盤旋五木，似走圓珠；手握多章，如擎團扇。
> 左覷人而右顧己，望穿鬼子之睛；陽示弱而陰用強，費勁罔兩之技。
> 門前賓客待，猶戀戀於場頭；舍上火煙生，尚眈眈於盆裡。
> 忘餐廢寢，則久入成迷；舌敝唇焦，則相看似鬼.[85]

[83] Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 11.1538.
[84] Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 11.1539.
[85] Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 3.420–21; Sheng, *Pu Songling quanji*, 2.369.

Gamblers look like ghosts with dull visages, haunting their family members until there is no property to drain away. But once again, we are reminded of the powerlessness of the gamblers. All their hopes are given to the "evil dead bones" 淫昏之骨, the tiny cubes that embody "efficacy" 靈 to control the outcomes.[86]

Chance and Control

The above discussion revolves around two types of people who could be involved in a gambling game. First, the swindlers who entice a person to gamble manipulate the whole situation. Second, the real gamblers are always powerless, either deceived by swindlers or controlled by an invisible heavenly order. "The Confidence Men" combines the two types into one, making the swindlers gamble on the outcomes of their deception. To do so, Pu Songling built an episodic narrative structure modeled on the "framed traps" similar to those that the gambling treatises warned about.

The first half of the story is a detailed "enticement to gamble" in which the swindlers continuously approach Wang Zixun to pave the way for the gambling game. Wang's journey northward to the capital is not peaceful. Soon after he departs from Jinan (Shandong Province), there is a Mr. Zhang 張, a self-claimed office runner, trying to accost and please him. The next day, Wang encounters a Mr. Xu 許. Xu cautions him to be aware of the *nianyang* swindlers along the way. Then on the third day, Mr Jin 金 shows up. He is a handsome young student who recently failed the civil service examination. Since Jin still needs to wait for his relatives, Wang

[86] The so-called "evil dull bones" can be a double entendre, possibly referring to either the cubes or the addicts themselves. The phrase, according to the gloss by Lü Zhan'en 呂湛恩 (fl. early nineteenth century) alludes to "evil, dull ghosts" 淫昏之鬼 in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳.

leaves first, only to again encounter Jin and Xu at the inn. As the swindlers gather together, the stage for the game is gradually set.

The game itself is nothing but a performance acted out by the swindlers. A die is turned into a veritable prop, waiting for the right time to be brought to life by these actors. When the swindlers reconvene at the inn and enjoy a banquet with Wang, Jin complains that he could not fall asleep the previous night due to the noisy sounds of the other guests "tossing dice and shouting" 擲骰叫呼. Pretending not to understand Jin's southern dialect for the word *tou* 骰, Xu, who claims to be a northerner, keeps asking what "*dou*" refers to. Jin used his hands to describe the object's cubic shape. Xu takes advantage of this opportunity to take a die from his bag and invite the banquet participants to gamble. Proposing a gambling game in such an indirect manner, as the early nineteenth century commentators note, could avoid arousing people's suspicion about a possible scam. It epitomizes the swindlers' "gradual approach" 以漸而來, a trait of *nianyang* that is highlighted in the Historian of the Strange's opening remark.[87]

Nevertheless, these consecutive framed traps fall apart into individual "rounds" (*ju* 局) when the outcome of each step can no longer be controlled. Counter to the swindlers' expectation, Wang declines their invitation to gamble on the pretext that he does not know how to play. Recognizing that Zhang is also among the gamblers, Wang feels more suspicious about the actual purpose of the game. He keeps refusing to participate and tries to distance himself from the group. The swindlers do not give up. They start a new round of deception and changed their strategy. They force Wang to "join" the game so that they can proceed to the next phase—

[87] Feng Zhenluan comments that "it seems that [the swindlers] approached him gradually" 看來以漸而來. Dan Minglun, meanwhile, states that "[the swindlers] neither say "dice" directly nor mention "gambling" immediately. In this way, people will not feel suspicious"不直說骰，驟說賭，使人不疑. See Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 4.567.

Xu acts on Wang's behalf and tells him the game's outcome. Then, another swindler, Mr. Tong 佟, enters the "stage." He barges into the inn, declaring that he has received an order to arrest the gamblers. But soon after, Tong also joins in the game and tries to befriend Wang. Ignoring Wang's refusal to gamble, the swindlers make him "lose" to Tong. This clears the way for their final step to scam Wang out of his property. The swindlers become gamblers on their own deception, seeking to exploit the target's reaction and adjust their strategies accordingly. "When one round fails, [they] enact a new round to make sure that he can be trapped" 一局不行，又易一局，務求其必入也,[88] as Wang Zixun himself recognizes after he realized that he had come across *nianyang*.

It is the swindlers who become ghostly. Like gamblers, they want to control the outcome of each round in order to be successful in the end and winning the money. Like ghosts, they haunt their target, on and on. [89] After Wang is tricked into losing money to Tong, Jin coaxes Wang into a repayment plan: Jin lends Wang the money to pay Tong ; Wang gives the money to Jin and Jinpromises to return the money to Wang later. Generous and kind, Wang trusts Jin's words, allowing him to take out his monetary belongings. At this moment, "it is as if [the swindlers] had constructed a ghost's cave where miraculous transformations reached their peak" 如造鬼窟，幻化已極,[90] remarked by Feng Zhenluan 馮鎮巒 (1760–1830), a mid-Qing dynasty *Liaozhai* commentator. Once entangled by these swindlers, the victims lose control of their fate, having no way to escape from a realm comprised of sheer illusions. Indeed, as Pu Songling repeatedly compared gamblers to ghosts, the Historian of the Strange reminded the reader of the

[88] Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 4.569.

[89] When Wang Zixun first encounters Trickster Xu on the way who cautions him to be aware of the *nianyang*. Feng Zhenluan comments that "the person talking about ghosts is a ghost" 說鬼者即鬼. See Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 4.565.

[90] Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 4.568.

swindlers' ghostliness in his unusual foreshadowing in "The Confidence Men": "The human realm is comparable to that of ghosts and demons" 人情鬼蜮.[91]

The readers, who are familiar with the episodic "framed traps," witness the swindle taking place in the first half of "The Confidence Men." The second half of the narrative mirrors Wang Zixun's experience: one swindler approaches Wu first, invites him to gamble with his fellow con men at an inn; as they set up the game so that Wu wins, their accomplices intrude to scam the money out of the target by claiming that they have come to arrest the gamblers. It is now the reader's turn to figure out when a new round has started. This readerly awareness is marked by commentaries like "changing to a different round" 又變一局 and "another round" 又局.[92]

The "*huyou*" 狐友 joins as the game changer. In contrast to the "Lyrics of Gambling," "*huyou*" here literally refers to a "fox friend" who has disguised himself as a young student. The fox spirit becomes the very force that will "destroy the ghostly realm [of the swindlers]" 殄斯鬼域.[93] The words of the fox are no longer just dubious verbal enticement; they dispel the doubt of his companion Wu Anren and foretell his safety in each round of the swindle. The more expected Wu's situation is, the more unpredictable the swindlers' becomes, so the more rounds of attempts they make. This time, the swindlers are not successful in deceiving Wu Anren through a fake gambling game. This is because the fox conjures a crowd of guards who approach the inn the moment that Wu is falsely accused of gambling. Afraid of exposing their tricks to the guards, the swindlers change their plan and set up a honey trap for a new round—they come up with using a

[91] Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 4.564.
[92] For Feng Zhenluan's comments, see Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 4.569, 571.
[93] For Dan Minglun's comment, see Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 4.568.

woman claiming to be the inn owner's wife to seduce Wu so that the swindlers can take the opportunity to blame Wu for sexual impropriety. Once again, they fail. When the owner starts to castigate Wu for his misdeeds, a guest appears and challenges the owner:

> May I ask, master, what you are going to do? Are you going to kill him? There are several of us guests and we will not sit by and watch you commit assault. If one of the two escapes, how can you avoid being punished? Do you want to go to court? Since there has been sexually misbehavior in your home, you will just be humiliated. In terms of your lodging, moreover, it is obvious that you are committing fraud. How can you be sure that the woman will not say anything unexpected?
>
> 請問主人意將胡為？如欲殺耶？有我等客數輩，必不坐視兇暴。如兩人中有一逃者，抵罪安所辭？如欲質之公庭耶？帷薄不修，適以取辱。且爾宿行旅，明明陷詐，安保女子無異言？[94]

These questions, empowering the guest to gradually take the initiative, culminates in the last inquiry that points to a contingency scenario—the woman here seems not dissimilar to a die, the useof which implies unknowability. Yet instead of an unpredictable outcome, in a swindle either the woman or a die can serve as props in a manipulation scheme. Indeed, when the woman finally starts to break her silence, she laments about nothing but her passive status: "How hateful that I am not treated like a human; I am only told what to do to carry out [this] cheap businesses!" 恨不如人，為人驅役賤務.[95] As a result, the swindlers' tricks were entirely exposed.

If the story had ended here, the reader would still have enjoyed a moment of feeling that they had mastered the narrative. They learn to identify the individual rounds of a swindle, and informed by the fox, they too anticipated the failure of the *nianyang*. However, the subsequent events in the story indicates that this readerly control was also an illusion. When the swindlers seek a reconciliation, the woman insists on staying with Wu. The guest, a fox-turned scholar,

[94] Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 4.572.
[95] Pu, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 4.573.

urges the inn owner to let Wu buy her. Due to the fox's persuasion, Wu is allowed to pay the swindlers fifty taels for the woman and he leaves the inn with her. Then the fox's servant transforms into the woman's elder brother whom she had not seen for over a decade. Together with Wu's servant, the fox's servant interrogates the inn owner about the whereabouts of his "sister." Lying that she died of illness, the owner, afraid of being sued to the court, can do nothing but give them forty taels to reach a compromise. This time, it is the swindlers who fall into the framed trap designed by the fox spirit. The addition of this new round of deception further throws into relief the dialectic between chance and control that lurks throughout the story. Whether the woman was originally one of the fox's props in his framed traps, or whether the fox is taking advantage of the fact that the woman chooses to stay with Wu to design the next trap is uncertain. In either case, the fox is to some degree another being who "sets traps whenever opportunity appears" 隨機設阱.

As the reader follows the narrative from one round to another, the impression that they can control the plot development is also continuously disturbed by the unpredictable. Such uncertainty is built into the reading experience of the story as a whole, first within each episode, and then through the story's two-part structure.[96] As the Qing dynasty commentators pointed out, this structure is modeled on the historical biographies in Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (145–86 BCE) *Records of the Grand Historian* in which two or more incidents involving same historical figures are connected in a chronological sequence with transitional sentences like "several years later, incidents involving a certain person occurred" 後數年，而有某某之事.[97] Employing this

[96] Allan Barr points out that "The Confidence Men" and the vernacular stories share the symmetrical structure and the neat ending that leaves no problem unsolved. See Barr, "*Liaozhai zhiyi* and Chinese Vernacular Fiction," 17.

[97] According to Wai-yee Li, "Whereas in historical biography the transitional sentence functions as a simple marker of chronology with intimations of typological connections or recurrence in history, the same device in 'Nien-yang' brings in the second half of the story, with its supernatural agent the fox (as the dispenser of justice)

framework, Pu Songling makes the fox story parallel to Wang Zixun's encounters, yet leaves the reader uncertain as to whether the fox is authentic as a historical figure or the swindlers are illusory as supernatural beings.

In order to revisit the whole structure of "The Confidence Men," I go back the opening remarks by the Historian of the Strange that I touched upon earlier in this section. If the first half of the story where Wang Zixun is gradually entrapped by the swindlers justifies the definition of *nianyang* at the beginning, the framing introduction is undermined by the seemingly random involvement of a fox and the ultimate failure of these tricksters. To be sure, "The Confidence Men" is not the only story that Pu Songling begins with an expository introduction of certain customs, objects, or contexts before unfolding the concrete events, "purporting to 'ground the narrative in factual information."[98] But the fox story, in this case, adds a sense of uncertainty to both the authorial teaching at the beginning and the following narrative development, and thus places the introduction's reality effect in a different light. The reader realizes, in retrospect, that the authorial comment is itself a gesture of enticement, through which the reader is "coaxed" into a game of reading rife with contingency and unpredictability. It is only upon their own judgment that they can avoid being deceived by the author and find the ultimate truth embedded in the story.

The Romance of Gambling

effecting a systematic reversal of the first half of the story." See Li, "Rhetoric of Fantasy and Rhetoric of Irony" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1988), 31.

[98] See Wai-yee Li, "Rhetoric of Fantasy and Rhetoric of Irony," 35. She gives several examples where Pu starts with an exegesis: "*Wuling*" 吳令 (*The Magistrate of Wu*), "*Tiaoshen*" 跳神 (*The Dancing Shaman*), "*Qingwa shen*" 青蛙神 (*The Frog Spirit*), and "*Shuimang cao*" 水莽草 (*Shuimang Grass*).

Now, can you tell me again how you see and feel your pair of dice? Please allow me to give you a response from a gambling addict living four hundred years ago:

> Wang Wumeng loved to gamble and used the earning from sales of his writings to support his addiction. Wang Shizhen (style name: Yuanmei, 1526–1590) asked him where the pleasure of gambling lay; he answered, 'The moment I threw the dice I was thrilled by their truly promising look.'
>
> 王無夢好賭，所得賣文錢，盡以佐呼盧費。王元美問其得意何在？答曰："爾時偏喜其面真."[99]

In fact, this is nothing but a joke included in Feng Menglong's *Treasury of Laughter* (*Xiaofu* 笑府). Its punchline, nevertheless, is still worth a careful consideration. The line is ambiguous enough to induce multiple interpretations. The pronoun "*qi*" 其 (that), while translated here as the dice, can also refer to the fellow gamblers as well as the host of the gambling game. Was Wang Wumeng, then, pleased at the actual faces of these people? Or as the translation suggests, was he drawn by the promising look of the dice, submitting to sheer chance yet hoping that in the next round, the outcome would be desirable? If it is the latter, the dice again appear to be living objects, enticing Wang the gambler to animate them so as to keep him at the gambling table.

