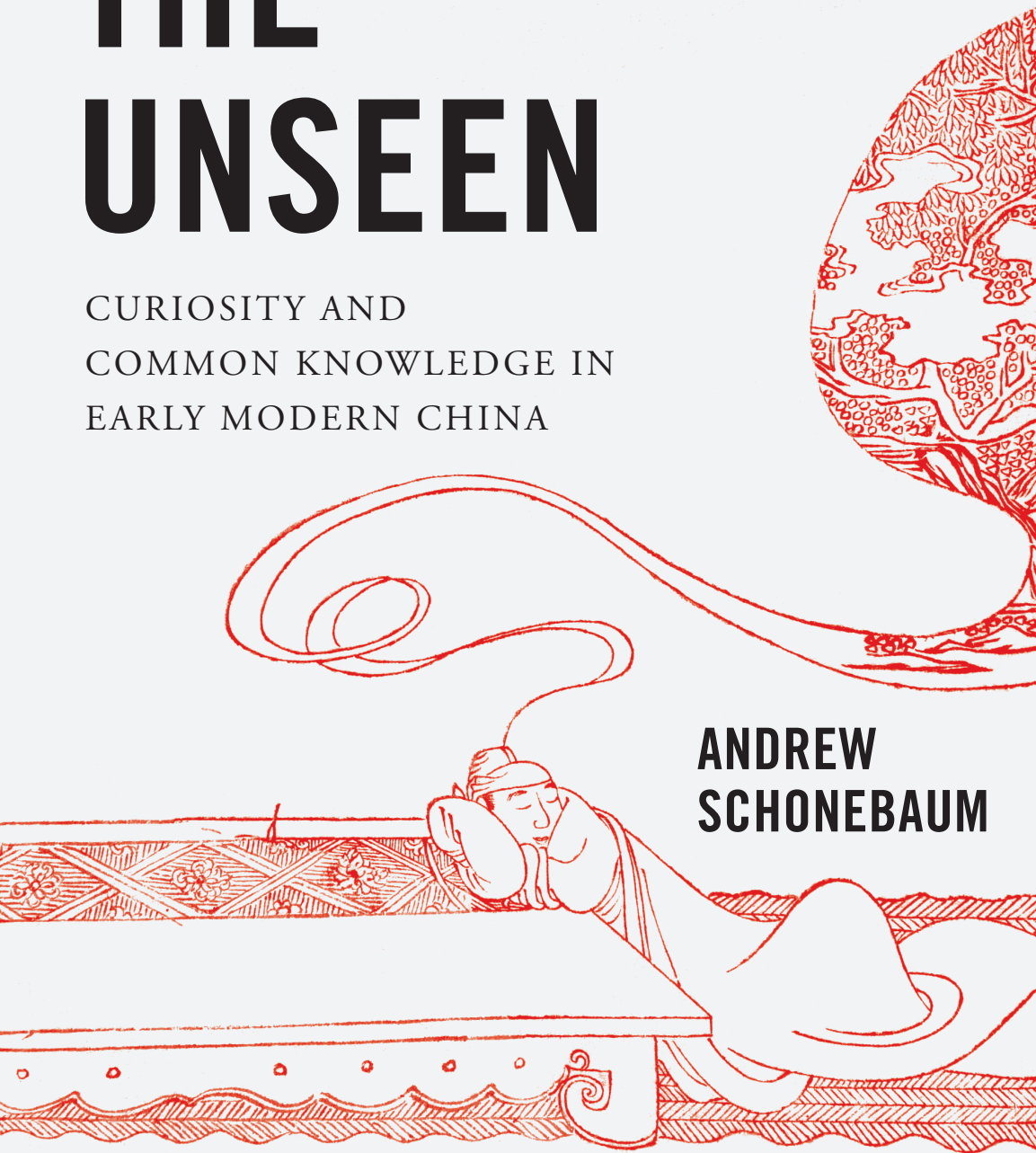


# OBSERVING THE UNSEEN

CURIOSITY AND  
COMMON KNOWLEDGE IN  
EARLY MODERN CHINA

ANDREW  
SCHONEBAUM



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## SIMPLIFIED CHRONOLOGY OF CHINESE DYNASTIES WITH SELECTED REIGN PERIODS

DYNASTY	DATES	NOTES
Shang	ca. 1600–1046 BCE	Earliest dynasty with archaeological evidence
Zhou	1046–256 BCE	
Qin	221–206 BCE	First unified imperial dynasty
Han	206 BCE–220 CE	Former Han (206 BCE–9 CE) and Later Han (25–220 CE)
Three Kingdoms	220–80	Also known as the Six Dynasties Period (220–589)
Jin	265–420	
Southern and Northern Dynasties	420–589	
Sui	581–618	
Tang	618–907	
Song	960–1279	Northern Song (960–1127) and Southern Song (1127–1279)
Yuan	1271–1368	Mongol empire
Ming	1368–1644	
Hongwu	1368–98	
Yongle	1403–24	
Xuande	1426–35	
Zhengtong	1436–49	
Chenghua	1465–87	
Hongzhi	1488–1505	
Zhengde	1506–21	
Jiajing	1522–66	
Longqing	1567–72	

Wanli	1573–1620	
Chongzheng	1628–44	
<hr/>		
Qing	1644–1911	Manchu dynasty
Shunzhi	1644–61	
Kangxi	1662–1722	
Yongzheng	1723–35	
Qianlong	1736–95	
Jiaqing	1796–1820	
Daoguang	1821–50	
Xianfeng	1851–61	
Tongzhi	1862–74	
Guangxu	1875–1908	
Xuantong	1909–11	

# OBSERVING THE UNSEEN



# Introduction

A man washed his hands with water flowing down from the eaves of his house. Suddenly he felt something penetrate his fingernail. It looked like a hair or a thread. He was unable to stretch or flex his finger, and that was when he realized the cause was a hidden dragon. Dr. Shi Cangyong said that the formularies had no record of such a problem, but if he were to grind dung beetle and apply it to his finger, he could avoid being struck by thunder. He did as he was told and then thunder and fire entwined his body, so he hastily took a needle and pricked his finger. Something leapt out of his finger, and he avoided calamity.

—*Systematic Compendium of Materia Medica*, 1596

Presumably, the doctor in the example above used dung beetles to effect the cure because they share, with dragons, an association with thunder, believed at the time to be the force in storms that caused damage and death. The beetle was used topically to avoid injuring the patient when thunder struck. This account, fantastical though it may seem to the modern reader, seemed credible to Li Shizhen (1518–93), who included it in his monumental, authoritative work of natural history, *Systematic Compendium of Materia Medica* (Bencao gangmu; hereafter *Systematic Compendium*). The *Systematic Compendium* is so much more than an encyclopedia of natural history. It is also an encyclopedia of literature in that it quotes from more than a thousand literary sources from the preceding two millennia. These sources, drawn from every genre, served as evidence about the world and everything in it.<sup>1</sup> Li Shizhen took his knowledge from all strata of historical Chinese society; beggars, convicts, monks, priests, physicians, scholars, dukes and emperors were equally acknowledged as contributors.<sup>2</sup>

Li had found this story in *Medical Explanations* (Yishuo), a Southern Song (1127–1279) collection of “brush notes” (*biji*), a loosely defined genre often

cataloged as “miscellany” or “fiction” by twentieth-century bibliographers and literary taxonomists. *Medical Explanations* in turn quoted this case from the Northern Song (960–1127) collection of brush notes *Assembled Records from the Literary World* (Hanyuan congji). Readers encountering this story in any of these texts likely found it as probable as Li did, given the widely held belief that dragons both cause and respond to rain, that they can transform into myriad creatures and sizes, that they often cause catastrophic wind and flood damage, and that they can act like parasites, hibernating in the human body until called upon by heaven, or thunder, to emerge and do its bidding. That they might accidentally invade the body and be drawn out by thunder—something believed to roust bugs and snakes from hibernation in spring—was a sensible extension of known properties. This sort of invasion and extraction was commonplace, according to Xie Zhaozhe (1567–1624), author of the 1616 collection on natural history *Five Miscellanies* (Wuzazu).<sup>3</sup> Xie writes that dragons can roust the thunder that strikes people, or people can be hit by thunder rising out of the ground. Those struck are either being punished by heaven or simply unfortunately in its path. Misbehaving dragons also fear thunder, though, and often flee into people’s homes, hiding in walls, in human ears and noses, even in cows’ horns.<sup>4</sup>

These sources were authoritative, although *Five Miscellanies* was banned in the Qianlong period (1735–95) for its portrayal of Manchu “barbarians.” They quoted from other sources and reified the information found there. Casual and experienced readers likely took them at face value. What made these anomalous accounts entertaining was their plausibility, their slight, uncanny distance from common knowledge, and their elaboration on and extension of known properties without destroying credulity. Xie’s account squares neatly with the verified truth of authoritative texts such as the *Systematic Compendium*. Early newspapers and periodicals of the late nineteenth century reported stories that borrowed liberally from those collections and from the common knowledge that suffused them. Consider this report from a July 1877 issue of the Shanghai newspaper *Shenbao*:

Throughout history, it has been said that dragons could hide in the eye or under a person’s fingernail, but I still cannot fully believe this. Now last month, in Yangzhou there was a rumor circulating widely

about a scholar named Yu Xiu, whose left arm suddenly swelled unusually. It was as thick as a bowl with a wriggling red thread in it. On the eighth there was a big storm with flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, and suddenly a dragon broke through the tumor and flew away. Isn't that amazing! We have heard many stories about how the dragon hibernates. How is it that they often hibernate in the human body? This is truly incomprehensible. I have not yet known a western scholar who could explain to me the sense of these two matters—the thunderbolts of Hankou and the flying dragons of Yangzhou. May they use their clarity to educate me!<sup>5</sup>

In *Observing the Unseen*, I seek to know how literate and marginally literate people in early modern China understood their world, especially the unseen world, or aspects of the world that are overlooked, tiny, distant, or conceptual. The sixteenth century to the late nineteenth century was a period of increasing literacy that featured the proliferation of all kinds of books and a great variety of readers. Increasing weight was given to empirical evidence, but texts, even very old texts, still held sway when it came to investigating the world. In this period, how did one investigate the forces undergirding technology, or the weather, or properties of drugs, behavior of animals, the movement of stars, the structure of time, or fate?