Yet after all, it was the gambler himself who projected his thoughts onto the inanimate dice, feeling *as if* the object were presenting a favorable look ("*mian*" 面, literally meaning "face"). Throughout the chapter, I have demonstrated that there are always two sides—or rather faces—of a well-designed gambling game as well as the short stories that take inspiration from gambling. An official promotion game is simultaneously a pedagogical tool to facilitate the reading of history and an everyday entertainment for monetary gain and loss. In "For One Penny," chance means contingency but can also be transformed into a higher heavenly order

[99] Hsu, *Feng Menglong's Treasury of Laughs*, 191.

emphasizing a strict balance of actions and retribution or rewards. The gambling game in "The Confidence Men," can be read as a performative illusion that calls the reader to distinguish the boundaries between truths and lies in the narration. And finally, the intricate narratives of these stories, which mirror the episodic nature of each gambling round, comes hand in hand with a comparably succinct moral lesson.

Indeed, the romance of gambling, according to Jessica Richard, can be "in the episode, as the gambler seeks this particular moment again and again and resists combining into a longer narrative."[100] As I argue in this chapter, in early modern China, there was also an eagerness to link the individual episodes together as the player-reader enjoyed forming a complete narrative of the gameplay process, counting the give and take, and becoming mesmerized by the narrative complexity without being given an explicit authorial message. The romance of gambling in late Ming and early Qing literature, in other words, lies in a strategic readerly choice of one of the two sides in order to tackle the chance elements rooted in these narratives.

The notion of "face," if anything, is fundamental to another literary game: riddles. Instead of selecting one side to read, the player-reader reads *through* the "riddle face" (*mimian* 謎面) to figure out the "riddle bottom" (*midi* 謎底). How to read a riddle, then? How does the mechanism of riddling inform us of the reading practices across mediums in early modern China? To answer these questions, I now invite you to put down your dice. Let us move on to the next round.

[100] Richard, *The Romance of Gambling in the Eighteenth-Century British Novel*, 45.

CHAPTER FOUR

Riddling Across Page and Stage

A riddle is a piece of writing so circuitous
that it leads people into a maze.
謎也者，回互其辭，使昏迷也.
Liu Xie 劉勰 (465–522)[1]

[The riddle] represents the revolt of the intelligence
against the hypnotic power of commanding words.
Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*[2]

Let me tell you a riddle, and please make a guess. It describes a type of theater object to be manipulated with the hands.

> There are affairs of the great people and affairs of the minor ones. In the case of any individual, the things that the craftsman makes are available to him.
> I have heard their speeches, but have not seen them in person.
>
> 有大人之事，有小人之事，一人之身，而百工之所為備。
> 吾聞其語矣，未見其人也。[3]

How would you answer?

While you are guessing, allow me to inform you that the riddle is a combination of two quotes from the Confucian classics. The first line is from *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子). The sage advised Agriculturalist Xu Xing that the division of labor was necessary in society since it would be inefficient for an individual to undertake all the work on their own. The second line, based on *The Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), points to Confucius' dismay due over the fact that the sage had

[1] The English translation of Liu is based on Victor Yu-cheng Shih, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1983), 162–63.

[2] Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 137.

[3] Translation modified from Philip J. Ivanhoe trans., *Mencius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 56.

never seen a truly moral person, but had only heard someone claiming that "[he] lives as a recluse to realize [his] aspirations, and practices rightness in order to perfect his Way" 隱居以求其志，行義以達其道.[4] Would this additional information affect how you think about the riddle?

By asking these questions, I hope to draw your attention to two particular aspects of this riddle. First, it is a combination of two textual fragments. Juxtaposing texts from disparate sources, particularly orthodox ones, is a key feature of late-Ming literary games, including riddles. For some games, players were requested to make meaningful sentences by stitching together quotes from various sources including the Confucian classics. Deprived of their primary moral and doctrinal implications, these fragments represent "the many texts that can be dissolved and re-assembled in the pursuit of amusement" in early modern China.[5] Second, to solve the riddle requires one to make guesses. Being confused, experiencing sudden enlightenment, and feeling satisfied or disappointed are all part and parcel of the gaming experience. We usually concentrate on a riddle as a question-and-answer pair, composed of a face (*mimian* 謎面) and a bottom (*midi* 謎底). This easily passes over the player's guessing process: how one reaches the answer may be as important as the answer itself.

For scholars, "texts" or "literary games" are the most common terms for categorizing riddles. Known as *mi* 謎, and sometimes as *yinyu* 隱語 or *souci* 廋詞 (both translated into "hidden words"), riddles are treated either as a subgenre of poetry or as a rhetorical device in fictional narratives in Chinese literary history.[6] Thus, studies on riddles tend to focus on riddles'

[4] Translation modified from Watson trans., *The Analects of Confucius*, 117.

[5] He, *Home and the World*, 24.

[6] For a historical survey of riddles in China, see Qian Nanyang 錢南揚, *Mishi* 謎史, in *Qian Nanyang wenji* 錢南揚文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 243–335. Originally completed in 1920 during the New Culture Movement, this survey was a response to the appeal to recover vernacular and folk literature which was thought to mark modernity. For scholarship that treats riddles as an independent genre, see for example, Haun Saussy, "Reading and Folly in *Dream of the Red Chamber.*" For scholarship that discusses the riddles within narratives, see

textual registers, its poetic mode of describing an object to be guessed, or its significance in plot development. In other words, scholars are often tempted to "make sense" of a riddle as a text, to read it either independently or within a broader narrative. These approaches not only overlook the historical process of riddle guessing, but also miss the fact that this process was also social and conversational. By at least the eleventh century, riddles had developed into a form of street entertainment. Professional performers drummed and sang to attract the audience. Instead of simply reciting a riddle, they at times masked the clues or acted to make the audience believe in its difficulty.[7] From that time on, as an essential component of the annual Lantern Festival celebration on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, riddles were also written on strips and attached to decorated lanterns. The "lantern riddles" (*dengmi* 燈謎) were hung in public venues like temples and streets, waiting for people, old and young, male and female, to stop and casually hazard the answers.[8] These historical contexts illuminate the process of presenting and solving riddles. Riddle-solving was hardly as straightforward as linking the prompt with its answer but time and again it was entangled with contemplation, collaboration, competition, and even deception.

Li Pengfei 李鵬飛, *Tangdai fei xieshi xiaoshuo zhi leixing yanjiu* 唐代非寫實小說之類型研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2004), chapter 1. Li even coins the term "riddling literature" (*xieyin wenxue* 諧隱文學) to refer to the short stories with riddles; Sarah Allen, *Shifting Stories*, especially chapter 4; Judith T. Zeitlin, "The Ghosts of Things," in *Fantomes dans L'Extreme-Orient D'Hier et D'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Presses de l'Inalco, 2017); Wai-yee Li, "Riddles, Concealment, and Rhetoric in Early China," in *Facing the Monarch: Modes of Advice in Early Chinese Court*, ed. Garret P.S. Olberding (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 100-32; and Thomas Kelly, "Riddles in *Jin Ping Mei*."

[7] Records on earlier riddle performances are included in notation books (*biji* 筆記) or memoirs. See for example, Naide Weng 耐得翁, "Shangmi" 商謎, in *Ducheng jisheng* 都城紀勝 (1235). Interestingly, in a fourteenth-century Choson-period primer on colloquial Chinese *Pak t'ongsa onhae* (*Piao Tongshi yanjie* 朴通事諺解), an entry reflects the conversational nature of riddles with such lines as "I will tell you some riddles and you make a guess" 我說幾個謎你猜 and "Tell me another one, and I will guess again"你再說，我再猜.

[8] Liu Tong 劉侗 and Yu Yizheng 于奕正, "Chunchang" 春場, *Dijing jingwu lüe* 帝京景物略 (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1969), *juan* 2, 34:b.

How historical players solved riddles, just like tracking down how historical readers read, can be elusive. Yet theater makes it possible for us to retrieve some of the gaming experience in history.[9] In addition, some playwrights integrated riddle-solving events—one or more people guessing riddles under certain conversational, social, or festive circumstances—into a longer narrative not simply to represent how people guessed riddles through the medium of theater, but to reflect on some broader issues like the mechanisms of human understanding and communication. This chapter addresses the staging of riddle-solving events and its significance by putting in dialogue two late Ming theatrical works: a southern *zaju* play, *Zen Master Yu and a Voluptuous Dream* (*Yu chanshi cuixiang yimeng* yu 玉禪師翠鄉一夢, hereafter *Zen Master Yu*) by Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593); and a *chuanqi* play, *Spring Lantern Riddles* (*Chun dengmi* 春燈謎), by Ruan Dacheng 阮大鋮 (1587–1646).

I intentionally choose these two works because both include a detailed riddle-solving scene. The former transforms orthography riddles (*zimi* 字謎) into charades followed by a pantomime that takes up nearly a whole act. The latter appropriates the festive event of solving lantern riddles to the stage, making it a key in the plot development. In both cases, the reader/audience joins the event in two ways.[10] On the one hand, they witness the characters

[9] The connection between theater and riddles is much closer than expected. In the fourteenth-century biographical catalogue of *zaju* playwrights, *Register of Ghosts* (*Lugui bu*) and its fifteenth-century sequel (*Lugui bu xubian* 錄鬼簿續編), approximately one-fourth of the playwrights were listed as riddle masters. Compliments like "talented at riddles" 工隱語 and "composing numerous riddles" 隱語極多 were common.

[10] I use "reader/viewer" to emphasize that for the sake of this dissertation, I am more interested in the blurred boundaries between staging and publishing, watching and reading in early modern Chinese theater. This simultaneity between staging and publishing the plays has been touched upon by for instance, Ling Hon Lam in his discussion about the early modern theatricality. According to Lam, "the locale of theatricality is not the theater but the intersection between page and stage." See Lam, *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early Modern China*, 43. As a result, in terms of the late Ming theater, there was never a very clear-cut boundary between the performance and the playtext—they were often correlated with each other. It therefore differs from its European counterpart in which publishing a play could stabilize it and turn the performative event into a literary monument. This was also true in early modern Japanese kabuki. For relevant scholarship on the relationship between text and performance in the non-Chinese contexts, see Roger Chartier, *Publishing Drama in Early Modern Europe* (London: British Library, 1999); David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); and Satoko

trying to find the answer, at times going awry and falling into an incessant process of guessing. On the other hand, they are invited to join the game themselves, even if they may have been informed of the answer already. This invitation to guess is made possible by the playwrights who control the point of view, and that is why they still need to think over the answer along with the characters in the diegetic world.

More precisely, as we have already encountered in our first riddle, what the reader/audience witnesses and experiences is a process of connecting fragments into a meaningful whole so as to reach an answer. I call this mechanism "riddling." I identify two modes of riddling with *Zen Master Yu* and *Spring Lantern Riddles*: while for Xu Wei, "guessing" (*cai* 猜) serves as a method to tackle wordlessness, in Ruan Dacheng's case, the reader/audience could also be trapped in endless misunderstandings of the play if they do not "think" (*xiang* 想) carefully. What the mechanism of riddling magnifies is the two playwrights' concern about understanding and communication, about the ways their reader/audience should understand and communicate with them as they turn their works into a "reading game." Yet as I shall demonstrate, piecing fragments of graphic components, actions, literary texts, and even objects together to make meanings from them is not confined to the riddle-solving scene in the two plays. With the plays as points of departure, I will also take you to follow some fictional and historical readers and explore how they (un)consciously conduct the mechanism of riddling as a particular way of reading. Through riddling, I want to bring to the fore this readerly presence: when the reader develops their own rules of reading, new "reading games" that they design began to take shape.

Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition: From the Worlds of the Samurai to the Vengeful Female Ghost* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), especially chapter 5.

On Guessing: Xu Wei and *Zen Master Yu*

A writer, painter, calligrapher, and dramatist, Xu Wei (style name: Wenchang 文長) is an enigma. Signing himself Tian Shuiyue 田水月, an orthography riddle of his given name "Wei" 渭 (渭=氵+田+月), he himself made his life a mystery. He composed a year-by-year chronicle of his personal life trajectory. But this "Deformable Chronicle" (*jipu* 畸譜) is just as much a conundrum since it only recorded some of his whereabouts while leaving other entries completely blank (fig. 4.1). Whether the chronicle indicates Xu's deliberate silence, confidentiality, or oblivion, these blanks are always waiting to be filled in by his readers. What Xu Wei has left though, through multiple names and identities, is a plethora of art works and writings ranging from poems and letters to plays and couplets, as well as lantern riddles.

Fig.4.1 Xu Wei, "Deformable Chronicle" 畸譜.
From *Xu Wenchang yigao* 徐文長逸稿, *juan* 1, 7:a-b. Peking University Library.

For his contemporaries, discovering Xu Wei was like a form of enlightenment. Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610) described this experience in his biography of Xu Wei. At a young

age, he found the *zaju* collection *Four Cries of a Gibbon* (*Sisheng yuan* 四聲猿, hereafter *Four Cries*) in a local bookstore. Yuan saw these plays as so different from the contemporary lengthy southern dramas and he supposed the playwright, this so-called "Student of Tianchi" (*Tianchi sheng* 天池生), must have lived in the Yuan dynasty. Later, in Shaoxing (Zhejiang Province), an ink painting with powerful brushstrokes caught Yuan's eye. Yet he failed to recognize that name of the painter Tian Shuiyue was an orthographic riddle that Xu Wei used to disguise his given name and by extention, himself. One evening, Yuan happened on a carelessly-bound blackened manuscript of some scattered poems at the residence of his friend Tao Wangling 陶望齡 (1562–1609). Yuan was informed by Tao that Xu Wei, a fellow countryman of his, was the poet, and used the sobriquets of Student of Tianchi and Tian Shuiyue. The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that was Xu Wei were finally complete. The discovery led to the dramatic ending with Yuan's "enlightenment." Comparing his experience to wakening from a nightmare about the disordered poetic circles, Yuan was so surprised at Xu's talent that he began repeatedly reciting, yelling, and reading Xu's poems aloud to Tao until the noise woke up the servants.[11]

Xu Wei chose to keep silent, asking his readers to figure out his true identity, personality, and life. I want to suggest that this silence may have been a deliberate decision by Xu. He left some possible clues to this in his early play *Zen Master Yu* in which a silent performance initiates a long process of guessing. Thus, this section, by examining the play, explicates the significance of guessing as a particular method advocated by Xu Wei to cope with these silent gestures.

[11] Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道, "Xu Wenchang zhuan" 徐文長傳, in *Xu Wei ji* 徐渭集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), appendix, 1342.

Zen Master Yu is the first of the four plays in Xu Wei's *Four Cries*.[12] Adapted from the local lore about the courtesan Willow Green (Liu Cui 柳翠) in Hangzhou (Zhejiang Province), the plot of *Zen Master Yu* is as follows: After Abbot Yutong 玉通 was unwilling to attend a banquet hosted by the official Liu Xuanjiao 柳宣教, he broke his years-long observation of the Buddhist rules on abstinence because he could not resist the seduction of the courtesan Red Lotus (Honglian 紅蓮) that Liu had dispatched. The abbot swore to be reborn into the Liu family and soon died of shame. He was reincarnated as Willow Green as retribution for his reckless deed. He was enlightened about his previous life by Moonlight Monk (*Yueming heshang* 月明和尚) and ultimately achieved spiritual transcendence.[13]

Zen Master Yu belongs to a popular Yuan-Ming *zaju* subgenre, the "deliverance play" (*dutuo ju* 度脫劇).[14] This type of play usually revolves around an immortal who brings enlightenment to a low-ranking divinity who is reborn as a mortal in the secular world. Illusion

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[12] Xu Shuofang 徐朔方 suggests that Xu Wei might have completed the collection no later than 1558 when the thirty-eight-year-old scholar had just become advisor to Supreme Commander Hu Zongxian 胡宗宪 (1512–1565). But the earliest extant edition of the *Four Cries* dates to 1588. It is included in the Maiwangguan 脈望館 edition of *Ancient Zaju by Famous Playwrights* (*Gu mingjia zaju* 古名家雜劇). It is unknown whether the collection was circulated as a manuscript or printed during this thirty-year period. See Xu Shuofang, *Wanming qujia nianpu* 晚明曲家年譜 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1993), vol.2, 99.

[13] Multiple versions of this story have been preserved. See the Yuan dynasty *zaju* play *Yueming heshang du Liu Cui* 月明和尚度柳翠; Mei Dingzuo 梅鼎祚, "Liu Cui" 柳翠, in *Qingni lianhua ji* 青泥蓮花記, *juan* 1; Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, "Yueming heshang du Liu Cui" 月明和尚度柳翠, in *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說, *juan* 29; and Tian Rucheng 田汝成, *Xihu youlan zhi* 西湖遊覽志, *juan* 13. For a comprehensive survey of the Liu Cui lore, see Zhang Quangong 張全恭, "Honglian Liucui gushi de zhuanbian" 紅蓮柳翠故事的轉變, *Lingnan xuebao* 嶺南學報 5, no.2 (1936): 54–74. For current scholarship on *Zen Master Yu*, see Wang Zhiyong 汪志勇, *Du Liu Cui, Cuixiang meng, yu Hong Lian zhai sanju de bijiao yanjiu* 度柳翠，翠鄉夢與紅蓮債三劇的比較研究 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1980); Xie Qian 謝謙, "Lun 'Du Liu Cui' zaju de liangge xitong" 論"度柳翠"雜劇的兩個系統，*Qinghua daxue xuebao : zhexue shehui kexue ban* 清華大學學報：哲學社會科學版, no. 5 (2002), 4–8, 57; and Shiamin Kwa, "The Shape of Things: Locating the Self in Xu Wei's *Zen Master Yu Has a Voluptuous Dream*," in *Text, Performance, and Gender in Chinese Literature and Music: Essays in Honor of Wilt Idema*, eds. Maghiel van Crevel, Tian Yuan Tan, and Michel Hockx (Brill: Leiden, 2009), 175–92.

[14] As I mentioned in the introduction, the concept of "deliverance play" was first raised by the Japanese Sinologist Aoki Masaru. It refers to plays "in which an immortal explains the Dharma to a mortal, causes him to be liberated from worldly cares, and leads him into the way of the immortals." See West and Idema trans., *The Orphan of Zhao and Other Yuan Play*, 202.

conjured by the immortal, often in the form of a dream, serves as an essential means of enlightenment. In addition to the Willow Green lore, Xu Wei might have taken inspiration from the Yuan dynasty *zaju* play *Moonlight Monk Helps Willow Green Preach Deliverance* written by Li Shouqing. As mentioned in the introduction, because Bodhisattva Guanyin's pure water vase is contaminated by a tiny grain of dust, the willow branch in the vase is punished by being reincarnated as a courtesan named Willow Green. An arhat called Moonlight is dispatched by Guanyin to enlighten the courtesan and bring her back to the South Sea paradise. The Yuan dynasty *zaju* follows the convention of a deliverance play. In one act, Willow Green recognizes the illusory nature of life and death through a dream in which she is sentenced to die and go to Hell for enticing the monk. In fact, Willow Green's nightmare is conjured up by the monk himself. He shows up in her dream and tells her directly that the only way to transcend death is to leave this world with him.[15]

In the Yuan predecessor, Willow Green is the passive recipient of the deliverer's teachings. In contrast, by turning the process of enlightenment into a guessing game, Xu Wei remade Willow Green into an active player that discovers the monk's ultimate message. In Act Two, Moonlight Monk asks Willow Green to watch his pantomime and guess her true identity. This silent performance is composed of a series of fragmentary actions that are only meaningful when the player starts to apply a certain logic to connect them. Guessing, in other words, actualizes the potential of the monk's actions. The reader of *Zen Master Yu* also engages in this guessing game through detailed stage directions. Yet these lengthy descriptions of actions already suggest an additional round of guessing for the reader: as a desktop drama, *Zen Master*

[15] Li Shouqing, *Yueming heshang du Liu Cui*.

Yu requires them to piece together the stage directions and visualize a performance on the page in the first place.

Riddles set the process of guessing in motion. Moonlight Monk's pantomime is framed by two charades that provide direct instructions on how to interpret the monk's silent actions. These two charades are based on orthography riddles whose prompts usually hint at the graphic components of one or more Chinese characters. For charades, one use actions to describe the sounds, graphemes, or meanings of the graphic components, and the player is expected to decipher these actions to assemble them into specific characters. "The *wai* (the male role) vigorously grabs the *dan*'s 旦 (the female lead) earring, then mimes a finger guessing game" 外急扯旦耳環，又作猜拳介. This refers to the answer "guess again" (*huan cai* 還猜), with the "earring" (*erhuan* 耳"環") being a homophone of "again" (*huan* 還) and "finger guessing game" hints at the act of "guessing."[16] Xu Wei does not intend to hide the answer from anyone, as Willow Green gets the characters right after watching Moonlight Monk's gestures. But this charade, despite its straightforwardness, is like a mobius loop in that knowing one answer only leads to another round of guessing: ceaselessly, to "guess again."

[16] Shiamin Kwa, *Strange Eventful Histories: Identity, Performance, and Xu Wei's Four Cries of a Gibbon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 161.

Fig. 4.2 Illustration for *Zen Master Yu*.
From *Shengming zaju* (preface dated 1629). Naikaku bunkō, Tokyo, Japan.

Indeed, Willow Green can only keep guessing as she repeatedly fails to make sense of the monk's pantomime about her previous life. The pantomime is acted out with the assistance of three props—a gauze cap, a female mask, and a monk's hat. The props play an important role in serving as the substitutes for Liu Xuanjiao and Red Lotus throughout the monk's silent performance. Interestingly, in an illustration of the play in the Chongzhen 崇禎 edition of the *Zaju Collection of the Glorious Ming* (*Shengming zaju* 盛明雜劇), the female mask is uncannily depicted as a woman's face (fig. 4.2). As if it were a skin, the mask enacts Red Lotus' life when Moonlight Monk puts it on. Yet even his body as a carrier of the skin-like mask is unnecessary,

for the prop alone can stand for the courtesan. According to the detailed stage directions, the monk is performed by a *wai* who

> puts on the female mask and walks a few turns, then acts out knocking on a door. He drops onto the floor and acts as if he's got a stomachache, miming rubbing. Then he takes off the female mask and puts it on the floor. He puts on the monk's hat, and drops down next to the female mask. He loosens his clothes and mimes rubbing the stomach.
>
> 外戴女面走數賺作敲門勢，卻倒地作肚疼自揉介，卻下女面放地上，起戴僧帽倒身女面邊，解衣作揉肚介。[17]

The Moonlight Monk, in this way, conducts double mimesis. Informed of Yutong's life experience in Act One, the reader would easily understand that as he is wearing the monk's cap, the monk is representing Abbot Yutong, while it is Red Lotus' stomach that he mimes rubbing.

Xu Wei engineered the play's comic effects by setting Willow Green's guesses apart from the reader's expectation. Since the reader knows about Abbot Yutong's story already, they would not feel it so challenging to decipher the meanings of the Moonlight Monk's performance. As he mimes knocking on a door, dropping to the floor, or rubbing the stomach with his assorted props in Act Two, the reader would recall that upon Liu Xuanjiao's request, Red Lotus had knocked on the gate of the Shuiyue Temple on a rainy night. Pretending to have a stomachache to trick Abbot Yutong, the courtesan suggests he press his belly against hers. The abbot calls to his acolyte for medical help, but he does not hear anything back from him. As a result, the abbot can do nothing but carry her inside and "follow her instructions." Clueless, in contrast, Willow Green can only make sense of the Moonlight Monk's actions based on her own knowledge: Is it a "shiny bald gourd" who "presses on the girl in red" 光葫蘆按倒紅妝?[18]

[17] Kwa, *Strange Eventful Histories*, 160; *Xu Wei Ji*, 1195.
[18] Kwa, *Strange Eventful Histories*, 160; *Xu Wei Ji*, 1195.

Willow Green has no knowledge about her life, so she can only relate the monk's pantomime to her personal experience in this life. As she continuously guesses wrong, the monk makes a last attempt. He acts out the characters for *toutai* 投胎 (reincarnation): "The *wai* uses his hand to strike his head once ("head" as a homophone of "throwing" 投). Using his hands, he forms a three cornered *si* ㄙ character, then acts out a four-sided square, to make the character *kou* ㄖ, then acts out a circle, to make a full moon (胎=ㄙ+ㄖ+月[one needs to understand that the circle refers to a full moon, and then relate the signified to the character *yue* 月])" 外手打自頭一下，手妝三尖角作ㄙ字，又妝四方角作口字，又妝一圈作月輪介.[19] Then, he presses his hands into a willow branch. The courtesan correctly recognizes the phrase "reincarnation" and realizes that the willow branch refers to her. Yet, at the thought of being a courtesan, she could not help but start agonizing whether she would be pregnant due to her affairs with a certain Monk Huang:

To the tune *Desheng ling*

How could I help it, as I plied this trade in a boudoir,
Unavoidably burying men in a mountain of rouge.
I remember that year I plucked some profit from Monk Huang,
I've only brought that single bridge down.
I did once let the little baldy penetrate my pants crotch:
On the ledger's face, a pair of names,
In the lotus wrap, a warm ooze.
As for sour flavors, very soon melon-seed teeth will be nibbling on sour plum sauce.
As for medicine, soon enough it will be carp broth and musk incense.

【得勝令】

不合得在青樓幹這樁，免不得堆紅粉將人葬。
我記得那一年掇賺了黃和尚，我自來只拆斷了這橋樑，
敢有個小禿子鑽入褲襠，紙牌上雙人帳，荷包裏一泡漿。
酸嘗，不久來瓠犀子，嚼梅醬。

[19] *Xu Wei Ji*, 1194; For a detailed explanation of how these gestures should be deciphered, see Kwa, *Strange Eventful History*, 158.

藥方，須早辦鯉魚湯，帶麝香。[20]

Guessing helps thread Moonlight Monk's separate gestures together, but the attempt soon fails for both Willow Green and the reader. Whereas the courtesan can hardly decipher the monk's true message, the reader who is informed of the answer in advance can only watch as Willow Green misapprehends one round after another.

At first glance, this lengthy pantomime seems merely to be a playful theatrical maneuver, as the reader enjoys the dazzling masquerade of the monk while laughing at the courtesan's repeated mistakes in her responses. But I want to suggest that for the reader, it is the discrepancy between the courtesan's understanding of the pantomime and their own that draws their attention to the very mechanism of guessing as meaning-making. Just as the courtesan attempts to comprehend the monk's fragmentary actions based on her own experience, the reader would approach the stage directions—fragmentary descriptions of the monk's actions—similarly they would visualize the pantomime according to their theater-going experience and personal imagination, and interpret the visualized actions by following their knowledge of the plot in Act One.

Inviting the reader to reflect on the process of guessing is inseparable from Xu Wei's reflection on theater, especially the shared transient and illusory nature that it shares with life in general. As Willow Green keeps failing to guess the correct answer, Moonlight Monk breaks his silence. He shouts out the lines Abbot Yutong wrote before his death, spitting at her:

> Red Lotus made a monkey out of me,
> So I shall hide for a springtime in the *skin* of a Green Willow.
> Waves beat the duckweed, there are none that aren't stuck;
> But my only fear is that when I return you will not recognize my *self* of old.[21]
> (*Italics* mine)

[20] *Xu Wei Ji*, 1196. Kwa, *Strange Eventful Histories*, 162 with modifications.
[21] Kwa, *Strange Eventful Histories*, 152.

紅蓮弄我似猢猻，且向你綠柳皮中躲一春。
浪打浮萍無有不撞著，只怕回來認不得舊時身。[22]

The abbot's four lines play a key role in enlightening the courtesan. It states clear a dialectic between "skin" (*pi* 皮) and "body/self" (*shen* 身). For the abbot, the truth of his reincarnation is that his original body is dormant inside the skin of the courtesan, waiting to be awakened when the truth is discovered. In this sense, Willow Green, who makes great efforts at guessing Moonlight Monk's charades and pantomimes, turns out to be unconsciously roleplaying Abbot Yutong. Indeed, Moonlight Monk responds to Yutong's exclamation over their forty-year separation, "Younger brother, it was only for a brief moment that you performed on this stage" 師弟，你一霎時做這場;[23] this betrays the illusory nature of Willow Green's life. For Xu Wei, the phenomenal world is none other than a stage.[24] In his preface to the renowned Yuan *zaju* play *The Romance of the West Chamber* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記), he claims that in the worldly theater there is a dichotomy between "the original (inherent) form" (*bense* 本色) and "the apparent form" (*xiangse* 相色). The latter is merely the "substitute self" (*tishen* 替身). It is inauthentic

[22] *Xu Wei ji*, 1196.