## Records of the Unseen

Readers often interrogated texts to learn about the world, and many of those texts were designed to teach, but curious readers also mined entertainment literature for information about the natural world. I use the term “entertainment literature” to refer to *xiaoshuo* in the form of novels and short stories, printed plays, and texts that seem designed or marked to entertain the reader with their stories or literary qualities, but they also beguiled with the kinds of information they transmitted. *Xiaoshuo* is frequently translated as “fiction,” but that is an invention of modern bibliographers and does not accurately describe the wide range of problematic genres that were dumped into that category because they did not easily fit elsewhere. Or as Ling Hon Lam writes, “The term fiction is yet another strategy (a most recent one) to delimit

the unpredictable nature of *xiaoshuo*.<sup>6</sup> Consider this 1880 advertisement in *Shenbao* for a new printing of the novel *Flowers in the Mirror* (Jinghua yuan): “Although one talks of *xiaoshuo* as ‘small talk by minor officials,’ this one truly has the ability to enhance one’s spirit and knowledge [zhi].”<sup>7</sup> *Xiaoshuo*, among other things, contained knowledge, knowledge that was believed by bibliographers to be unimportant, marginal, trivial, unreliable, or unverified. Not so for readers.

Practical literature, including medical texts, encyclopedias, almanacs, and guidebooks, was designed to educate and inform, and so too were local and court histories, gazetteers, and newspapers that recorded natural disasters, omens, and unexplained phenomena. But entertainment literature—novels, anecdotes (*zhiguai*, *chuanqi*), and brush notes created primarily to amuse and beguile, also conveyed information about the natural world. Many texts of the entertainment and epistemic kinds contained or inspired commentaries, appendices, supplements, or sequels that weighed in on the veracity of information contained in the text. These discourses on the literal margins of texts also contained debates on the margins of elite discourse. I hope that *Observing the Unseen*, by drawing on connections between epistemic and entertainment texts, will advance a more robust understanding of how an increasingly literate population in early modern China perceived and experienced the invisible and therefore perplexing aspects of the natural world.

Parts of the natural world were, of course, fascinating and scary. *Observing the Unseen* examines the curious in context, revealing fears of both people and practices (magical poison, secret medical practices) along the borders of an expanding empire and foreign curiosities that penetrated its urban centers. It also seeks to understand *how* things were investigated and envisioned when they lacked visual context, either because they were everywhere (water, wind, life), nowhere (the future), rarely seen (dragons, rainbows), or seen only through their effects (thunder). This book is about reading, visualizing, and envisioning.

This book builds on one of the primary theses in my book *Novel Medicine*, that while authors wrote in particular genres (some of them, like *biji*, decidedly lacking distinctive generic markers), many readers disregarded generic distinctions when gathering information about the world. Scholars in recent years have discussed how fiction was conceived differently in China than in

the West, and that none of the terms for various narrative entertainments in Chinese, like *xiaoshuo*, are rendered meaningfully into English by the word “fiction.” Readers found real information in every genre, and authors frequently demonstrated the breadth of their knowledge by quoting or discussing texts of every genre in their novels, compendia, and published jottings.

## Visualizing the Unseen

A series of images that encode some of the major themes of this book are preserved in a seventeenth-century illustrated edition of China’s “most popular love comedy.”<sup>8</sup> *Prints of “The Story of the Western Wing”* (Xixiang ji banhua) was compiled by Min Qiji (1580–1662?) and published in 1640. Each illustration corresponds to one of the twenty scenes in the Yuan dynasty play by Wang Shifu (ca. 1250–1300). I imagine that anyone living in a big city in the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) would have heard of this play, if not seen it. The plot of the love story between Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying was common knowledge. But the story was also *real* in its potentially dangerous effects, as numerous accounts claimed that readers were in danger of pining away under its influence.<sup>9</sup> That the play was based on a story from a few centuries earlier that claimed to be autobiographical might have contributed to its popularity.<sup>10</sup> *The Story of the Western Wing* begins with Zhang Sheng, a young scholar on his way to the capital to the imperial civil service examination. While staying at the Monastery of Universal Salvation, he falls in love with Cui Yingying, who is lodging there too, with her mother and maidservant. Zhang Sheng’s machinations save everyone in the monastery when it is besieged by bandits attracted to Yingying’s beauty. After these events, the love story unfolds. Yingying’s mother had publicly pledged that she would marry her to Zhang Sheng in return for saving the monastery, but she later recants, plunging the lovers into despair. A long and secret courtship ensues. With the help of the maidservant, Hongniang, Zhang and Yingying communicate, exchange poems, and eventually consummate their love. Yingying’s mother discovers their liaison and, to hide the disgrace, reluctantly agrees to their marriage. She imposes a final condition that Zhang first succeed in the civil service examinations.<sup>11</sup>

The prints of the play’s scenes are pictures inside of pictures that point simultaneously to the play’s fantastical dreaminess and its ubiquity and

mundanity. Most prints in the collection portray scenes from the play on objects d'art—pots, screens, mirrors. These objects are exquisite but common in real life, and the scenes on them are well known—fantastical and possibly true. Many of these objects allude to double meanings—a lantern that projects shadows, double screens, dressing mirrors, and so on.<sup>12</sup> Real objects commonly depicted scenes from this or other plays, so the prints are realistic in that regard. One print depicts a scene acted out by puppeteers, with unused props and puppets hanging on the side of the stage. This print highlights the story's layered textual and performance histories and its constructedness. But this picture is also extremely *real*, capturing a practice of daily life that would have been a familiar street scene in all its detail.

Especially relevant for this study is a print that depicts a dream that Zhang Sheng has while traveling to the capital to take the exams. In the dream, Yingying appears at the inn where Zhang is staying and explains in song that she could not bear being separated from him and has run away from the monastery in the middle of the night. Alone and with bound feet, she made her way to him so they could journey together. Zhang marvels at her intrepidity. He sings about his tender feelings and his determination never to be separated from her again. Suddenly, the same gang of bandits from earlier in the play storms onto the stage and demand that the girl be handed over to them. Zhang Sheng is disconcerted, and Yingying, in a tone of commanding authority, tells him to leave this to her. She then opens the door of the inn and confronts the bandits herself, scolding them with perfect self-control and authority. The bandits snatch her and take her away, leaving the stage. Zhang Sheng wakes up suddenly, exclaiming, “Ya! So it was only in a dream!” From this point until the end of the act, Zhang Sheng's perception of what exactly is a dream is never clear, and the verses he sings are most ambiguous. When dawn breaks, he continues his journey to the capital with his young servant, amid a sense of irremediable loss.<sup>13</sup>

Of particular interest here is that the print presents the dream as spewed forth by a giant clam in the sea. Such clam motifs were also emblazoned on pottery; everyone knew that clam dragons/demons (discussed in more detail in chapter six), produced cities over the sea with their qi. These cities perhaps were illusions or glimpses of a hidden reality (for now, we will call them “mirage”) but the thing that made them was real, and so was its qi. Images from



FIG. 1. A giant clam (*shen*), a subspecies of dragon, creates a mirage representing an alternate or future reality dreamed by Zhang Sheng in this image from the illustrated edition of the famous play *Story of the Western Wing*. *Xixiang ji banhua*, Cologne Historical Archives. <https://www.kulturelles-erbe-koeln.de/documents/obj/05161815>.

a play that were motifs on porcelain, or subjects of scrutiny in public theater, were like these cities in that they could be either real or imaginary. Min Qiji adopted for “mirage” the same artistic motifs as many did to portray dream—curly, swirling lines that are usually shown emanating from the dreamer’s head and containing the dream itself. Zhang Sheng’s dream is here an artifact of the natural world, something that has been moved from possible future to alternate reality. The subjects of investigation in this book were not discreet; they gestured at the underpinnings of the world in different, entwined ways.

## Observing the Unseen

Observing is a kind of paying attention, of watching carefully or noticing detail. But it is also an act of perception, of becoming aware of something.