[23] *Xu Wei Ji*, 1196. Kwa, *Strange Eventful Histories*, 164. One "eyebrow comment" 眉批 above this line in the late Ming Dachengzhai edition 明末大城齋刊本 mentions a possible reader's response "[It's a] devastating event!" 石破天驚. See *Yu chanshi cuixiang yimeng*, in *Sisheng yuan*, Dachengzhai edition, 17:a.

[24] This idea is exemplified by his quatrain on "curtain puppets":
The puppets before the curtain are false to begin with,
A painting of the puppets is even more removed.
If you think of the sky as a canopy of curtain,
Who among us isn't an actor, too?
帳頭戲偶已非真，畫偶如鄰復隔鄰。
想到天為羅帳處，何人不是戲場人。
The English translation is quoted from Shiamin Kwa, "The Shape of Things," 175.
This idea of *theatrum mundi* also echoes the contemporary literati's consciousness of the social illusion in the phenomenal world. See Sophie Volpp, *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth-Century China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

just like a maid with heavy makeup and accessories who is trying to act as the mistress.[25] Willow Green, in this light, is considered none other than a substitute for the "authentic self"—the abbot.

If being enlightened is a sudden "aha moment," the transformation of the courtesan back into Abbot Yutong is just as instantaneous. Willow Green, acted by a *dan* (female lead), doffs her female clothing, throws away her wig, and puts on a monk's hat and a coarse gown. This quick costume change turns the courtesan into the abbot. Without replacing the *dan* with the *sheng* (male lead) who played the abbot in Act One, it is a matter of "changing the tone and altering the appearance" 改腔換妝 that restores Yutong's original body. The skin-like costumes—wig, hat, and clothes—determine the true identity of the body, that is, whether the person is Willow Green or Abbot Yutong.[26] Yet even this interpretation can be problematic if we attend to the props used in the courtesan's transformation. Following the stage directions, the reader would notice that the monk's hat had already been used as a prop in Moonlight Monk's pantomime. It was used to symbolize Yutong's life, but now serves as a sign of the abbot's identity. The cross-use of these stage costumes blur the boundary between presentation and representation, belief and make-belief. They also make the reader doubtful: to what extent is the transformation itself just an illusory performance?

In the end, Moonlight Monk and Abbot Yutong sing a duet. One line states, "In this one moment, ten thousand affairs, a hundred anxieties; all stand in for impermanence's pasteboard clothes" 這一切萬樁百忙，都只替無常褙裝.[27] Whether it is the pantomime or the courtesan's

[25] "Ti pingyue *Bei Xixiang*" 題評閱北西廂, in *Xu Wei ji*, 1094.

[26] Towards the end of Act One, there is a line: "Wherever it cues 'to sing,' the word '*sheng*' refers to 'Yu.' This is because whenever Abbot Yutong can play a role, he will do so, without being confined to a *sheng*, *wai*, or *jing* [role]" 科唱處凡生字俱是玉字，蓋玉通師能耍者即扮耍，不拘生外淨也. See *Xu Wei ji*, 1192.

[27] *Xu Wei Ji*, 1197; Kwa, *Strange Eventful Histories*, 166. Also similarly, there is another possible reader's response in the marginal comment that reads "[I] only realized after…" *後才知(the first character is indistinct), see *Sisheng yuan*, late Ming Dachengzhai edition, 18:a.

transformation, beneath the surface of all these "affairs" and "anxieties" is the truth of impermanence. It ultimately calls attention to the title of the play: *Zen Master Yu and a Voluptuous Dream*, sometimes abbreviated as *A Voluptuous Dream* (*Cuixiang meng* 翠鄉夢; *Cuixiang yimeng* 翠鄉一夢). The title is ambiguous: does it refer to the dream of Abbot Yutong about his affairs with Red Lotus or about him playing the role of Willow Green? Or is the play also the reader's dream for their enlightenment? But above all, when Abbot Yutong and Moonlight Monk "suddenly disappear" (*tuxia* 突下) from the stage, the dreamer awakens, realizing the transience of all their experience.

In Xu Wei's view, theater brings to the fore the transient nature of life. In *Zen Master Yu*, identity can be quickly changed with props and costumes; truth and performance always coexist. All these characteristics are epitomized by the pantomime. Through the pantomime, Xu Wei constructs an exceptional realm in which nearly everything, from someone's life experience to words and graphs, is turned into a pure, silent performance. Without no definite message, the performance is illusory and ambiguous by nature, requiring the audience to apply their prior knowledge and experience to make sense of the fragmentary actions and piece them into a meaningful whole.

Let us return to the charade I mentioned earlier in this section: "The *wai* vigorously grabs the *dan*'searring, then mimes a finger guessing game." If you had not known the answer, would you have been able to figure out what grabbing the earring or miming the finger guessing game meant? Would you have realized that you needed to come up with two separate characters to form a compound? For Xu Wei, the worldly stage does not lack performance as such. With all the noises, unstable signs, and social performances, the way we can navigate the phenomenal world is to start guessing, and keep guessing.

I suggest that Xu Wei's emphasis on guessing in *Zen Master Yu* is entangled with his general attitude toward his own works. While words can be performed in Moonlight Monk's pantomime, Xu, like the monk, chooses to remain silent, leaving behind a corpus of writings under different names and identities—his silent "performance." Just like Willow Green (and the reader) tried to come up with a narrative to fit the monk's separate actions, readers of Xu Wei's works were eager to piece together Xu Wei as a person through his scattered words. Thus, we see several attempts by the historical readers who collected, edited, and published Xu's works—they were riddling with these texts, so to speak. To paraphrase Northrop Frye's remarks on riddles, these readers were trying to gain control over Xu Wei and his works, to "awaken from a dream" in which they were trapped by so many of his writings yet with none of his own explications.[28]

Here, I take one such effort made by Zhang Dai 張岱 (1597–1648) as an example. In consultation with his grandfather Zhang Rulin 張汝霖 (fl. sixteenth century) and teacher Wang Siren 王思任 (1597–1648), Zhang published a total of twenty-four volumes of Xu's scattered works including his poems, letters, essays, and literary games. Entitled *The Scattered Writings of Xu Wenchang* (*Xu Wenchang yigao* 徐文長逸稿), the compilation did not aim to establish Xu's oeuvre. Rather, it was a deliberate selection purporting to construct and promote Xu as a talented writer whom Zhang and Wang had never encountered in person.

A series of conversations between Zhang Dai and Wang Siren reveals the selection process. At first, Wang was unsatisfied with Zhang, for he "had not left out any fur, hair, teeth, or horns [of Xu's writings], aspiring to persist [without changing the original] Wenchang and

[28] According to Northrop Frye, riddles are mainly about guessing an object's identity, and "naming such objects has analogies to waking up from a dream." See Frye, "Charms and Riddles," in *Spiritus Mundi*, 123–47, especially 139 and 147.

restore him" 不遺其皮毛齒角, 欲仍文長以還文長.[29] With an aim to "be strict on Wenchang to cherish him"嚴文長以愛文長,[30] he believed that "selecting Xu's writings was like picking the feathers of a peacock, only the gold and blue-greenones should be singled out" 選青藤文如拾孔雀翎，只當拾其金翠.[31] The way to implement this selection principle, as Zhang Dai pointed outwas to largely eliminate the massive pieces that Xu Wei had casually jotted down in a befuddled state.[32]

Lantern riddles were included in the presentation of Xu Wei and his literary talents. Wang Siren felt that they should preserve those riddles with spontaneity (*tiancheng zhe* 天成者, lit. created by Heaven). Among them was the riddle I invited you to guess at the beginning of this chapter (fig. 4.3). Anthologized, the riddle was treated like a poem with a title and highlighted with annotations. There is no question that the lines are about a "curtain puppet" (*zhang'ou* 帳偶),[33] and these lines are simply read at a face value: there are affairs of the great and the minor characters; each puppet was made by the artisans' hands; only the voice of the manipulator could be heard, while their presence was invisible from in front of the curtain.

[29] Zhang Dai, preface to *Xu Wenchang yicao* 徐文長佚草.

[30] Zhang, preface to *Xu Wenchang yicao*.

[31] Zhang, "Shang Wang Xue'an nianzu" 上王謔庵年祖, in Xia Xianchun 夏咸淳 comp., *Zhangdai shiwen ji* 張岱詩文集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014), 310.

[32] Zhang, preface to *Xu Wenchang yicao*.

[33] The type of puppet that Xu Wei referred to might be the marionette. According to some visual representations like the illustration for Act 19 of *The Romance of the West Chamber* published by Min Qiji (fl. sixteenth century), the puppeteers stood behind a screen or a curtain and operated the strings attached to the puppets from above.

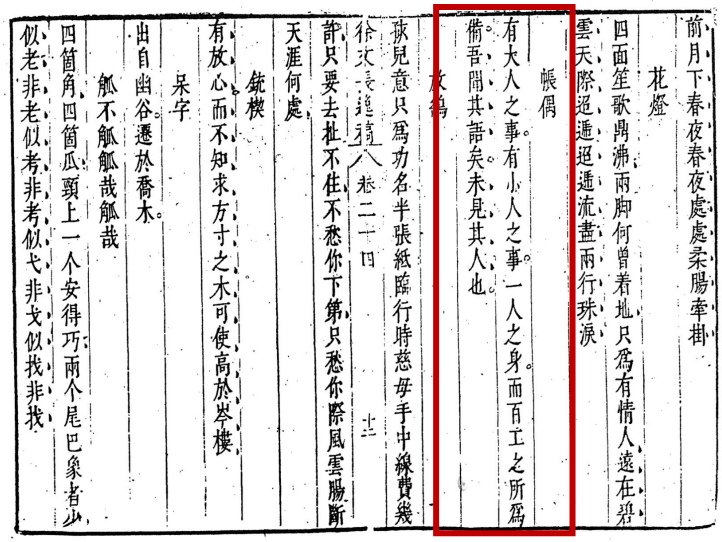

Fig.4.3 The "Curtain Puppet" lantern riddle.
From *Xu Wenchang yigao*, *juan* 24, 12:a. Peking University Library.

Xu Wei might have not expected that his lantern riddle would be treated in this manner. Perhaps we may also push our interpretation even further: the anthologized writings are comparable to the curtain puppet mimicking the real person of Xu Wei which was manipulated by the slight of hand of these editors and publishers. Yet a paradox transpired. This continuous desire of Xu Wei's contemporaries and later generations to manipulate Xu Wei's works only "contribute[d] to the very surplus of production they were designed to control."[34] Including Zhang Dai, they kept looking for his scattered works everywhere, collecting, evaluating, selecting, and printing them.[35] The more they attempted to unveil the mystery of Xu Wei, the more writings they discovered; the more they tried to understand Xu Wei through his writings, the more mysteries emerged. Therefore, Zhang Rulin taught his grandson a lesson. As he mentioned in the preface to Zhang Dai's edited collection, "When [Zhang Dai] was collecting

[34] Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in the Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 82.

[35] Zhang, preface to *Xu Wenchang yicao*. Also, according to Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, "明人劇曲以牡丹亭及四聲猿傳刻最盛", see Zheng, *Xidi shuba* 西諦書跋 (Beiing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1998), 547.

Wenchang's scattered writings, I gathered Xu's anecdotes and gave them to him. [I wanted to] let him know that Xu Wei as a person was as inexhaustible as his works" 為文長蒐佚書，故亦蒐佚事與之，使知其人果不盡於其文耳.[36] In the end, the enigma of Xu Wei continued to exist. The only thing that readers could do was to keep guessing.

On Thinking: Ruan Dacheng and *Spring Lantern Riddles*

Spring Lantern Riddles is a typical romantic comedy that centers on the encounter, separation, and reunion of the scholar Yuwen Yan 宇文彥 and the maiden Wei Yingniang 韋影娘.[37] The play features the transformations of the lantern riddles from which the play title derives. Yuwen Yan and Wei Yingniang meet each other for the first time while solving the lantern riddles together on the night of the Lantern Festival. They exchange two poem letters based on the answers to their riddles. Matching the two letters together leads to their final reunion.

If *Zen Master Yu* is still a desktop drama for reading, *Spring Lantern Riddles* was mainly written for performance. Upon its completion in 1633,[38] the forty-scene southern drama was widely staged in the Jiangnan region and beyond. A series of records demonstrate the play's rich

[36] *Xu Wei ji*, 1349–50.

[37] Theater historian Lin Ho-yi uses the notion of "narrative formula" to explicate the fixed structure and plot of the Ming-Qing *chuanqi* plays. According to Lin, the formula can be divided into three categories: the structural (including the fixed encounter, separation, and reunion of the male and female leads), the connective (including the common events such as misunderstanding, coincidence, and success in the civil service examination), and the modifying (including the fixed forms of dialogues, arias, poems, and lyrics). The playwriting techniques in particular that Ruan used included misunderstandings and coincidences both as entertainment and as a plot device. See Lin Ho-yi 林鶴宜, "Lun Ming Qing chuanqi xushi de chengshixing" 論明清傳奇敘事的程式性, in *Ming Qing xiqu yantaohui lunwenji* 明清戲曲研討會論文集, eds. Hua Wei 華瑋 and Wang Ay-ling 王瓊玲 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiusuo choubeichu, 1998), vol.1, 139–73; Lin, "Ruan Dacheng dui 'cuoren' ;qiaohe' bianju shoufa de yingyong" 阮大鋮對"錯認""巧合"編劇手法的應用, in *Xiaoshuo xiqu yanjiu* 小說戲曲研究, vol.2 (Taipei: Guoli qinghua daxue zhongguo yuwen xuexi, 1989), 265–90.

[38] For a discussion about when and where Ruan completed his plays, see Sun Shulei 孫書磊, "*Shichao chuanqi sizhong* chuangzuo kaobian" 《石巢傳奇四種》創作考辨, *Wenxian* 文獻, no.3 (2003), 151-63.

performance history. Wen Zhenheng 文震亨 (1585–1645), for instance, mentions that "soon after Mr. Shichao completed his *Spring Lantern Riddles*, it was frequently performed by the theatrical troupes and the young actors in Wuzhong (today's Suzhou in Jiangsu Province)" 石巢先生《春燈謎》初出，吳中梨園及少年常演唱.[39] In addition, according to an inscription on the wall of a village temple theater in Shanxi Province on the sixteenth day of the ninth month in 1658, a so-called "One-hundred Fortunes Troupe" (*Baishun ban* 百順班) performed three plays for entertainment including the one titled *Spring Lantern Riddles*.[40] It is still uncertain whether the title refers to Ruan's play as the present-day theater scholars speculate. But at least, the frequency of its performance implies that the play was put on as a theatrical spectacle around Ruan's time. *Spring Lantern Riddles* advances our exploration so far about the affordance of theater to stage a riddle-solving event and its implications concerned with understanding and communication.

Zen Master Yu and *Spring Lantern Riddles* are different. One is a two-act *zaju* primarily for desktop reading, and the other is a lengthy *chuanqi* mainly for watching.[41] The playwright of *Spring Lantern Riddles*, the scholar-official Ruan Dacheng was never as enigmatic as Xu Wei. His life story was widely accepted with no dissent: as a treacherous official, Ruan was first involved in the political struggle with the eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627) and the

[39] Wen Zhenheng, "Preface to *Mouni he*," *Mouni he* 牟尼合, in *Guben xiqu congkan erji* 古本戲曲叢刊二集 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1955), 1.

[40] The inscription reads: "On the sixteenth day of the ninth month in the fifteenth year during the Shunzhi reign, the One-hundred Fortunes Troupe staged three plays, including *Spring Lantern Riddles*, *Residence of Favor and Honor*, *Story of Double Bags*, for entertainment here" 順治十五年九月十六日，百順班演戲三台，春燈謎、恩榮弟、雙包記，在此一樂. See *Zhongguo xiqu zhi: Shanxi juan* 中國戲曲志·山西卷, ed. Zhongguo xiquzhi bianji weiyuanhui 中國戲曲志編輯委員會 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1990), 586.

[41] To be sure, the boundary between reading and watching a play was not clear in early modern China. Xu's *zaju* might have been performed, while Ruan's *chuanqi* might have also been read. For a discussion of the performability of Xu Wei's plays, see He Yuming, "Difficulties of Performance: The Musical Career of Xu Wei's 'The Mad Drummer,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 68, no.2 (2008), 77–114.

Donglin Party; after fifteen years of dormancy during his retirement from the court in Nanjing, he served as Minister of the Department of War for the Southern Ming regime, but soon surrendered to the Qing after their invasion in 1644.[42] A figure like Ruan Dacheng—an opportunistic villain yet with impressive literary talents—was epitomized in Kong Shangren's 孔尚任 (1648–1718) famous *chuanqi* play *Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan* 桃花扇). In the play, the painted face of the *fujing* 副淨 who performs Ruan points toward the character's constant playacting as a politician and casts doubt on whether there is anything genuine beneath the paint. His limitless self-transformations to cater to different people through performance, instead of complicating his identity, only results in underscoring his villainy.[43]

Unlike Xu Wei whose writings were continually anthologized and published, Ruan Dacheng's works were barely circulated in printed form, except for his poetry collection *Poems from the Yonghuai Hall* (*Yonghuaitang shi* 詠懷堂詩) and four *chuanqi* plays including *Swallow Letter* (*Yanzi jian* 燕子箋) and *Spring Lantern Riddles*.[44] Zhang Dai, in his recount of Ruan's family troupe, explained, "seven-tenths of his plays criticize society, and three-tenths defend himself against ridicule. Since most of his plays slander the Donglin Faction while pleading for

[42] The major posthumous biographies of Ruan Dacheng include Zhang Dai, "Ma Shiying Ruan Dacheng liezhuan" 馬士英、阮大鋮列傳, in *Shikui shu houji* 石匱書後集, juan 48; "Ma Shiying (Ruan Dacheng)" 馬士英（阮大鋮), in *Mingshi* 明史, *juan* 308; and Qian Chengzhi 錢澄之, "Wanran shishi" 皖髯事實. For fictional representations of Ruan, see *Taohua shan*; *Qiaoshi tongsu yanyi* 樵史通俗演義; and *Gu wangyan* 姑妄言. For a study on Ruan Dacheng and his literary works, see Hu Jinwang 胡金望, *Rensheng xiju yu xiju rensheng: Ruan Dacheng yanjiu* 人生喜劇與喜劇人生：阮大鋮研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004).

[43] Tina Lu, *Persons, Roles, and Minds: Identity in Peony Pavilion and Peach Blossom Fan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[44] Ruan Dacheng wrote altogether eleven plays, but only four are preserved. Among these four plays, *Swallow Letter* is most widely circulated, with seven extant editions published from the late Ming to the early 1900s. There are only three editions of *Spring Lantern Riddles* extant: the one in *Shichao chuanqi sizhong* 石巢傳奇四種 published by Mao Heng in the reign of Chongzhen, an early Qing edition, and a reprinted *Shichao sizhong* published by Dong Kang 董康 (1867–1947) in 1919. For a survey of the editions and the main plot of Ruan's four plays, see Guo Yingde 郭英德, *Ming Qing chuanqi zonglu* 明清傳奇綜錄 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), 384–93.

the party of Wei Zhongxian, the literati spurned them with contempt, paying his works little notice" 罵世十七，解嘲十三，多詆毀東林黨，辯宥魏黨，為士君子所唾棄，故其傳奇不之著焉.[45]

A third difference, in addition to genre, authorship and reception, lies in the playwrights' attitudes to their plays. Whereas Xu Wei underscored guessing as a way to tackle the wordlessness and the transience of the phenomenal world, Ruan Dacheng invited his audience to "think carefully about this *chuanqi* play" 把這部傳奇請仔細想.[46] This gesture of encouraging the audience to "think" 想 rather than to merely enjoy it as an entertaining spectacle is also implicitly made within the play. *Spring Lantern Riddles* is never complete. In a seemingly random moment in the play towards the finale, Ruan inserted an intercalated scene and titled it "Retaining a Blank" (Scene 36, "Liuyu" 留餘). With no major characters on stage, this interlude is carried out through a dialogue between a *za* 雜 (an "extra") and one or more actors from inside the backstage. Verbal diegesis of the plot replaces the theatrical performance. The diegetic world is entangled with the reality. The *za* expresses the viewpoints of the playwright on his behalf:

> (*Za*) This is also an extraordinary story. But that playwright has not completed it.
> (*Nei*) Why not finish it?
> (*Za* beats the gongs) This *chuanqi* play is too wily. The playwright is afraid of being blamed.
> (*Nei*) By whom?
> (*Za*) He is afraid of being blamed by the innocent, and therefore, he has left this scene blank and is waiting to fill it in in the future.
> (*Nei*) When can he complete it?
> (*Za*) It's still early! Still early! Not until his parents are eight hundred years old. At that time, he will just complete the old arias and create the new ones. Now, let's welcome the Doctor of the Five Classics, so that our Number One scholar can be married into his

[45] Zhang Dai, "Ruan Yuanhai xi" 阮元海戲, in *Tao'an mengyi* 陶庵夢憶 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), 122.

[46] Ruan Dacheng 阮大鋮, *Yonghuai tang xinbian shicuoren chundengmi ji* 詠懷堂新編十錯認春燈謎記, *juan xia* 卷下, in *Guben xiqu congkan erji* 古本戲曲叢刊二集 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1955), 86:a.

family. I'm unable to finish my speech. But look, Li Xingjian has already entered the stage.

(雜) 這也是一樁奇事情。只是填詞那位先生，未曾填得。
(內) 怎麼不填完了?
(雜鳴鑼介) 這一本傳奇，也忒刁鑽了，填詞的怕招怪。
(內) 誰怪?
(雜) 怕混沌怪，故此留個有餘的意思兒，日後補完。
(內) 幾時纔得補完?
(雜) 早哩! 早哩! 只待他父母壽高八百歲的時節。那時，方完舊曲，再譜新腔。如今，且請五經博士出來，待狀元好入贅認親。道猶未了，李行簡早上.[47]

The sudden disruption of the performance brought the audience back to reality, reminding them that the play was just a play. But the conversation also betrays Ruan's perception of theater's irreplaceability. Through the voice of the *za*, he expressed his worries that the innocent audience would have blamed the playwright, if the scene had been completed. Given that this particular scene was originally supposed to be filler performed by some minor characters to move the plot forward, the playwright's concern seems more or less hyperbolic. Yet for the playwright, even such a minor scene may have risked a certain misunderstanding. Indeed, as Zhang Dai stated praising Ruan's plays: "each was remarkable, and so was every role, every scene, every line, and every word" 本本出色，腳腳出色，句句出色，字字出色.[48] If Ruan was capable of creating a theatrical production of high quality, his deliberate refusal to do so makes his statement clear: *Spring Lantern Riddles*, as a complex of speeches, arias, and performances, urges the audience to think over every single detail attentively.

"Think" is the instruction that Ruan gave to his audience. I want to suggest that to understand the significance of "thinking," we need to investigate how the mechanism of riddling is manifested in *Spring Lantern Riddles*. As I have already pointed out, by "mechanism of

[47] Ruan, *Chun dengmi*, *juan xia*, 71:a.
[48] Zhang, "Ruan Yuanhai xi," 122.

riddling," I mean the connecting of fragments together using a certain logic in order to reach a correct, meaningful answer. In the case of *Spring Lantern Riddles*, riddling is not only at the core of the riddle-solving scene where Yuwen Yan and Wei Yingniang meet for the first time, it is also embedded in the ways in which the two protagonists make sense of their poem letters—two "silent riddles" (*yami* 哑谜) from their perspectives. In the following discussion, I show how riddling in *Spring Lantern Riddles* foregrounds a particular two-step method of understanding: first, one turns the nonsensical into the meaningful and second, the "fragments" take shape and can be connected into a whole. This exploration further motivates me to move from the diegetic world—by looking at the fictional characters involved in riddling—to the broader cultural realm when *Spring Lantern Riddles* was written. With a specific focus on "love letters" as a type of silent riddles, I show how thinking was a mode of desire-driven reading. In this last case, readers became designers of the reading games in their own right.

Staging a Riddle-Solving Event

The riddle-solving event takes place in Scene 8 "Solving the Lantern Riddles in Uproar" ("Hongmi" 轰谜) as part of the Lantern Festival celebration. At the Huangling Temple 黄陵廟, Yuwen Yan and Wei Yingniang (cross-dressed as a male) join the crowd in the celebration. Both successfully solve the lantern riddles. They are invited by the temple attendant for a drink and exchange poem letters before departure. This particular scene, on which the title of *Spring Lantern Riddles* is based, sets forth the series of misunderstandings and recognitions. The lantern festival scene epitomizes Ruan Dacheng's stagecraft, while also betraying the first connotation of "*xiang*" 想—to break down the four-line lantern riddles and come up with an answer. In this

section, I focus on how Ruan represented this process of "*xiang*" by constructing a riddle-solving event within a festive spectacle on stage.

Fig. 4.4 Illustration of Scene 8 "Solving the Lantern Riddles in Uproar." *Spring Lantern Riddles*.

In the early Qing edition of the *Spring Lantern Riddles*, the first illustration offers a visual representation of the Lantern Festival scene (fig. 4.4). All the celebratory events are compacted vertically, as if they are taking place simultaneously. From the bottom left, a procession of people performing the dragon dance and dressed in oversized masks pass through the arches toward the Huangling Temple.[49] In the upper left corner of the image, a crowd of

[49] The procession has long been an essential component in the lantern festival celebration in China. Known as the "lantern performance" 燈戲, people act as divine figures, drama characters, and many others, by dressing in costumes or wearing oversized masks, while following the procession to travel around the town or village. See Wang Zhaoqian 王兆乾, "Deng, Denghui, Dengxi" 燈、燈會、燈戲, *Huangmei xi yishu* 黃梅戲藝術, no.1 (1992): 29–50; Kang Baocheng 康保成, "Shenme shi dengxi" 什麼是燈戲, *Xiqu yanjiu* 戲曲研究, no.3 (2016): 4–22; Zhou

people, old and young, men and women, have gathered to solve the lantern riddles inside the temple. Among them near the altar on the left side are probably Yuwen Yan and the cross-dressed Wei Yingniang looking at the paper strips attached to the lanterns.

The illustration echoes the contemporaneous records about the Lantern Festival celebration mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Theater brings this visual depiction to life yet in a different manner. Groups of performers enter and exit the stage alternately; rather than all the events taking place concurrently, the procession and the riddle-solving event are arranged in chronological order. A procession of "dragon lantern dancers, demons, as well as Student Zhang, Monk Facong, and Hongniang" 龍燈、小鬼、張生、法聰、紅娘 thus appear at center stage and sing an aria describing their route and performance[50]:

To the Northern tune *Chao tianzi*

We are passing through teahouses and wine shops,
Daoist shrines and Buddhist Temples.
Look! We are pulling the dragon's eyes, wielding its claws,
and swinging the florid dragon lantern.
Solemn or brave, we perform some roles in the plays,
We set off firecrackers and brighten the night.
We strike those who mistreat others or show off their power,
We insult those who are wily.
We are acting in thousands and thousands of forms.
We have no restraints so people may enjoy themselves as they please.
We are singing the song of peace and wandering like the immortals.
We are singing the song of peace and wandering like the immortals.

【北朝天子】

串茶廳酒坊，繞神祠佛堂。
看，扳睛舞爪珠龍晃，
胎孩劣古、扮花稍幾樁，
炸流星把清天亮。

Huabin 周華斌, "Dengxi tuli: Zhongguo xiqu shi shang de liangjian zhongyao wenwu" 燈戲圖例：中國戲曲史上的兩件重要文物, *Sichuan xiju* 四川戲劇, no.2 (2011): 39–48.

[50] Zhang Dai praises the delicacy of the stage props in Ruan Dacheng's plays, including the dragon lantern in *Spring Lantern Riddles*. See Zhang, "Ruan Yuanhai xi," 122.