In the early modern period, nothing was observed, investigated, and debated as much as the information transmitted in texts. Information—data that have been given context and meaning—is found in texts explicitly designed to transmit it, as well as in a range of epistemic forms that in the Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties included information on how to pass the exams, predict the future, build a house, behave in a brothel, sow crops, paint, write poetry, read the stars, raise children, and so on. Some texts were explicitly didactic or explanatory—the encyclopedia, the textbook, the guidebook, and compendia—while others simply described the world, thereby helping readers to locate themselves in it.

The taxonomic imagination broke objects down into component parts and grouped things together that shared the most important of those components. Components were sometimes names—words or parts of words. Origins were essential, especially for categorizing medicinal herbs or distinguishing between genuine items and imitations. The taxonomy of collectanea and other texts interested in the phenomenal world often reinforced the three “branches” (*bu*) of heaven (astronomy), earth (geography), and humanity (history), each divided into categories (*lei*) and those subdivided into items (*mu*). This scheme was broad enough to encompass all manner of things and processes. Other epistemic texts had more specific categories of knowledge, but most were variations on a theme. For popular how-to texts, such as daily-use encyclopedia (*riyong leishu*) or almanacs, the categories of information contained in them reflected a desire of literate non-elites, especially merchants, for upward mobility and encouraged self-reliance (some had *buqiuren* “don’t rely on others” in the title).<sup>14</sup> These practical, informational texts suggest profound socioeconomic changes, particularly regarding the increasingly large population of literate or semiliterate readers seeking information about how to understand, protect, or restore their health, their fortunes, and their futures.

Practical, didactic, or epistemic texts often included information on proper ways to address and speak to officials, how to file suits in court, how to interpret dreams. They included chapters on medicine, pregnancy and childbirth, and driving out disease-causing demons. Physiognomy and geomancy, agriculture, and military preparedness were also common categories. Some categories were not really for daily use, being without practical or pre-

scriptive application. These featured discussions about strange things, such as two-headed snakes or reports of feathered people living beyond the borders. Such information had little use value beyond understanding the world. Readers wanted to know about anomalies, omens, and outlying data points. Practical texts collected methods and remedies and stories that proved their efficacy. Sources, treatments, or methods were often described as “strange” (*guai*), “unusual” (*yi*), or “extraordinary” (*qi*). Practical medical texts include miraculous and wonderous cures. Presumably, readers attempted these cures; they were not just barkers’ ruses. After all, what is curiosity if not inquiry after being confronted with a logical or practical conundrum? When anomalies question the dominant paradigm, information categories blur, and curiosity is provoked.

An example of how readers in search of information viewed texts comes from the *Systematic Compendium*. It is a profoundly influential text that was often reprinted, quoted, and supplemented that purports to be a pharmacopeia dedicated to healing with natural and artificially produced substances. It is also a groundbreaking work of premodern natural history and an remarkably rich archive of information on all facets of Chinese historical culture.<sup>15</sup> Li Shizhen was not necessarily an archetypal reader in the early modern period, but he was a very important one, and some editors and compilers of popular and practical texts in the late Ming and Qing dynasties employed similar reading methods. Recent scholarly work makes it abundantly clear that Li Shizhen and his collaborators drew on every kind of text to gather knowledge about the natural world, including works we might assume were written primarily to entertain.<sup>16</sup> He quoted over fifty texts he identified as *xiaoshuo* and over a hundred works of brush notes, to say nothing about the classics, poetry, drama, collectanea, and previous materia medica. Moreover, Li was not very consistent about citations, clearly displaying his own disregard for concerns of genre, category, or even title. Books were not easy to obtain or to manage in the early modern era, with long novels and other books published in twenty or more stitch-bound fascicles, at considerable cost. Each fascicle could be shared, loaned, or lost, and none of these works had indices or other apparatus to facilitate searching for specific passages or bits of information. Often, the only available or extant edition of a work was an edited version contained in another text that collected it. This process of collecting, editing, using, and

untangling textual information could obscure original generic attributions, nature, or origins. It is also true that many compilers seem not to have cared what lexical or generic category a text belonged to, at least not when finding useful or new information in it.

An extensive bibliographical section in Li's book categorizes the texts he cites into essentially three groups: works on pharmaceuticals, works on medicine, and everything else. This latter group Li labels as belonging to the taxonomic/generic category of "classics, history and the hundred schools." Among these are *xiaoshuo*, *biji*, *chuanqi*, generic subcategories of which Li was aware, but unlike modern scholars, he did not assume that any of them were exclusively, or even primarily, "fiction." This is how just one of hundreds of texts is classified, declassified, and unclassified in the *Systematic Compendium*:

*Tang xiaoshuo*: Duke Cui of Wei died suddenly. Imperial physician Liang Xin examined him and said, "This is a case of food poisoning." A servant said, "He loved to eat bamboo chicken [*zhuji*]." The doctor said, "Bamboo chicken often eat *banxia* [pinellia] seedlings." He then pounded ginger to obtain its juice. That was then force-fed to the patient by breaking his teeth, whereupon he returned to life [*su*].<sup>17</sup>

I discuss the early modern concept of death and revival in chapter six, but here, let us focus on the origins of this account. Li Shizhen cites it as coming from *Tang xiaoshuo* (Tang period stories) as if that were a title, meaning "some collection of short stories from the Tang dynasty." Elsewhere in the *Systematic Compendium*, he refers to its title as *Anecdotes from the Area North of Meng* (Beimeng suoyan), a Song dynasty collection of anecdotes, words, and deeds of literati and social customs of the Tang and Five Dynasties periods. Li also refers to the text in shorthand, as "anecdotes." He quotes this text secondhand from *Verified and Categorized Materia Medica* (Zhenglei bencao), which combined prior materia medica texts with additional material from various sources.<sup>18</sup> Li quotes it extensively, variably referring to it as *Verified and Categorized, Song [dynasty] Materia Medica, Old Book, Materia Medica by Tang Shenwei*, just *Shenwei*, or one of four or five other titles. It is unclear if Li knew the origins of this case or if he was just following *Zhenglei*

*bencao*, which records the story of bamboo chicken as coming from a now lost *Biography of the Official Cui Wei* (Cui Wei gong zhuan), a title that could easily be that of a *xiaoshuo*. Either way, he clearly did not view *xiaoshuo* as something entirely made up but rather as a text full of not only useful but lifesaving (or life-restoring) information. He was interested not in the qualities of this story that make it entertaining, suspenseful, literary, or gruesome but rather in information about the successful use of ginger juice to dispel the poison of *banxia* seeds, regardless of the text that contains it. Whether pharmacopeia, brush note collection, short story, or official history, the information remained the same.

To readers who sought information about the natural world, virtually every text belonged to an epistemic genre. This blurring of generic lines had less to do with the origins of Chinese *xiaoshuo* in unofficial histories and news collected by local officials than with the fact that literati not only read everything—they quoted everything. Local gazetteers, the first draft of history, quote brush notes extensively, for instance.<sup>19</sup> Many readers were looking for information, which was both practical and inherently gratifying. Like *Guinness World Records*, accounts of the marvelous were entertaining, educational, uncanny, and even edifying. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that some genres, like very long high-brow novels were not only encyclopedic in their quotation of virtually every manner of text but were used as encyclopedias.<sup>20</sup>

The increasing quantity of print materials made the project of collecting and classifying texts essential to manage and navigate so much information.<sup>21</sup> Editors frequently showed a broadminded inclusiveness. Tao Zongyi (1316–1403), for example, selected and classified for his *Purlieus of Exposition* (Shuofu) more than a thousand texts, among which were brush notes dating from the Han to Yuan times and material from classics, histories, philosophical works, poetry, and other literature, including many rare or now lost books. Tao was criticized for credulity and superstitious beliefs, but living under the Mongol Yuan dynasty and being generally interested in exotic things seems to have contributed to his conception of a world more broadly encompassing than those of his contemporaries.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Li Shizhen was aware that he shared an editorial curiosity with Tao, since many of the texts cited in the *Systematic Compendium* are quoted secondhand from *Purlieus of Exposition*.

## Sequels and Supplements

One of the aims of this book is to try to understand readers. On delightful but rare occasions, individual readers annotated books, flagging passages they found interesting or enjoyable. In collectanea, editors express their feelings about what is important or in danger of being forgotten. In many other cases, we have reading notes hiding among the other thoughts, stories, and records in the large texts and huge corpus of brush notes. We also find reading notes in commentary that was printed between lines, in margins, and in prefaces of novels and collections of short stories. We will see that practicing healers made notes, for their own use, of what they had read and heard. Many of these records of reading exhibit a horizon of expectations that align with bibliographic or generic categories—“This novel is reminiscent of that novel” or “This play exceeds that play.” Frequently, though, the comments on texts, prefaces to sequels, and reading notes exhibit an interest in the information contained in a text, disassociated from its primary category.

Some of *Observing the Unseen's* major sources are sequels, supplements, and appendices. Many books, whether designed to teach or to entertain, were appended, amended, supplemented, or rewritten in forms that announced themselves as conscious responses to their parent text. These often had the same impulses as current fan fiction does; readers admired the original work and wanted it to go on or wanted to undo some aspect of it or to fix it in some way. We see this happening with epistemic texts too, in which readers wanted to contribute new knowledge to texts they admired.