打禁持勢張，侮刁鑽鬼央，
千狀千狀千千狀。
沒拘矜隨人玩賞，隨人玩賞。
太平歌、神仙浪，太平歌、神仙浪.[51]

The aria overcomes the limits of a physical stage.[52] Through verbal visualization, it extends the audience's vision beyond the visible acting on a stage to a broader cityscape and street performance in "thousands of forms."[53] The aria, along with the illustration, also helps the reader to envision the festival spectacle and feel the liveliness. Indeed, according to an early Qing reader who was sitting in silence and flipping over the black-and-white book leaves, the "lyrics are still as gorgeous as flowers, as heated as fire. The spectacle of an immense illusion emerges from the page" 詞亦艷如花、熱如火，紙上堆起海市蜃樓巨觀也.[54]

However, the riddle-solving event following the departure of the procession offstage is dominated by characters' speech. Participants read the lantern riddles aloud and shout out their answers. The audience is privileged to "hear" their mind. Turning their backs to the characters on stage, the participants "think out loud [only to the audience]" ("*beixiang*" 背想介) about the ways to tackle the lantern riddles. Thus, the audience is informed not only of the answers, but also of the specific methods for reaching it. All three riddles are orthography riddles that ask the player to guess a person's name. Written in "vulgar language" 市語, one of them reads,

---

[51] Ruan, *Chun dengmi*, *juan shang*, 22:b.

[52] The playtext of *Spring Lantern Riddles* suggests that Ruan was highly aware of the actual stage space. For him, it was a bounded place of four corners with a visible front and an invisible backstage. For instance, Wei Yingniang as performed by a *dan* plans to view the festival celebration on the east side of the temple, but according to the stage directions, she and her maid go to the "western corner [of the stage]" 站西角介.

[53] The success of *Spring Lantern Riddles* in staging the Lantern Festival might have motivated Ruan Dacheng to include a similar scene in *Shuang jinbang*. In Scene 7 "Rambling under the Lanterns" ("Dengyou" 燈遊), a set of arias to the same tune title describe the festival sights in the city of Luoyang through the perspective of a *fujing*, a pirate in the disguise of a scholar-official. The *fujing* is like a spectator on stage, watching the groups of performers—dragon lantern dancers, two bamboo-horse dancers, and two actresses acting as famous historical figures—as they enter and exit the stage in turn.

[54] Ruan Dacheng, *Yonghuai tang xinbiankan hudie shuangjinbang ji* 詠懷堂新編勘蝴蝶雙金榜記, in *Guben xiqu congkan erji* 古本戲曲叢刊二集, *juan shang*, 18:b.

> Neither on the streets nor in the marketplace,
> There is "one" character overhead by a fortuneteller.
> Qian Yulian jumps into the river,
> Zhang Zifang [Zhang Liang] fishes her out to one side.
>
> 不在街坊不在市，
> 賣卦的頭上頂著一個字。
> 江心裡倒跳著錢玉蓮，
> 張子房撈起在身邊.[55]

An elderly pedant—one of the *zhong* 眾 (crowd)—takes a stab at solving the riddle. He speaks his mind for the audience:

> Neither on the streets nor in the marketplace; this glosses the word *xiang* 鄉 (lit. village, a place away from streets or marketplace);
> The fortuneteller indicates "*bu*" (lit. to tell the fortune); with an "*yi*" 一 (one) over it, it is the character *xia* 下 (一+卜)
> Qian Yulian (the female protagonist of *The Thorn Hairpin* 荊釵記) was a "*nü* "女 (woman);[56] there are "waves" in the river, so that is the word "*bo*" 波 (wave); "*bo*" below "*nü* " suggests a "*po*" 婆 (波+女; lit. old woman) character.
> Zhang Zifang is another name of Zhang "Liang" 良[57]; adding "*nü* " next to "*liang*" (good) is a "*niang*" 娘 (女+良; lit. woman) character.
>
> 不在街坊不在市，這是箇"鄉"字。
> 賣卦是箇"卜"字，頂著"一"字，是個"下"字。
> 錢玉蓮是箇女人，江心裏有波浪的那"波"字，下一箇"女"字是箇"婆"字。
> 張子房名喚張良，"良"字傍加一箇"女"字是箇"娘"字.[58]

In *Zen Master Yu*, the reader is invited to guess together with Willow Green. Knowing the correct answer beforehand, they witness the courtesan keep making the wrong guess; in this way, they also reflect on their own method of threading together Moonlight Monk's fragmentary actions. Contrastingly, in *Spring Lantern Riddles*, the riddle-solver's inner thoughts (or rather, the only correct way of thinking) that would have been concealed from everyone is exposed only

[55] Ruan, *Chun dengmi*, *juan shang*, 22:b.
[56] In *The Thorn Hairpin*, Qin Yulian attempts to drown herself in order to escape an arranged marriage.
[57] Zhang Liang was a Western Han general whose style name was Zifang.
[58] Ruan, *Chun dengmi*, *juan shang*, 22:b.

to the audience. This revelation is made possible through "aside" in theater. Like the lyrics that make a citywide procession imaginable both on the stage and on the page, these detailed explanations make a person's train of thought hearable/readable. What the audience is following, learning, or simultaneously comparing with their own, is a particular mechanism of riddling: each line is nonsensical at first glance, but it encodes a Chinese character by hinting at its literal meaning or at the graphic components together with their combination method; one thus needs to carefully examine each line and find these clues. Then, the answer can be revealed by linking the four characters together: "*xiang xia po niang*" 鄉下婆娘 (village woman).

The audience can choose between thinking with the participants on stage or merely watching it as part of the festive spectacle. They are reminded of their choice about whether to think along or not, even before people start to solve the lantern riddles. As the procession group leaves the stage, a group of *za* enters, holding lanterns and playing the musical instruments. Singing, they introduce the game rules and rewards:

> To the Northern tune *Chao tianzi*
>
> We carry the ball-shape lanterns to enliven the space,
> We open the lantern riddles to confuse the hearts.
> The paper strips [of the riddles] have been properly written.
> A small amount of money hangs under the lanterns,
> The one who finds the correct answer will get it,
> But if they're wrong, they will be fined the same amount.
> Written in marketplace speeches, [the lantern riddles] conceal securely some persons' names.
> You either *not think, think not, or do not think not*.
> Come on, educated people, take the awards.
> If you get the right answer, [we will] sing aloud,
> "You are the Number One Scholar."
> [We will] sing aloud, "You are the Number One Scholar." (*Italics* mine)
>
> 【北朝天子】
>
> 打燈毬鬧場，拆燈謎攪腸。
> 紙條兒標寫得停停當。

金錢小掛，道著時送將，那不著的受罰還如樣。
市語兒幾行，人名兒緊藏。
教你非想非想非非想。
讀書的早來拈賞，早來拈賞。
打著時狀元郎，高聲唱，狀元郎，高聲唱.[59]

"Think not, or do not think not" alludes the "Sphere of Neither Thought Nor No Thought" (*feixiang feifeixiang chu* 非想非非想處) in Buddhist cosmology. This is the highest heaven of the four-level formless realm. There, everyone reaches an immaterial state of mind in which "the perception of all mundane things vanishes entirely, but the perception does not."[60] The tongue-twisting "neither thought nor no thought" 非想非非想, thus, refers to the highest meditative level of thinking beyond the phenomenal world. Yet when it is parodied in the aria, it becomes ironic. What the lantern festival participants and the audience alike (equivocally addressed by the pronoun "you") are invited to think, or not to think, is probably the most nonsensical things in this mundane world: in the lantern riddle above, why is there a Chinese character over the fortuneteller's head? How could Zhang Liang fish Qiang Yuliang out on one side? To be sure, when the solution of the riddle is reached, anyone would realize that the answer "*xiang xia po niang*" 鄉下婆娘 (village woman) is nothing but part of the festive spectacle—she is another lantern viewer in the crowd who becomes the prize for the successful riddle-solvers.

"Silent Riddles": Thinking with Desire

Applying the mechanism of riddling is not confined to solving the lantern riddles. Rather, it is addressed throughout the play as the two protagonists project their affections for each other

[59] Ruan, *Chun dengmi*, *juan shang*, 23:a.
[60] Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr. eds., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1051.

and turn two insignificant poem letters into love letters. This transformation, I argue, is through riddling. As the two protagonists lend specific meanings to the letters, they become "poem riddles" 詩謎, that is, two meaningful halves to be "matched" (*he* 合).[61] This process of riddling reveals the second connotation of "*xiang*" as a double entendre of thinking and longing. In light of that, I further situate my analysis in the cultural context of reading love letters—the so-called "silent riddles" (*yami* 啞謎) that always simultaneously evoke thoughts and feelings for a lover.

Let us return to the Lantern Festival scene. On the festival night, there are three lantern riddles that are presented and solved. Prior to the one with the answer "village woman," the two protagonists Yuwen Yan and Wei Yingniang each solve a lantern riddle successfully. The answer to the first riddle, figured out by Yuwen, is the well-known Western Han writer and politician Sima Xiangru 司馬相如. Yingniang works out the other one that points to the virtuous lady of the Eastern Han, Meng Guang 孟光. After the festival events, Yuwen and Yingniang are invited by a temple attendant to compose a poem based on the answer. They exchange the poems as "verification for a future reunion" 以為後會之驗.[62] Yuwen's quatrain alludes to the anecdotes of Meng Guang and her husband:

> Responding to the Song of Five Sighs,[63] where was she going?
> Were they digging the purple mushroom together on Mount Shang?[64]
> Even if she only raised the meal tray in the corridor,[65]

[61] The idea of "poem riddles" 詩謎 is directly pointed out in Scene 37.

[62] Ruan, *Chun dengmi*, *juan xia*, 4:a.

[63] "The Song of Five Sighs" is an old-style poem that Liang Hong composed when leaving the capital. It laments the miseries of the commoners. Each of its five lines ends with the character "*yi*" 噫 (alas). For a biography of Liang Hong, see *A Biographical Dictionary of Later Han to the Three Kingdoms* (23–220 CE), ed. Rafe de Crespigny (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 448–49.

[64] This line alludes to the Four White Heads of Mount Shang (*shangshan sihao* 商山四皓)—elders who chose to live a reclusive life after witnessing the tyranny of the Qin dynasty. As hermits, they lived mainly on wild mushrooms. They also composed the "Song of the Purple Mushroom" 紫芝歌. Meng Guang and her husband Liang Hong also lived a hermit's life.

[65] According to the anecdote, each night Meng Guang presented a meal to Liang Hong by raising the meal tray to the level of her eyebrows so as not to look at him directly. The phrase "*ju'an qimei*" 舉案齊眉 (raising the tray to the eyebrow level) is often used to refer to the mutual love and respect of couples.

Her white hair still surpassed the distant-mountain eyebrows.[66]

五噫相和去何之? 不共商山掘紫芝。
廡下一餐聊舉案，白頭勝似遠山眉。[67]

Following the same rhyme, Wei Yingniang writes a poem on Sima Xiangru:

The gifted scholar from Maoling was too infatuated,
Why not pursue his lover while she was still unmarried?
The double reedpipes communicated his love through music,
Silver they are that should not complain about the grey hair.

茂陵才子太情癡，何不求凰未嫁時?
一曲琴心雙鳳管，皚皚莫怨鬢如絲。[68]

The two poems are composed solely based on the life stories of these two cultural figures. However, as the plot gradually unfolds, they undergo a process of transformation from affectionless tokens to love letters that convey their feelings.

This is evidenced in Scene 21 "Revealing the Letter" 洩箋. Before this scene, Yingniang mistakenly boards the boat of the Yuwen family and is taken in as a "daughter" by Yuwen's family members. She learns that the young scholar whom she met at the Huangling Temple is the younger son of the Yuwen family. Yingniang realizes that they have a "predestined romantic relationship" (*tianyuan* 天緣). She fondles the letter and reads at it carefully. She finds that the second couplet of Yuwen's poem is imbued with his emotions. Instead of merely recapitulating Meng Guang's life, the anecdote of Meng Guang raising the meal tray to her husband now holds a message: Yuwen wishes to have a happy marriage with Yingniang until death. Yingniang even conjures up an image of Yuwen as author. "Dipping the brush," Yingniang sings, "he carefully

[66] "Distant-mountain eyebrows" alludes to Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君. According to the *Miscellany of the Western Capital* (*Xijing zaji* 西京雜記) written by Ge Hong 葛洪 (284–364), Zhuo Wenjun, the wife of Sima Xiangru, was renowned for her eyebrows, as beautiful as the distant mountains, which all women in her time tried to imitate.

[67] Ruan, *Chun dengmi*, *juan shang*, 27:a.

[68] Ruan, *Chun dengmi*, *juan shang*, 27:a.

wrote down the poem filled with emotion" 點筆含情多細作.[69] Indeed, it is Yingniang the reader who transfers her affection for Yuwen to the poem, hence lending it with a new interpretation.

Likewise, the way Yuwen reads Yingniang's poem also changes. At first, when receiving the poem letter from the male-dressed heroine, he viewed it as the wish of his new friend: "Once he meets his 'Zhuo Wenjun' in the future, he will definitely pursue her while she is still unmarried" 日後倘遇文君，定是求凰未嫁.[70] In Scene 36 "Self-Matching" 自媒, Yuwen, who took first place in the civil service examination, is invited over by Yingniang's father and is told that the poem on Sima Xiangru was actually written by his daughter. Yuwen now recognizes that the "unmarried Wenjun" in the poem refers to Yingniang herself. The poem with her handwriting becomes an object signifying her untouchable presence. Not knowing her whereabouts, the young scholar can only lament that "at present, I am alone facing [your father] Zhuo Wangsun, but who knows where my unmarried Zhuo Wenjun is?" 如今獨自個對王孫，待求凰未嫁知誰向.[71]

As both protagonists project their longings to the interpretations of the poems, the poems transform into love letters that are supposed to communicate the feelings. In Roland Barthes' words, a love letter suggests "*a relation*, not a correspondence: the relation brings together two images [of the loves]." It is waiting for an answer, "implicitly enjoining the other to reply, for without a reply the other's image changes, becomes *other*."[72] In *Spring Lantern Riddles*, what complicates Barthes' conception is precisely the act of reading. In other words, it is the reading rather than the writing of the poems that transforms the "others"—the strangers—into lovers, and

[69] Ruan, *Chun dengmi,* juan *xia*, 2:b.
[70] Ruan, *Chun dengmi, juan shang*, 27:a.
[71] Ruan, *Chun dengmi, juan xia*, 69:a.
[72] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 2010), 158.

the two friends into a "silent-riddle couple" 啞謎夫妻. The two poems were irrelevant at first. When they take on new meaning, they become related halves waiting to be matched. The reunion of the lovers requires the reunion of the poem letters in the first place.

Two dreams in *Spring Lantern Riddles* reveal this desire to match the two poem letters. In Scene 26 "Making an Appeal" 籲觸, Yuwen is convicted for being a spy for the enemy army. He dreams of a couple in prison. In the dream, the *dan* and a masked youth in red (Yuwen) "each hold a letter and cry in each other's arms" 各持箋抱哭, as they sing, "We want to match our love letters, but when can we realize it in this life?" 欲合鴛鴦柬，今生甚年.[73] No longer referred to as "poem letters" 詩箋, their handwritten pieces are explicitly called "mandarin duck letters" 鴛鴦箋 that undoubtedly symbolize the lovers.

Earlier in Scene 18 "Regretting Imprisonment" 傷繫, Doulu Xun 豆盧詢, Yuwen Yan's savior, has a dream that is more puzzling. Doulu visits the imprisoned scholar and tries to comfort him. He tells Yuwen about the dream. In it, a branch of plum blossom was growing on Yuwen's prison bed. Doulu saw a pair of colored strips hanging on the branch but was unable to recall the words inscribed on them. With only limited secondhand information about Yuwen's encounter on the Lantern Festival night, Doulu has no knowledge about the meaning behind the image of the paired strips. He does notice the plum blossom branch. Doulu possibly follows the general cultural symbolism of the blossoming plum as a figure of perseverance and revitalization,[74] and thus considers the dream an auspicious omen that the injustice done to the

[73] Ruan Dacheng, *Chun dengmi*, *juan xia*, 25:b.

[74] For a survey of the cultural and literary traditions of plum blossoms in Chinese history, see Hans H. Frankel, "The Plum Tree in Chinese Poetry," in *Asiatische Studien* 6 (1952): 88–115; Maggie Bickford, *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially chapter 1. For a discussion of images related to the plum, including the fruit, plum tree, and plum flowers in Tang Xianzu's 湯顯祖 *chuanqi* play *The Peony Pavilion*, see Catherine Swatek, "Plum and Portrait: Feng Meng-lung's Revision of *The Peony Pavilion*," *Asia Major* 6, no.1 (1993): 127–60.

scholar will soon be wiped out. Doulu ignores the idea that the branch could also stand for an epistle to an absent lover. Ever since the fifth century, the so-called "branch of spring" 一枝春 or "[sending] plum blossoms to the northern hills" 隴頭梅花 has alluded to a letter of longing.[75] This adds another interpretation to the branch in Doulu's dream that points to the intimacy despite the distance between the owners of the paired strips.

The discussion above traces the transformative process of two poem letters into love letters in *Spring Lantern Riddles*. During this process, like in the case of *Zen Master Yu*, we see how a reader's personal experience is involved in shaping their understanding of the text. But different from the courtesan's guessing game, in *Spring Lantern Riddles*, personal feelings (*qing*) turn the insignificant into the significant, and *xiang* as both thinking/imagining and longing drives the whole process. To better understand this notion of thinking as a mode of desire-driven reading, it is necessary to contextualize *Spring Lantern Riddles* in the love-letter culture of the late Ming. This period witnessed a surge in printed letter collections and commercial letter-writing manuals. These collections usually included one or more sections on *qingshu* 情書, an umbrella term referring to letters sent between loved ones—husband and wife, client and courtesan, unmarried lovers, as well as friends. As Kathryn Lowry points out, these published *qingshu*, with the purpose of being reproduced by the reader, blur the boundaries between private and public, imagination and social reality. Such reproductivity of the model letters poses a question on the nature of writing and whether duplicable phrases and sentences can communicate

[75] The famous poem reads, "Plucking these flowers, I met a departing messenger; I send them to you up there in the northwest hills. As Jiangnan has nothing to offer, I merely give you a branch of spring" 折梅逢驛使，寄與隴頭人。江南無所有，聊贈一枝春. For the English translation, see Frankel, "The Plum Tree in Chinese Poetry," 93-94.

one's genuine emotions.[76] Here, I would like to draw attention to the other side of the coin: namely, love letters also require a careful reading only through which can the set codes of affection be deciphered.

I am focusing on a particular type of love letters. Compared to "silent riddles" 啞謎, they often prompt the recipient to ponder the exact message their lover intended to convey, in turn intensifying their longing for their lover. These silent riddles are not necessarily written in prose or verse, but can be textual fragments (e.g. a name or a set phrase), a set of objects, or even a blank paper. The act of (mis)reading—making sense of these fragments—overpowers that of writing. Here is an example of a popular song to the tune *Daogua zhi'er* 倒掛枝兒. It describes the longing of a woman who receives a blank letter from her distant lover:

> To the tune *Daogua zhi'er*
>
> Receiving your letter,
> Teardrops fall on the envelope,
> When I open it, there is no more than a half sheet of paper.
> My love's silent riddle is hard to fathom,
> There is not half a sentence, nor half a line of writing.
> You make me face a blank letter, thinking/longing in vain.
>
> 【倒掛枝兒】
>
> 寄來書，淚珠滴在封皮上。
> 拆開時止有紙半張。
> 冤家啞謎難思想，話沒半句，字兒沒半行。
> 交奴家，對著空書，白白的想.[77]

[76] Kathryn A. Lowry has conducted a series of studies on late Ming love letters (*qingshu* 情書) and their circulation. See Lowry, "Three Ways to Read a Love Letter," *Ming Studies* 44 (2000): 48–77; "Duplicating the Strength of Feeling: The Circulation of *Qingshu* in the Late Ming," in *Writing and Materiality in China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), 239–72; "The Space of Reading: Describing Melancholy and the Innermost Thoughts in Seventeenth-Century *Qingshu*," in *Yuyan mizhang: Zhongguo lishi wenhua zhong de si yu qing* 欲掩彌彰: 中國歷史文化中的私與情, ed. Xiong Bingzhen 熊秉真 and Hu Hsiao-chen 胡曉真 (Taipei: Hanxue yanjiu zhongxin, 2003), 33–80.

[77] Translation modified from Lowry, "Duplicating the Strength of Feeling," 250. Lowry misreads 啞謎 as 謎謎 (cruel riddle). For the original text, see *Daming chun* 大明春, *juan* 5, in *Shanben xiqu congkan* 善本戲曲叢刊 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1984), first series, vol.6 207–208.

With the absence of writing, the woman as the letter reader can do nothing but imagine what her lover may have wanted to express. Facing this piece of blank paper, she thinks about (*xiang*) its possible content, only to feel more yearning (*xiang*) for her lover's presence.

This wordplay of *xiang* is further exemplified in the *chuanqi* play *The Romance of the West Lake* (*Xihu ji* 西湖記), published during the Wanli reign (1573-1619). It is a romance between the scholar Qin Yimu 秦一木 and Duan Rugui 段如圭, the daughter of a wealthy man. After first meeting Rugui on the West Lake in Hangzhou, Scholar Qin, under the pseudonym He Yi 何易, encounters her again in the rear court of the Garden of One Hundred Charms (*Baike yuan* 百可園). He is driven out by Rugui, however, when he expresses his love for her and as a result, he suffers months of lovesickness. To cure him, Rugui has her brother, Qiwen 奇聞, send an "effective silent-riddle prescription" 啞謎良方, which turns out to be a tapestry package of five thick cakes of rouge (*houshi yanzhi* 厚實胭脂), a branch of flowers (*yizhi hua* 一枝花), and a sandalwood steelyard (*tanxiang dengzi* 檀香等子).

The female protagonist sending objects to her lovesick lover to cure him is not an invention of *The Romance of the West Lake*. As early as the Yuan dynasty *zaju* play, *The Romance of the West Chamber*, to which the garden rendezvous in *The Romance of the West Lake* is largely indebted, the lovesick Student Zhang takes a turn for the better when Yingying packs six objects and sends them together with a letter as a response (Book 5, Acts 2 and 3). Sending objects along with a love letter, especially personal belongings like handkerchiefs and hairpins, was a common practice even before the late Ming. On the one hand, the objects strengthened the social bond between the sender and the recipient, while on the other, their

original intimacy with the sender replaces the lover's physical and emotional presence.[78] In Yingying's view, her six personal belongings—a single undergarment, a waist wrap, a pair of stockings, a jasper *qin* zither, a jade hairpin, and a mottled bamboo brush—can convey her true feelings (*biaoyi* 表意) even better than written words. Yet, it is exactly the silence of these objects that makes them prone to miscommunicate their embedded messages between the couple. Whereas Yingying wishes her far-off lover not to seek another good match, Student Zhang decodes them as love messages that express her longing and expectations for him. That being said, what remains consistent is the attentive treatment of these objects. Whether it is Yingying or Student Zhang, they repeatedly instruct Lute the pageboy to take good care of the objects: there should be neither stains nor creases on them, as if these objects of daily use have been transformed into collectible treasures. Like substitutes for Yingying's presence and genuine affections, they, too, should be carefully protected.

Nevertheless, the objects themselves in *The Romance of the Western Chamber* are never medicine for Student Zhang's lovesickness. Before Yingying's package arrives, Student Zhang sighs in despair that no prescription or highly skilled doctor can cure the longing that is lovesickness. It is the arrival of Yingying's handwritten letter and personal belongings (or in Zhang's eyes, because "now you [Yingying] have arrived" 你來到此), that finally pacifies his aching heart.[79] The innovation of *The Romance of the West Lake*, in this light, lies in its playful treatment of "prescribing a specific medicine for illness" (*duizheng xiayao* 對症下藥). The "effective silent-riddle prescription" itself is a paradox. As the male protagonist Qin Yimu complains, "even though a famous doctor prescribes [medicine], I cannot recover from my

[78] Lowry, "The Space of Reading," 59–68.

[79] For English translation, see Shi-fu Wang, *The Story of the Western Wing*, trans. Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 267.

illness, let alone [find an] effective silent-riddle prescription that would only make me think too much; as my heart would be hurt, my illness would only get worse. How can I be cured?" 名醫用藥，尚不能愈，啞謎良方，費心妄想，傷動肺腑，反加沉重，豈有得痊之事.[80] In other words, the paradox of the prescription is that only by thinking (*xiang*) about its embedded message can the scholar recover from his illness of longing (*xiang*).

The prescription is a letter to be deciphered. This time, the message is completely hidden in the objects but these objects are not necessarily Ru Gui's personal belongings. Scholar Qin is bemused. He first interprets each object based on its shape and function. The round shape of the rouge, for instance, is construed as a signal of the "reunion at the night of the full moon" 望月團圓.[81] Reminded by his servant to combine the objects including their number, Scholar Qin starts to translate these objects into words and assemble them into a sentence. "Isn't it suggesting that in *five days*, [we will] enjoy communal pleasure under the *flowers*? (*Italics* mine)" 莫不是五日內花下同歡忭. After several attempts, the scholar conjectures by trying to link the figure five (*wu* 五), the round shape (the shape of the sun, which implies the word *ri* 日), and the flower (*hua* 花) together. He fails again. Qin Wang points out the correct answer. It is a message composed of *five* characters: "wait in the back garden" 等後面花園. The process of deciphering this silent riddle, in fact, requires more than one step. One needs to recognize first that the five rouge cakes suggest that the message consists of five characters. Then, each object should be decoded into corresponding words; the steelyard implies *deng* 等 (to wait), the flowers suggest *hua* 花 (flowers), and the thick cakes of round rouge pointing to *houmian* 厚面 (thick) and *yuan*

[80] Anonymous, Scene 25 ("Caimi zhiqi" 猜謎知期), *Xihu ji* 西湖記, in *Guben xiqu congkan erji* 古本戲曲叢刊二集, *juan xia* 卷下, 7:a.

[81] Anonymous, *Xihu ji*, *juan xia*,7:b.

圓 (round). Only when the reader replaces the two words *hou* and *yuan* with their homonyms *hou* 後 (back) and *yuan* 園 (garden) and puts all these words in the correct order will the five-word message finally be revealed. This particular guessing scene reminds us of *Zen Master Yu*. Prior to the scene, Rugui secretly reveals to the audience that she intends to meet Scholar Duan in the back garden to have a serious conversation with him. Still, the pleasure lies in the audience's participation. They join the scholar in making sense of these objects while witnessing him repeatedly "thinking in vain."

Once again, we see the mechanism of riddling at work: the reader of the message makes sense of each fragment first and connects them together into a meaningful whole. It is necessary to keep in mind that a letter is a medium of communication between a sender and a recipient. The recipient both deciphers the sender's feelings and projects their own onto it. Contrastingly in the case of *Spring Lantern Riddles*, Yuwen and Yingniang encode *and* decode the meaning of their poem letter during the process of discovering their feelings for each other. Going back to a claim made by Zhang Chao, when discussing the selecting of literary quotes to gloss the domino/dice tiles with a family member, he stated, "So long as someone is sentimental, they can extract meaning from poems and lyrics" 有情便可從詩詞取義. Anyone with *qing* can recreate the meaning of the text they read. The text, whether selected literary lines or love letters to be matched, becomes fragments waiting to be reassembled. The reader sets their rules of reading. In this sense, they simultaneously become both the player of the text and the designer of their own reading game.