Epistemic texts often append information that the author or editor found anomalous or hard to categorize. In some cases, the author appended (*fulu*) entries to a section that seemed a bit more fantastic or unverified. Li Shizhen explains this practice in his introductory notes: “Items that seem to belong to the same group but lack known potential or application, or that have potential and application that are in danger of being forgotten are added as appendices. If there is nothing they could be appended to, they are added as an appendix at the end of a section. . . . What is obscure should not be neglected.”<sup>23</sup> In addition to these reasons, Li appended things that were simply strange to him, as evidenced by his use of such phrases as “It is not known if this is so”

(Weizhi ran fou). Preserving data for later analysis outweighed the personal risk of appearing too credulous.

Sequels sometimes expand on the fantastic or anomalous in the original, and supplements similarly add information that was overlooked or cast aside by the original text. Authors and publishers wanted to benefit from the popularity of the parent text to sell copies, but in making connections for marketing purposes, they occasionally blurred generic lines. An example of this are the anomalous accounts of Wang Tao (1828–97), published toward the end of a long period of popularity of those stories and claims, beginning with Pu Songling's (1640–1715) *Strange Stories from Liaozhai* (Liaozhai zhi) in 1766.<sup>24</sup> Originally released in installments in the lithography-printed *Dianshizhai Pictorial* (Dianshizhai huabao) between 1884 and 1888, they were presented as news and printed by *Shenbao*, one of the earliest modern newspapers in China. Wang Tao's accounts were printed as a collection in 1887 under the title *Casual Notes from the Seclusion of the Song River* (Songyin manlu), which sounds like a brush note collection. Likely because a very popular edition, *Strange Stories from Liaozhai, Illustrated* (Liaozhai zhiyi tuyong) was published in 1886, Wang Tao's collection was soon reprinted in at least five authorized and unauthorized editions between 1887 and 1903 under variants of the title *Sequel to Strange Stories from Liaozhai* (Hou Liaozhai zhiyi). Whether news, reading notes, or fantastic tales, these same accounts were repackaged numerous times and may have contributed to readers' sense that generic distinctions were not useful classifiers of the information contained in a text.

Authors of sequels and supplements to epistemic texts explained and justified their impulse by first praising the parent text and then citing the ever-expanding field of knowledge. Zhao Xuemin, writing in 1765, defended his *Supplement to the Systematic Compendium* (Bencao gangmu shiyi) by saying that people love to collect curiosities, and therefore more and more of these exotic treasures become known over time. Zhao argued for the inclusion of new information, exotics, curiosities, and anomalies. The pharmaceutical archive was ever-expanding, reflecting the growth of intellectual and material horizons of the Qing world, as well as the excitement and confusion that surrounded it.<sup>25</sup>

Sequeling, like appending, said much about the veracity, utility, morality, or reality of the information in the original. Implicit in many of these texts is

the sense that sequels to entertainment literature are written by readers dissatisfied with the relation of the parent work to reality—that it was somehow unbelievable—or with the parent work’s exclusion of obscure or fantastic possibilities.

## Reality and Belief

It was not uncommon to prize information contained in the textual tradition above that which could be gathered with the naked eye, but the period that this book focuses on witnesses an evolution in that regard. It also exhibits new uses of old texts, a desire to locate the patterns that undergird technology (a.k.a. scientific thought) in ancient tradition, and the instinct to supplement and perfect those texts. Long entertainment or epistemic texts were archives of other texts, and they cite many of the same texts—classics, but also poems, plays, medical texts, *biji*, *xiaoshuo*, and others. The more a text is quoted by other texts, the truer it becomes.

As an example of this, we can consider *A Miscellany from Youyang* (Youyang zazu), a Tang dynasty collection of brush notes. It contains chapters of essays and accounts, anomalous reports, omens, unnatural calamities, local habits and customs, depictions of curious objects (magical swords and mirrors), anecdotes of transformation (leaves turning into fish, stones into birds), remarkable feats (the armless beggar who did beautiful calligraphy with his foot), oddities from border regions, delicious kinds of food and alcohol, dreams, thunder, tattooing, medicine, and more. One of the earliest bibliographies to mention it classifies the work in the general category of *xiaoshuo*, a generic repository for texts that did not readily fit into other, more well-defined, bibliographic categories.<sup>26</sup> This probably would have pleased Duan Chengshi (ca. 860), the author, since he titled his book after a legendary cache of mystical texts supposedly hidden in a cave on Youyang Mountain.<sup>27</sup> Six centuries later, the bibliographical work *Catalogue of the Hall of Literary Profundity* (Wenyuange shumu) of 1441 classed *Youyang* alongside the broadly inquisitive texts “philosophies and miscellanies” such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, family instructions, and descriptions of local customs. Both the *Systematic Compendium* and *Plum in the Golden Vase* (Jin ping mei) quote and cite *Miscellanies from Youyang*, as do other medical texts, *xiaoshuo*, and mis-

cellany, but also books on agriculture, dictionaries, and encyclopedias. It has been anthologized in tens or hundreds of compendia. Many Qing dynasty texts that cite *Youyang* are explicit about teaching the reader a variety of useful knowledge and contribute to the sense that *You-yang* was a source of reliable information. Two examples of these are *Record of Daily [Gains in] Knowledge* (Rizhi lu, 1695) and *Record of Minor Knowledge* (Xiaozhi lu, 1804). Thus, *Miscellanies from Youyang* transmitted its tried-and-true knowledge to readers through collections and highly intertextual works for a thousand years.

Many texts, including *xiaoshuo*, insist on the veracity of their information, and readers might believe commentary that states, “It happened exactly this way,” regardless of genre.<sup>28</sup> Readers of *Strange Stories from Liaozhai* might be reminded that certain stories were made up when the author, writing as the Historian of the Strange (Yishi), appends his own commentary to point out their morals, metaphors, and other created qualities. Alternately, the lack of commentary to brief entries may have signaled their authenticity. Readers may have been captivated by authors’ own credulity, as when Li Shizhen writes of accounts in his own text, “Wow!” (Yi!). More often, though, Li uses phrases such as “This makes sense” or “This is reasonable” when evaluating evidence and adjudicating truth. Li’s occasional skepticism adds to the force of his positive evaluations: “I have my doubts,” “It is not known,” “Most likely untrue.” His inquiries seem so earnest because he is not always able to disentangle truth and speculation. He asks rhetorical questions in these moments: “How could all this be meaningless?” Whether or not readers agree with him, they cannot doubt that Li believes that what he writes is true and real.

Readers of *Plum in the Golden Vase* might have been surprised to learn, as was the story’s maidservant who stole a golden bracelet, that a “wolf sinew” (*langjin*) could be used to detect the culprit in cases of theft, a “fact” corroborated by epistemic texts like *Youyang Miscellany* and the *Systematic Compendium* that discuss and debate the nature and application of the object.<sup>29</sup> Li Shizhen believes that those who employ wolf sinew to uncover crimes are skilled in “arts” (*shu*), though it is unclear if these are arts of magic or of trickery—or both.<sup>30</sup> *Plum*’s detailed descriptions of everyday life and its resonance with epistemic texts obfuscated its “fictionality,” at least for some readers. The novel states repeatedly that a pageboy has been sent “out on the street to purchase a wolf’s sinew,” which reifies the thing’s material reality and

its mundanity. Perhaps readers had seen such a thing for sale themselves. Marketplace evidence materialized unseen things—dragon bones, water from far-off places, the hammer that thunder left in the ground after a strike—and realistic literature propagated information from big-city marketplaces. Elites and marginally literate alike found phenomenological traces of unseen things in the marketplace, and entertainment literature helped circulate knowledge of things found there.

The existence of the unseen things discussed in this book was mostly not up for debate. Divination, varieties of water, dragons, thunder, and animating forces beyond “souls” were all widely accepted features of the natural world. It was the characteristics of these things and their uses that required investigation. Although modern readers may ask, “But what was it, *really*?” our sources mostly accept the existence of these things. We need to overcome the hegemony of the scientific method and other modern ways of thinking to understand the thoughts and methods of Ming and Qing readers. This is a book about curiosity and curiosities, and as such, I hope it will beguile and enthrall readers, but just as much, it is about trying to inhabit the minds of others—readers living in early modern China. Many readers in China, before the proliferation of biomedicine and the scientific method, read in ways that seem surprising to readers of the modern era. Literary scholars might assume that people read texts for their literary content, for instance. Many certainly did. Others did not. Early modern readers had their own agendas, and they used texts according to their interests. When it came to investigating dragons, for example, most readers who left records did not wonder if something was really a dragon. They wondered whether dragons produced wind or merely inhabited it. They wondered whether dragons could reproduce or die. They wondered why dragons were so lazy and so lusty. Some had their doubts, of course, but even the nature of that doubt was different from ours.