"I Have Not Seen Them in Person"

About the same time as *Spring Lantern Riddles* was widely staged in the cities of Nanjing and Suzhou, Mao Heng 毛恆 (fl. seventeenth century) published the play as one of the *Four Plays of Shichao* (*Shichao chuanqi sizhong* 石巢傳奇四種). We do not know for certain whether Ruan Dacheng himself participated in editing his manuscripts and publishing his works, as Kong Shangren later imagined in *Peach Blossom Fan*. Like contemporaneous printed drama, a series of delicately carved illustrations are attached before the play proper in *Spring Lantern Riddles*. Some of the illustrations are human figures and some only landscapes, but each is based on a line from an aria in the play. The opening illustration (fig. 4.5) stands out. A young scholar holding a folded fan or a brush stands in front of a pavilion in a garden. The garden is embraced by a vigorous pine tree, swirling mists, and different kinds of flowers. Next to the side wall of the pavilion, a crane is popping its head out. The garden is depicted as if it belonged to a reclusive immortal realm far away from human habitation. As the inscription in the upper left indicates, this illustration was designed based on the line from the first scene: "In the depths of hundreds of flowers is the Yonghuai Hall" 百花深處詠懷堂. Ruan lived in Yonghuai Hall (the "Hall of Chanting My Heart's Feelings,") during his retirement. This particular line, which is followed by "painting a portrait in the bamboo grove" 畫個竹林小像, is singled out from the opening song sung by the *fumo*. Then, who is the scholar?

Fig. 4.5 The opening illustration for *Spring Lantern Riddles*.
From *Shichao chuanqi sizhong*, Ming Chongzhen edition published by Mao Heng.
In *Guben xiqu congkan erji* 古本戲曲叢刊二集.

The young scholar is neither a faithful depiction of Ruan Dacheng nor the *fumo*.[82] The illustration is like a rebus, a riddle-like pastiche of various late Ming visual elements that wait for the reader of the play to draw a possible connection. Together with the play proper, it invites the reader to think about it carefully. Kong Shangren, born after Ruan Dacheng's death, was among the historical readers of *Spring Lantern Riddles*.[83] He put his thoughts about the play into the

[82] For a discussion of drama illustrations of the opening scene, see Li-ling Hsiao, *The Eternal Present of the Past: Illustration, Theatre, and Reading in the Wanli Period, 1573–1619* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). Hsiao also mentions this opening illustration in the Chongzhen edition of *Spring Lantern Riddles*, but she thinks that it is portraying the playwright.

[83] Kong Shangren made it clear that he read the two plays (*Spring Lantern Riddles* and *Swallow Letters* [*Yanzi jian* 燕子箋]) in *Shichao chuanqi* in his bibliography before the play proper of *Peach Blossom Fan*.

mouth of the *fujing* in *Peach Blossom Fan*. As the character Ruan Dacheng asks, "Who hasn't viewed the *Spring Lantern Riddles*? Without distinguishing the ten misunderstandings [in the play], everyone is condemning me"春燈謎誰不見，十錯認無人辯，個個將咱譴.[84] For Kong, the widely staged play should have afforded a biographical reading of Ruan repenting his political mistakes. This reading is shared by many readers of *Spring Lantern Riddles*.

Yet, I want to emphasize that relating *Spring Lantern Riddles* to Ruan's political life should be viewed as one of the answers to Ruan's request to carefully think about the play. My analysis in this chapter demonstrates that what the playwright stresses is not any particular answer. Through staging multiple manifestations of riddling (solving lantern riddles and transforming poem letters into love letters), Ruan calls attention to the very process of thinking, as does Xu Wei. By means of their stagecraft, both invite the reader/audience to think about thinking—about the very nature of understanding and communication. This is also why on telling you the riddle, I was asking *how* you would answer it. While the playwrights invite the reader to engage in guessing and contemplation, the reader possesses the desire to search for an answer. Whether the reader and the playwright meet in person or not, it is in this way that reading becomes a game and goes on and on.

[84] In Chen and Acton's translation, the line had already been interpreted by a translator and relates more to Ruan Dacheng's personal life: "Every problem demands a fair solution, But I have been ten times wronged, Yet no one rises to defend me. I am vilified by all." I am inclined, however, to a more literal translation. See K'ung Shang-jen, Chen Shih-hsiang and Harold Action with Cyril Birch trans., *The Peach Blossom Fan* (New York: New York Review Books, 2015), 28.

EPILOGUE

The Games Never End

Let us conclude our exploration with a game in an adventure. In chapter 46 of the novel the *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記; hereafter, the *Journey*), four pilgrims—Monk Xuanzang and his three disciples, Sun Wukong the Monkey, Zhu Bajie the Pig, and Sha Wujing—continue their journey westward to retrieve the Buddhist sutras. They arrive at the Cart Slow Kingdom (*chechi guo* 車遲國), where they encounter three demons masquerading as Daoist priests. To obtain a seal on the travel rescript from the king, the pilgrims engage in multiple rounds of contests with the demons. They compete in rainmaking rituals, meditations, beheading challenges, and bathing inside a cauldron of boiling oil. Throughout all the contests, there is a game of "guessing what's behind the chest board." While the demon-priests decide in advance what to put inside the chest, Wukong directly sneaks into the darkness and transforms the hidden items. Consequently, "an empire blouse and a cosmic skirt" are turned into "a torn and worn-out cassock," a peach into a pit, and a Daoist lad into a Buddhist monk.[1]

Frivolous as it may seem, the guessing game scene in the *Journey* has inspired multiple interpretations and comments since its full-length publication in the sixteenth century. For instance, Qing dynasty commentator Zhang Shushen 張書紳 (fl. eighteenth century) emphasized the importance of knowledge as a key to winning the game: "Intelligence is revealed by the fact that [one] knows what others do not" 知人之所不知方見其智.[2] Zhang was astonished by

[1] For the original Chinese text, see *Xiyou ji* 西遊記(Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanbshe, 2019), 567–70; for English translation see, Anthony C. Yu trans. and ed., *The Journey to the West*, vol.2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 302–5.

[2] Zhang Shushen 張書紳, *Xinshuo xiyou ji* 新說西遊記, *juan* 8, 4:b.

Wukong's sleight of hand, asking "how can we understand that the intelligent possess the ability to change Heaven and Earth, and even know the secrets of deities and demons?" 豈知智有天地變化之能，神鬼不測之機耶.[3] In other words, Zhang believed that the truly intelligent, like Wukong, not only have knowledge of the unknown but can also manipulate that knowledge through transformation. Around the same time, the Daoist priest Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821) completed his edition with commentary entitled *The Original Intent of the Journey to the West* (*Xiyou yuanzhi* 西遊原旨), with the aim of uncovering the Daoist "truth" of the novel. In his detailed analysis of the guessing game scene, Liu compares the chest board to the Daoist classics, suggesting that one can only attain the Way by mastering these classics. Otherwise, the board blocks one's vision of understanding the Daoist truth, turning the process of cultivation into "the study of wild guessing" 虛猜之學. For Liu, "wild guessing" was also associated with the ways other commentators interpreted the *Journey*. In his preface to *The Original Intent*, Liu criticized Wang Qi's 汪淇 (fl. seventeenth century) edition, saying that it was full of "false arguments and illegitimate guesses" 妄議私猜. This *Journey to the West that Proves the Way* (*Xiyou zhengdao shu* 西遊證道書) transformed the novel into a manual for Daoist cultivation by removing the original poems, reducing the repetitive lines, and adding lengthy commentaries with Daoist overtones. According to Liu, Wang's "ridiculous language and false words" 戲謔之語，荒誕之詞 obscured the author's original intention and misled aspiring scholar-readers.

These commentaries provide valuable insights into how historical readers read games in early modern China. Like what we have explored in the previous chapters and especially chapter 4, the guessing game inspired the early modern commentators to reflect on the epistemological

[3] Zhang, *Xinshuo xiyou ji*, 6:a.

approaches to knowing and learning. While Zhang Shushen looked at the essence of intelligence through Wukong's strategies as a trickster, the chest board took on a new meaning in Liu Yiming's Daoist perspective. Specifically, for Liu, Wang Qi was considered one of the "bad players" who failed to see through the board and discover the Daoist truths. However, from our vantage point as readers of these commentaries, we can see that Liu's approach was not so different from Wang's hermeneutic methods. Both attempted to uncover the "meanings [that] transcend the actual words" 其用意處，盡在言外[4] and present a persuasive Daoist interpretation of the *Journey*. In this sense, Zhang, Wang, and Liu were all participants of a reading game in which the one who correctly discerned what lay beneath the textual surface of the novel would become the winner.

I make this claim to draw attention to *how* these readers were prompted to arrive at these interpretations, not just to explain *what* those interpretations were. "Reading games," as I have emphasized in this dissertation, serves as a heuristic device to explore the history of reading, and particularly how the literary forms, structures, and rules of reading might have prompted the reader-player to interact with the text beyond mere textual interpretations. Although the historical readers of the *Journey* had their particular intellectual and religious agendas, they all engaged with the transformative potential of the novel, much like Wukong, who transformed the hidden things to uncover what was behind the chest. Indeed, even in the first edition with commentary of the *Journey* was published in the sixteenth century, the commentator had already invited the reader to seek the secret truths beneath the "*youxi*" 遊戲 (lit. to wander and play;

[4] Liu Yiming, "Xiyou yuanzhi *dufa*" 西遊原旨讀法, in Zhu Yixuan 朱一玄 and Liu Yuchen 劉毓忱 eds., Xiyou ji *ziliao huibian* 西遊記資料彙編 (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 2012), 344.

equivalent to "games" in modern Chinese) of the novel.[5] Responding to this invitation, readers time and again "expanded [the meanings to a new context] in places teeming with transformations" 於其變化橫生之處引而申之, hoping to reach "any realm and join any way [of the Three Religions.]" on their end.[6]

* * *

Throughout this dissertation, I have deliberately chosen not to seek a terminological counterpart of "games" in early modern China. This is because the notion of "games" as rule-bound, participatory activities are universal and are immediately recognizable to everyone. It is the rules, values, and significance of specific games that require historical contextualization. For example, without consulting literary representations of drinking games, it would be difficult to understand how historical players used printed drinking cards or ivory tallies (chapter 1). Similarly, the reading puzzles and orthographic riddles (chapters 2 and 4) would be perplexing for players with limited exposure to Chinese poetry and the writing system. An understanding of the popular discourses on chance and fate is necessary to fully grasp how a coin-toss gambling game could lead to the deaths of thirteen people (chapter 3).

Furthermore, it is important to reconsider what can be regarded as "games"—or "gaming technologies," to borrow Tara Fickle's phrase—in different cultures and times, instead of

[5] The comment in Chinese reads: "遊戲之中，暗傳秘諦." "*Youxi*," noticeably, has long been entangled with comments about *Journey to the West*, and for modern scholars like Hu Shi 胡適 and Lu Xun 魯迅, the term ultimately indicates nonsensical playfulness. But it is never simply translated as "playful." An umbrella term, it can be traced to the Warring States period in the *Chuci* 楚辭 which referred to it as playing and wandering. When Buddhism was later introduced to China, *youxi* started to be compounded into phrases like *youxi shentong* 遊戲神通 and *youxi sanmei* 遊戲三昧. The former regards the state of the enlightened in which the Buddha and bodhisattvas convert human beings to Buddhist way of life through transformative and illusory manifestations. The latter was a Chan Buddhist concept of attaining spiritual purity and enlightenment through everyday playfulness.

[6] Huang Lin 黃霖 ed., *Zhongguo lidai xiaoshuo piping shiliao huibian jiaoshi* 中國歷代小說批評史料彙編校釋 (Nanchang: Baihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 2009), 310.

categorizing games right away. We would miss the changing dynamics between different games, representations of games, and metaphors for games, if we assumed that each of these categories suggests a different purpose and requires a separate approach. We would also overlook diverse and individual ways of playing a game, if we focused too much, for instance,on the categories proposed by Roger Caillois, such as *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo).[7] In this sense, "reading games" takes corrective action by highlighting the dynamic interplay between games and literature: for example, a poem about the game of Go becomes a notation system for the game (chapter 2); a folk song suit about gambling is linked to a gambling-like swindle story (chapter 3); and an orthographic riddle on the page is transformed into a charade on the stage (chapter 4). This interplay is at the core of a series of the reading games we have experienced. As specific game elements and logics are integrated into various literary experiments, hence "gamifying" the literature, reading becomes game-like. "Reading games," thus, intends to expand the scope of games and shift our focus from textual interpretations to potential, rule-bound modalities of readerly interactions prompted by the system of each reading game. The system, as I have tried to demonstrate, is itself an attempt to explore, manipulate, and reconfigure existing structured systems, such as the Chinese writing system and the structure of a short story. In turn, it invites and trains the reader-player to interact with it through specific methods, like dissecting and reassembling the graphic components of Chinese words and "calculating" the fate of characters in the story. However, as the last chapter on riddling has pointed out, the game designer does not necessarily have to be the author, and it is not always the case that the author has designed a reading game for their reader. Instead, when a new mechanism of reading is applied, a reading game starts across mediums (e.g. pairing

[7] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

dice/domino patterns with literary quotes; linking literary, gestural, or object fragments together into a meaningful whole). According to Eric Zimmerman, "To play a game deeply is to think more and more like a game designer—to tinker, retro-engineer, and modify a game in order to find new ways to play. As more people play more deeply in the Ludic Century, the lines will become increasingly blurred between game players and game designers"[8] If for Zimmerman, deep play still only exists in the twenty-first century when digital games permeate everyday lives, the reading games that I have explored with you in this dissertation urge us to recognize that games were as significant to the people from the distant past as they are to us and our lives.

On a conceptual level, my dissertation proposes a methodological intervention by emphasizing the critical potential of games. In early modern China, as in the present, games have inspired various literary experiments in terms of forms, narrative structures, and reading mechanisms. Games provide unique logic and new orders that can transform something nonsensical into something meaningful, invisible into visible, and static into dynamic. As we have seen throughout the dissertation, authors and readers alike engaged creatively with the affordances of poetry, short stories, and theater to develop a distinct epistemological perspective for viewing, understanding, and navigating reality. Through the dynamic interplay between games and literature, we can also overcome temporal distance and join historical reader-players in a series of "reading games" to explore their perceptions of life and the world.

Dear readers, thank you for joining me in these "reading games." But remember, as long as you begin to think about the systems and the design principles behind these games, question them, and attempt to transcend them, you have already started your own reading games.

[8] Eric Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century," in *The Gameful World*, 22.

Although this marks the end of my games, yours and our collective search for ludic endeavors in early modern China and beyond does not stop here. It is just the beginning.

So, game on!

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