## Transformation

A few brilliant studies that have inspired this one mention the very end of the last chapter of the *Systematic Compendium*.<sup>31</sup> I think it is important to begin this investigation into curiosity, fantasy, and common knowledge with this passage. In it, Li describes all the various forms that people can take. In the

section “Human Abnormalities” (*Rengui*), Li quotes from tens of texts that discuss instances of birth after abnormally long pregnancies, feathered people, people who turn to stone due to chastity, objects that transform into human beings, and so on. As Li stretches his own taxonomic imagination, he keeps coming back to the principle underlying all these anomalies: “Creation and transformation between heaven and earth are limitless. The changes and transformations of human beings and objects are limitless, too.”<sup>32</sup> He argues against simplistic interpretations of the mechanisms of the natural world: “How can scholars of superficial learning rely on one perspective to categorize the old and new, the six directions, and the unending transformations and changes of affairs and things, and call them irrational and strange?”<sup>33</sup> When the fundamental paradigm for understanding the world is one of transformation, rather than creation, then what, as Li asks, is strange? Among the myriad transformations, though, some *were* unique. As Pu Songling, *Historian of the Strange*, would say describing an earthquake, “This was a truly incredible anomaly of transformation.”<sup>34</sup> That there are marvels in the world—curiosities and new information—is a reasonable outcome of a ceaseless process of transformation. However, even in a world based on endless change and transformation, there were limits. Li Shizhen discusses how horses, dragons, and silkworms have identical qi, which is why there are silkworms that have the head of a dragon and those that have the head of a horse. But there are inevitably busybodies (*haoshizhe*) who exaggerate these facts, saying that if one were to wrap a girl in a horse hide and place her in a grove of mulberry trees, she would transform into a silkworm. This, Li says, is nonsense.<sup>35</sup>

There were limits to what transformation could do, and to what it could explain. Some of those limits were bound by common sense. It is these limits, patterns in the principles of nature, that give the world meaning. Things might share a certain kind of qi, but things could also be connected through shared characteristics, resonances, feelings, or a common sense, *tonggan*. When flowers or cloth transformed into butterflies, it was natural that the butterflies would be the color of the thing from which they transformed.<sup>36</sup> It was when behavior or transformations diverged from expectations of transformational relationships that they were deemed to be strange.

Transformation followed certain principles, without which it would be impossible to discern differences between things. These principles were at

the heart of many debates about how the world worked and were the ultimate object of inquiry into natural phenomena. As Li writes, “How can scholars not investigate things and their underlying principles to discern their benefits and harms?”<sup>37</sup> When something reached an extreme, the next step in a cycle of transformation was to begin again as its opposite.<sup>38</sup> Things were deemed strange only when they exceeded the expansive boundaries of a foundational paradigm of transformation.

## Themes of Weather and Time, Bugs and the Written Word

In early modern entertainment and epistemic literature, many debates concerned the objects in and functioning of the natural world. The current study investigates only a few of them, chosen for their kinds and degrees of invisibility and tied together by time (or timing) and weather (or seasons). The precise moment that a person was born, when transformation brought them forth, influenced their fate. Plants blooming out of season were omens. The date and time of day when medicines were harvested, prepared, or administered to a patient played an important role in effecting a cure. Much of what made waters different from each other was when they were gathered, how old they were, and how far they had traveled. Predicting the future implicated memory and the past. Thunder and dragons had their seasons.

Time touches all things, and it is a thread running through this book, but the chapters do not unfold chronologically. With evidence drawn mostly from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, discussions range back and forth in time because our Ming and Qing era authors and readers engaged older texts as well. In fact, because so much of what was read in the Ming and Qing was found in collectanea that gathered texts from disparate time periods, disparate topics, and disparate genres, readers must have had a difficult time discerning old information from new or tracking the chronological development of thought.

The written word, perhaps predictably, emerged as a theme in *Observing the Unseen*. Societies for the care and respectful disposal of paper with written words, charlatans writing on water or with water, dragon bones identified because they had writing on them, and writing burned into the charred remains of willful animals all factor into this study. Graphophagy included

grinding and swallowing dragon bones (identified by their curious markings) with wine and the ingestion of written talismans. Healing practices included writing on the body and receiving written answers from inquiries directed at spirits. Heaven also sent messages via writing burned on buildings or bodies scorched by thunder.

The emergence of bugs in each chapter surprised me but probably would not surprise my colleagues who study the history of health care in China, who are aware that the real damage, fear, and illness caused by bugs, worms, poisonous things, and all manner of pest (*chong*) was omnipresent in the early modern period.<sup>39</sup> Bugs were a mundane nuisance but also capable of miraculous transformations. They also snitched to heaven about the sins of their hosts. They were, at times, admired (“Among small creatures, none are more lovable than ants”) but mostly, bugs infested homes and bodies.<sup>40</sup> Some scholars estimate that between one quarter and one half of all humans were hosts to roundworms, helminths, or the like through the eighteenth century.<sup>41</sup> The realities of gastrointestinal issues, bowel movements, digestion, chamber pots, hygiene sticks (early toilet paper), and the like were indelicate, and thus they rarely found themselves represented in printed texts written by and for the elite. Bugs were ignored by mainstream medical traditions but discussed in certain kinds of texts such as materia medica, brush notes, miscellanies, and stories. Pests wiggle their way through this book, transforming into dragons and rainbows, evolving from water, responding to thunder, and generally helping to demonstrate that entertainment literature was epistemic literature too.

These themes, emerging in a book about scrutinizing the unseen, are somewhat obvious in retrospect. They are all concerns that affected everyone in their daily lives, and this book is about common knowledge that a wide variety of readers gathered from a broad range of texts. Authors and publishers intend their books to be read by specific audiences, but who their readers actually are and what readers actually get out of their books is another matter. Publishers were aware of the expanding readership of their texts and the variety that such expansion entailed. Publishers of entertainment literature and epistemic literature alike were aiming their wares at a broad readership. “Even those committed to the most rigorous scholarship,” the publisher’s note to a collection of short stories begins, “have always included unofficial histories [*yeshi*] in their studies. It is no wonder, then, that the lower classes

find popular historical romances [*yanyi* sometimes a synonym for *xiaoshuo*] most appealing.”<sup>42</sup> An edition of a daily-use encyclopedia was published a century later with a marketing note specifying that “this book is designed to be appreciated by all four classes of people [i.e., everyone].”<sup>43</sup> We cannot know how many people read these books or who they were, but it is clear that publishers expected their books to be used by a variety of readers for a variety of purposes. Many of these readers sought to be informed as they were entertained. I hope readers of this book will be similarly broad and that they will also find it entertaining and informative.

## Fortune Telling, Storytelling

Without coincidences, there would be no stories.

—*Plum in the Golden Vase*

Early modern Chinese novels and short stories often presented readers with suspicious practitioners of divinatory arts who predict the fates of major characters. Those characters inevitably dismiss the prognostications and then ultimately suffer the predicated fates. Narratives were motivated to challenge divinatory practice, of course, since blind acceptance would render the story moot. But they also challenged fortunetelling by realistically representing doubt. Although fortunetelling in stories is commonplace and although details or descriptions call these practices into question, within the confines of entertainment literature, the text that fortunetelling creates is read as always true. Characters in stories are rarely successful at altering their fates. Even if they are good readers of the text produced by divinatory inquiry, they tend to squander the opportunities afforded by it. Mantic texts produced by divination, often in the form of verse, put characters in the position of readers. They must interpret the text to get at their fates. The reader of the novel thus relates to the characters cast as readers of their own fates and struggling to understand the mantic and the narrative text lest misreading lead to some harm.

The religious traditions of China extend beyond what is encompassed by Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. These other traditions often overlap the “big three” and are usually grouped together under the rubric of “Chinese folk religion” or simply “Chinese religion.” That this so-called Chinese

religion is rarely named among the religious traditions of China is ironic, especially given that it undergirds the daily behaviors of so many and that it is, by some accounts, the world's fourth-largest religion.<sup>1</sup> Many of the practices of Chinese religion seek to attract auspiciousness and avoid bad luck. To do so, you might worship local gods of rivers or city walls, kitchen gods or dragons. You might post talismans on your front door, perform rituals to expel demons, or call back a wandering soul. You might divine your future by consulting an oracle, foretell if a venture will have a favorable outcome by reading an almanac, or compare the important dates and times of birth to ascertain if an engagement will result in a lasting marriage. One of the difficulties in studying Chinese religion is that it creates a holistic worldview, a systematic cosmos, but the workings of that cosmos are assessed through a wide variety of practices and implied beliefs. Another difficulty is that while many of its practices have accompanying texts, it is not a liturgical religion or one that centers around any defined or delimited group of scripture. One of the most important aspects of this religion is predicting the future and divining auspicious moments.<sup>2</sup> Divinatory practices touch on practically all aspects of life in China in the premodern period, and all genres of literature in China reflect their influence.

Much of what would come to be known as classic works of Chinese philosophy, history, and poetry record or debate divinatory practices.<sup>3</sup> Many temple oracles are accompanied by poems, which must then be interpreted by a diviner. Poetry in general, whether because it was closer to the language of nature or because it was ancient or possessed some other quality, was thought to encode truth. The phrase “There is a poem as proof” (Youshi weizheng) is ubiquitous, found in texts of all kinds, including materia medica and *xiaoshuo*. The links between literature and divination extend all the way back to early examples of written language, with the first Chinese characters having been carved on ox scapulae or turtle plastrons—called “oracle bones”—and surviving well into the modern period in the form of written talismans that copy out characters in “spirit writing,” with embellishments and flourishes. Entertainment literature, and long novels in particular, teach much about divinatory practice, attitudes toward fate, and conceptions of time—though some of what they teach, they themselves created.

## History to Fiction to History

*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo yanyi), one of the “four masterworks of the Ming Novel” (*sida qishu* / *sida mingzhu*), fictionalizes and mythologizes accounts from the historical Three Kingdoms period (ca. 184–280), a pinnacle in a long tradition of retelling those stories. In it, warring armies and their cunning generals battle to outwit, as much as to overpower, each other to either restore or replace the declining Han dynasty. The novel spends much ink on tacticians in general and on Zhuge Liang (181–234) in particular, the politician, statesman, scholar, and master strategist who fought for the heir of the Han, early accounts of whom, drawing on folk tradition, tended to portray him as a Daoist immortal capable of performing magical feats.

*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (earliest extant edition, 1522) retains only some of these extraordinary talents. Zhuge’s depiction in the novel, often cited as one of the book’s great accomplishments, is primarily that of a wise statesman and brilliant tactician who labored tirelessly for his cause even as he realized that it was doomed.<sup>4</sup> Even so, his abilities in these regards surpass mundane talent.

Zhugé is portrayed as having cunning schemes, great introspection, and a keen insight into human nature that allowed him to predict behavior and manipulate others. But more, Zhuge seemingly knew everything that went on in the world, even when he lived as a hermit. Moreover, he is portrayed as a man of profound understanding, not just of military tactics and developments but of moral rightness and of arcane and mantic arts. Zhuge could consult the *Book of Changes* (Yijing) and observe celestial phenomena to predict the future. His powers were not solely prognosticatory, however, as his wisdom and moral power enable him to effect change even on the weather.

In chapter 53 of the novel, Zhuge Liang (whom the novel usually refers to as Kongming) applies the *liuren* (art of the six yang waters) method to ascertain the status of a remote battle. He and Liu Xuande (i.e., Liu Bei) are organizing a support detachment when a banner falls over at the same time that a south-flying crow passes them, croaking three times. Surely, these signs have meaning, Xuande says. Kongming makes calculations on his hands under his sleeves and replies, “Changsha district is ours! And we have won over important generals.”<sup>5</sup> Some scholars have pointed out how this manner of divina-

tion has only recently been studied, having been both outside of Confucian concerns and a military practice to be kept secret.<sup>6</sup> For our purposes, suffice it to note that Zhuge Liang, in addition to acting as a scholar who could perceive changes in the hearts of men and in the formations of the battlefield, is depicted as seeing—and even influencing—far-away places as well as far-away future times.<sup>7</sup>

At one point in the novel, after all preparations have been made for the fire attack on the villain Cao Cao's (155–220) fleet, the commander of the Southland suddenly realizes that for his plan to succeed, the wind must blow from the southeast, or his own fleet will catch fire. When he sees the wind blowing from the northwest, he vomits blood, faints, and becomes sick. Zhuge Liang visits him and points out the root cause of his illness—his worries about the wind. He then sets up an altar and performs detailed rituals—the mysterious gates escaping techniques (*Qimen Dunjia*)—for days, and indeed, the southeast wind starts blowing just before the fire attack is launched (chapter 49). Zhuge Liang reads the hero Zhang Fei's death in the stars (chapter 81) and later predicts his own death through an incantatory ritual (chapter 103). He is not the only character in the novel who interprets omens, predicts the future, and influences events, but these talents contribute to an enduring portrayal of Zhuge Liang as a modest scholar-gentleman and a master of the mantic arts.

Several prognosticatory texts and practices that are still in use are attributed to Zhuge Liang, including the *Secret Book of Zhuge [Liang's] Divine Calculations* (Miben Zhuge shenshu), a five-coin method, the movement of the stars for divining military strategy in *Zhuge's Art of War* (Zhuge bingfa), a divinatory method called “quick predictions” (*maqian ke*), and others. The *Qimen Dunjia* method of calendar astrology that Zhuge employs in the *Three Kingdoms* becomes attributed to him in later periods. He has even been credited as the author of *Records in a Jade Casket* (Yuxia ji), an almanac and divinatory text, ubiquitous in China for at least two or three centuries. Chen Shou's (233–97) biography of Zhuge Liang in the official *History of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo zhi) makes no mention of his having any interest in the divinatory arts, and nothing like the divinatory texts mentioned above are contained in his collected works, the *Zhuge Liang ji*, nor in the more expansive complete works of Zhuge Liang (*Zhuge Liang quanshu*), even though the latter contains a number of apocryphal works. Such divinatory attributions

are the result of later tradition, most notably by the novel. The novel, having created an image of Zhuge Liang as a master of mantic arts, led to his apotheosis in the public imagination, leading back to even more mythologized acts in subsequent stories, as the object of worship of many temples and shrines, and as a door god.<sup>8</sup>

### Fiction Explicates Fortunes, Fortunes Explicate Fiction

*The Story of the Stone* (Shitou ji), also known as *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng, hereafter *Stone*), features characters who have otherworldly sight and knowledge of the future, but the novel consistently asserts that while divinatory techniques can produce accurate data about the future, one must be a sensitive reader to make use of it. As in other premodern literati novels, characters often refer to the mantic arts casually or jokingly, suggesting that those characters, like their presumed readers, may not have taken practitioners of those arts very seriously. Wang Xifeng, for instance, mentions that she needs a fortuneteller when she misplays her hand in a game of dominos.<sup>9</sup> In another instance, a corrupt minor official is advised to claim that a man whom he is reluctant to prosecute has died of a sudden illness. To back up this claim, he should pretend to be able to consult spirits through the planchette, who then “confirm” that plaintiff and defendant were enemies in a former existence and were fated to clash to settle scores. The falsified planchette reading would verify that the defendant had been hounded by his victim’s ghost and thereby perished of some mysterious disease.<sup>10</sup> The attitudes of these characters, at times casually dismissive of divination or falsely practicing it, are belied by the world of the novel itself, which is undergirded by the structures, rules, interventions, and predictability of the unseen world.

As in other domestic novels, divination is taken seriously when a character is ill. In *Stone*, one of the masters of the house consults a fortune teller when his second wife falls ill. He discovers that her stars temporarily collided with those of some other female born under the sign of the rabbit—his concubine, who is already in competition with the other wives for their husband’s favor. Her astral influences were harming the second wife, and her subsequent removal from her rooms caused a great deal of anger and jealousy. This is a device we see in many works of entertainment literature, that

divination both reveals and creates enmity, especially between women in a household. Divination and resentment are linked by making the implicit explicit, by reading aloud for illiterate or obtuse characters the structures of dominance and contestation that are the nature of their unhappiness.

Exception to the general suspicion of fortune tellers is made for expediency in emergencies. Usually, this is the case when a character is very sick and divination is employed as prognosis. Readers can readily distinguish between fortune tellers who possess real skill and charlatans. In *Stone*, when the matriarch of the Jia family falls ill after walking through the desolate, perhaps haunted garden, her son Jia Rong asks a fringe character, Half Immortal Mao (Mao Banxian) to divine the cause and outcome of her illness. He beseeches the Supreme Ultimate, the Generative Powers of the Cosmos, the Holy Signs in the Great River, and the Four Sages for an efficacious response to his inquiry. He throws coins to create trigrams (printed in some editions of the novel) and then consults the *Book of Changes*. Readers' own views may have resonated with Jia Rong's: "At the beginning of this rigmarole it was all Jia Rong could do to keep a straight face. But gradually Mao impressed him as a man who knew what he was talking about, and when he went on to predict misfortune for another relative, Jia Rong began to take him rather more seriously."<sup>11</sup>

There is little discussion about why a character practices a particular kind of divination in *Stone*. Mao admits the limits of the method in which he specializes: "I am afraid a precise diagnosis lies beyond the limitations of even a more elaborate milfoil reading of the *Changes*. For that, you would have to cast a six cardinal (*daliu ren*) horoscope."<sup>12</sup> After being given the date and time of birth (stems and branches) of the patient, Mao adjusts his diviner's compass and predicts a "transformation of the material soul" (*pohua ke*) with a delivering spirit leading to a "transformation of the material soul and return of the spiritual soul" (*pohua hungui*), a prediction as much of the entire Jia family fortune as the course of one or two of its characters.<sup>13</sup> Why a character practices one kind of divination rather than another has more to do with the kind of language a method produces than accurately representing or discussing the cosmic mechanisms a method can access.

*Stone*, like other novels, uses divination as foreshadowing. It also represents prognosticatory practices as things that require sensitive reading, akin to using

poems as evidence. Characters in the novel consistently demonstrate their relative talents at reading and composing poems and debating the meaning of passages in the *Zhuangzi* and other classics.

Some characters, particularly important female characters Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai, are superior readers. So in chapter 101, when Wang Xifeng, ill, goes to the temple to pray to the Bodhisattva of the Sacred Flowers, she draws a divination lot predicting her future, and the abbess interprets the oracle that “Xifeng comes home to rest, in finery arrayed” as a good omen because the abbess is a literal, surface reader of the poetic text. Xifeng, a savvy household manager and master schemer, shows that she is a more sophisticated reader (though marginally literate) when she reveals her doubts that this is a fortuitous omen. Baochai, too, suspects that it is not a lucky omen as many say it is; “the phrase ‘returns home in splendor’ may have a deeper meaning.”<sup>14</sup> Baoyu, the scion of the wealthy Jia family, accuses Baochai of being skeptical, “forever trying to twist the meaning of the text where the truth [of its fortuitousness] is common knowledge, why read some other meaning into it?” This exchange reminds readers that Baochai has always been superior to Baoyu in composing and understanding verse.<sup>15</sup> The true meaning of the oracle is hinted at in the chapter title couplet, “At Scattered Flowers Convent, the Fortune Sticks Give an Alarming Omen,” giving the reader information with which she can rate characters’ ability to read.<sup>16</sup> The omen is alarming only to savvy readers of the novel and savvy readers within it. Their suspicions are borne out a few chapters later when Wang Xifeng dies, deliriously calling for a boat so that she can return to her ancestral home. The narrative spells out the meaning of the prognostication, and readers could judge their own abilities against it.

In one of the most important episodes in *Stone*, Baoyu loses the jade talisman that was in his mouth when he was born. The other characters in the novel believe the jade to be Baoyu’s soul, upon which “his very life depends.” Although it is the eleventh month, the crab apple trees in Baoyu’s residence that have been withered for a year suddenly burst into bloom. Everyone, except the ailing Xifeng, rushes over to have a look at the sight. There is disagreement about whether this is a good or ill omen. Baoyu does not wear his jade when he goes to look at the blossoms, and when he returns, he finds that the jade is missing. In its absence, Baoyu falls ill and becomes insensate. The family members, in a panic, consult all the fortune tellers of the marketplace.

One of them, Iron Mouth Liu (Liu Tiezui), divines the character *shang* 賞 and gives a detailed glyphomantic (*chaizi*) reading of its meaning:

We should be careful to notice that the radical element was *bei* 貝, meaning “a cowry shell” and *not* the similar radical *jian* 見 meaning “to appear” hence the object’s disappearance. And the top element of the whole was very like *dang* 當 meaning “to pawn” so we should go straight to the pawnshop. Then he pointed out that by adding a *ren* 人 “man” to the left-hand side, the compound *chang* 償 meaning “to redeem” was formed. Find the man in the pawnshop, pay the price, and the lost object will be redeemed<sup>17</sup>

Some may interpret this passage to mean that the author(s) were skeptical of fortune telling or of this method of fortune telling, but as with the above example, it is really a matter of reading well. Later, when a mysterious monk returns the jade, we discover that the data were correct, but their interpretation was off. Again, it is Xue Baochai who (after the fact) realizes the correct parsing: “You said it had something to do with a pawnshop. But now I can see it was really pointing to the word ‘monk’ [*shang* 尙], which is contained in the upper part of the character *shang* 賞. We were being told by the word diviner that a monk had taken it!”<sup>18</sup>

One of the people tasked with searching for the missing jade says, “If you ask me, all of those word diviners and fortune tellers you find on the street are all charlatans,” right before she recommends the secular Buddhist nun, Adamantina (Miaoyu), for her skill in consulting the planchette (*xianji*). Adamantina’s hand and that of a friend are guided by an unseen spirit (we are later told that she invoked Iron Crutch Li, Li Tiegua) to write verse in sand. Adamantina, another superior reader, makes no attempt to interpret the poem, the meaning of which is clear to readers who know the origins of the jade: “Alas, it [the jade] left no trace nor sign / Gone to Greensickness Peak to lie / at the foot of an age-old pine / why traverse countless mountains / searching for your friend / follow me and laugh to see / your journey at an end!”<sup>19</sup> This verse puts the readers in the shoes of the prognosticator, left to use their experience to read between the lines and understand the world system of the novel hinted at by divinatory glimpses. Moreover, the theme of insightful reading is

entwined with the motif of the entire novel, namely the interplay of truth and fiction, the possibilities and pitfalls of reading and misreading.<sup>20</sup>

Not surprisingly, dreams are among the most important prognosticatory media in *Stone*. Dreams are the bridge between reality and illusion and between now and the future. They need to be read in the same responsive way that fiction needs to be read, with attention to their constructedness, their figures, structures, and themes. *Stone* explicitly and implicitly reminds the reader that it is fiction, yet it also questions the nature of truth, particularly when it comes to human feeling. Jia Baoyu's dream visit to the land of illusion in chapter 5 is a key to the novel. In it, he is escorted by the Fairy Disenchantment (Jinghuan Xiang) to the administrative offices of the ill-fated fair, where he sees images and captions of the fates of most of the women in the novel and where he is then brought to a performance that also reveals those same fates in verse. Baoyu does not understand the meaning or gravity of his dream until he revisits the Land of Illusion (Taixu Jing) again (this time named the Paradise of Truth, Zhenru Fudi), 111 chapters later. Having learned the fates of the main female characters in the novel so early does not impede the sense that the novel is extremely real, since the emotions it elicits in readers are themselves truly felt. Fate is real, not just in the sense that prognostications are accurate but in that characters in fiction meet their fates—significantly, inevitably, and poetically.

*Stone* again and again questions its own fictionality and constructedness. Despite all the omens and oracles in its pages coming true, characters treat mantic practice as chicanery. Baochai responds to Baoyu's joke that she can foretell the future: "Even if I hit upon the truth about Xifeng, I didn't really know what was going to happen to her. I don't even know what's going to happen to me, so how can I tell about you? All such auguries are bogus. How can you believe in them?"<sup>21</sup> All the omens in *Stone* come true, though, providing another instance of the novel playing with truth and fiction

One of *Stone*'s most famous commentators felt, remarkably, that *Stone* was itself an oracle. Zhang Xinzhi (fl. 1828–50) believed that the *Book of Changes* was a key to unlocking the meaning of *Stone*.<sup>22</sup> His commentary draws on the notion found in the *Changes* and elsewhere that the constant transformation of outward form conceals inner, unseen patterns of coherence. He explains his revelation: "The whole book is nothing more or less than the way of the

*Changes!* In fact, my commentary on *The Story of the Stone* really begins from this point.<sup>23</sup> Zhang even conflates the divinatory practice of reading hexagrams with glyphomancy by viewing written Chinese characters contained in the text of the novel as hexagram-like. That is, he reads *Stone* the same way he reads the *Changes*. His views may not have gained much traction, and certainly his critical insight was underwhelming to some. One of his less forgiving detractors commented, “This kind of person cannot even read himself, yet he goes and composes a ‘how to read’ essay.”<sup>24</sup> His guide to reading *Stone* was reprinted in many popular editions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and therefore presumably had a wide and varied readership. While some found Zhang’s assertion that *Stone* was a fictionalized *Book of Changes* to be farfetched, others must have found it compelling, helpful, or even an example of how the elite read novels and how they should be read. At the very least Zhang’s commentary supported the view that *The Story of the Stone* was as complicated as the cosmos and required the same sort of sensitive reading to understand it.

## Divining Novels / Novel Divination

*Plum in the Golden Vase* was published in the early seventeenth century but written and first circulated in the last years of the sixteenth. It is the story of a merchant and his household, which rises in glory and wealth as he, Ximen Qing, is appointed to official posts and abuses those positions. The lives of his many wives and servants and their machinations to gain access to Ximen and to control information as a means of having some measure of power constitute much of the story.

*Plum* includes all sorts of apotropaic and mantic practice, from women “walking off the hundred ailments” on the night of the Lantern festival to ward off illness, to “Yinyang Master” Xu’s prognostications about characters’ futures.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes characters or the narrator suggest that they think divinatory methods are spurious. But upon investigation, that wariness is usually directed at professional practitioners rather than disbelief that the unseen forces of the cosmos are knowable. The narration addresses the reader directly at times, in “gentle reader” (*kanguan*) statements that either explain complicated aspects of the plot or give the reader advice on aspects of daily life. The

advice is consistent with prevailing literati attitudes of the time, and it is consistent throughout the novel, warning against the deceitfulness of humans, particularly women and professionals. *Plum* cautions the reader against those who seek only money—hangers-on, sing-song girls, monks, and nuns who expect payment—but it does not suggest that the world of demons is not real or that the workings of the cosmos cannot be gleaned through divinatory activity. Some “dear reader” passages warn that these practices do really access unseen patterns of time and fate: “Can the existence of such [mantic] arts be doubted?”<sup>26</sup> But *Plum* has a complicated stance toward these practices. The narrator warns the reader about female medical practitioners, including those who exorcise demons and prescribe herbal remedies, but it also presents mantic masters as real, even final, authorities on the course of disease. *Plum*, *Stone*, *Three Kingdoms*, and other novels affirm that a cure, or even a patient’s death after a dire prediction, served as evidence that these unseen forces of time and fate were real.

*Plum* records several divinatory practices in the heterodox medical tradition, often labelled “divination of the cause” (*zhuyou*). It even preserves one of the earliest accounts of a particular *zhuyou* practice in print: “Instructions on how to determine survival or death by means of emolument and horse” (*luma ding shengsi jue*).<sup>27</sup> The meaning of “emolument and horse” (*luma*) has to do with official reward and fate (*luming*) following the movement of the “heavenly steed” constellation (*tianma*).<sup>28</sup> It is not clear when the “emolument and horse” method to predict the course of an illness originated, but the first record of it in a printed text seems to be the story “Qiaoren Settles His Accounts” (Qiaoren suanzhang) in Xu Zhen’s (fl. 1377) early Ming drama *Records of Killing Dogs* (Shagouji).<sup>29</sup> Little about this method is recorded in any literature between this story and *Plum*.<sup>30</sup>

“Emolument and horse” was a method of prognosis without diagnosis; it distilled the workings of fate and time into three simple possibilities. Calculations were carried out on a table of four columns of ten characters each composed of alternating characters *ma* 馬 “horse” and *lu* 祿 “emoluments.” The two characters were written in three different possible positions: upright, slanted, and upside down. The healer then counted the number of days from the beginning of the month to the date of the onset of the disease, moving a finger down or up the chart depending on the month. Depending on how the

character landed on was written, the healer could then predict the course of the illness.

The Berlin State Library has an archive of eight hundred Chinese medical manuscripts created by healers for their own use. Mostly from the nineteenth century, these manuscripts provide insight into medical practice and are a corrective to overemphasis on orthodox medicine represented by printed medical texts. Most of the medical manuscripts contain bits of text copied by readers from medical works, novels, brush notes, and unknown sources.<sup>31</sup> Three of these manuscripts, created three hundred years after *Plum*, describe the emolument and horse method and agree with the novel that if “emolument and horse are not upside down,” the patient was expected to recover. A key appended to the diagram in a medical manuscript labeled “Depiction of all types of fright [conditions displayed] by children” (Xiao’er gezhong jingtu) specifies the predictions:

When the horse stands, the person will live and can be rescued from his troubles.

When the emoluments are proper, the disease may be serious but will not harm the body.

When the horse lies in a reclined position, help will be successful.

When the emoluments are slanted, a physician will be able to cure the patient.

When the horse lies upside down, the disease has an unfortunate prognosis.

When the emoluments are reversed, there is only a bleak outlook.<sup>32</sup>

This method of predicting the outcome of a disease was independent of the whimsy of gods, demons, and ancestors but also distinct from natural laws involving systematic correspondences between bodily organs, stars, and elements in the natural world. Horse and emolument seems to be a secular medicine that tied the individual to time and the cosmos but did not require mediation between them. This method revealed regularity, but it could not influence events or explain them.<sup>33</sup>

This is how *luma* is used in *Plum in the Golden Vase*. When one of his wives, Li Ping’er, is ill, Ximen Qing calls in several doctors to diagnose and

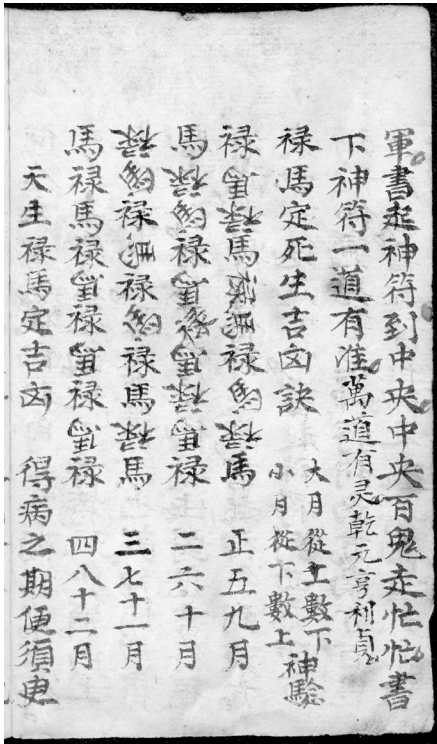


FIG. 2. This page from a Republican-era medical manuscript includes prediction tables using the “emolument (*lu*) and horse (*ma*)” diagnostic method. Note the rotating orientations of the *lu* 禄 and *ma* 馬 characters in the upper left quadrant, which form a table with which a healer could divine the prognosis of a patient’s illness. Berlin Library Unschuld collection, BUC 8806.

prescribe for her.<sup>34</sup> Another wife tells him that Ping’er is being overmedicated and that they should “send for Immortal Wu and have him prognosticate on her behalf to calculate if the *lu* and *ma* are up.”<sup>35</sup> Emolument and horse was a way of ordering the chaos of contemporary medical practice. With individual doctors giving various diagnoses and prescriptions, it made sense to have a fixed way to determine the outcome of the disease to limit the possibilities. That the practice of prognosticating with emolument and horse is recorded in *xiaoshuo* suggests something about the heterogeneity of literati practice as well. The narrator may argue against employing Buddhists and Daoists, but the author was certainly intimately familiar with these figures and their practices, along with the already copious and varied knowledge in the novel culled from elite life and literature.

In entertainment literature, prognostication generally proves to be accurate as the plot unfolds, serving as foreshadowing. The outcomes of fate and

fortune are always significant, but fortune tellers are often scorned. Immortal Wu (Wu Shenxian), who visits the Ximen household in chapter 29 and predicts (correctly) the fortunes of all the main characters, is an exception. Immortal Wu's first visit adumbrates almost the whole of the novel in certain essential points, and he is presented as stately, mysterious, and powerful. He seemed to be a bit over forty and of intelligent appearance. His bearing was like that of a "stately pine of Mount Hua," with a commanding presence and "the grave aspect of a scholar." The narrator praises Immortal Wu's talents:

Master of the discriminating mirror of physiognomy, Adept at interpreting the rules of Xu Ziping<sup>36</sup>

By examining celestial phenomena he understands yin and yang,

By perusing the *Dragon Canon* [Longjing] he can assess *fengshui*.<sup>37</sup>

Profoundly conversant with the Five Planetary Features [Wuxing],<sup>38</sup>

Deliberating to himself upon the three fates [*sanming mitan*];<sup>39</sup>

By scrutinizing the astrological circumstances,

He can determine the success or failure of a lifetime;

By observing the humor and the complexion,

He can decide the good or evil of one's allotted years.

If he is not Chen Tuan the realized adept who sojourned on Mount Hua<sup>40</sup>

He must be Yan Junping, who sold fortunes in the market of Chengdu.<sup>41</sup>

Immortal Wu has been sent by an official colleague to Ximen's house, so Ximen is obliged to invite him in and allow him to ply his trade. Before doing so, Ximen inquires which schools of *yinyang* and which varieties of physiognomy Wu practices. Wu replies with a somewhat different, detailed list of his mantic methods, adding that he distributes medicine and does not take payment, essentially bolstering the claims made by the narrator.<sup>42</sup>

Initially hesitant, Ximen is impressed by the discourse and demeanor of the diviner and has him predict his future first based on the date and time of his birth (which Immortal Wu silently calculates on his fingers) and then from the features of his face. He then predicts the fates of Ximen's primary wives using physiognomy. Although the fortune-telling jargon employed

here and elsewhere in the novel is quite authentic, the horoscopes provided for the characters are calendrically impossible, which suggests that the author did not intend his readers to take them too seriously.<sup>43</sup> Readers with a rudimentary knowledge of the calendrical system would likely have noticed this, as did the anonymous commentator on the *xiuxiang* (the illustrated text, a.k.a the Chongzhen) edition of the novel, who pointed this out: “These ‘four pillars’ are entirely out of keeping with Song [dynasty] fate calculation.” It is a mystery why the author would have employed accurate lexicon but absurd math in his representation of diviners predicting fortunes that come true. Is it a kind of code? Did the author desire to disparage the practice or profession? He was familiar enough with the practices and theories and could have easily looked up the correct dates in an almanac, so why signal to the reader that the fortune tellers were anything less than reliable? Perhaps the math is off out of respect for readers with stems and branches in their own horoscopes identical to *Plum*’s meager-fated characters. Or perhaps the author blithely copied details from an almanac, divinatory manual, or daily-use encyclopedia, all of which had begun to circulate when vernacular novels became popular.<sup>44</sup>

Not only are all the fortune-tellers in *Plum* perfectly correct in all their predictions, but historical fiction is always prognosticatory, since the reader knows how it all ends. In the case of *Plum*, dangers of critiquing Ming dynasty (1368–1644) politics and mores are obfuscated by its Song dynasty setting. And yet the author’s critique of the contemporary Ming court is not very subtle, since the novel is set in the years leading up to the invasion and collapse of the Northern Song (960–1127), a comparison that even casual readers would have noticed. The collapse of the dynasty foretells the collapse of the Ximen household (and, not incidentally, also foretells the collapse of the Ming dynasty, an event that happened thirty years after *Plum*’s first publication). *Plum*’s setting is also doubly indebted to the past, and beholden to its unfolding events, since it expands into eighty chapters an episode that happens in chapters 23–26 of *Outlaws of the Marsh* (Shuihu zhuan). Readers know that the Northern Song falls and that in literary history, Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian are killed by Wu Song. Thus, when Immortal Wu predicts that Jinlian is inclined to wantonness and assured of a premature death, readers of *Plum* know he his trustworthy.

The wives and concubines have their fortunes told again in chapter 46, when out of boredom and whimsy they invite in an itinerant woman who is

capable of divining with the “tortoise oracle” (*linggui*). She is unnamed, an “old country woman who made her living telling fortunes by means of the tortoise oracle and trigrams,” wearing a simple blue cotton skirt and patchwork jacket.<sup>45</sup> The woman asks the years of their birth, each in turn, and then gives the tortoise oracle a toss (in later divinations, it is a spin). This method of fortune telling is detailed in Tang Xianzu’s 1587 drama *The Purple Hairpins* (*Zichai ji*), perhaps the source for *Plum*’s author. The Daoist nun who practices this art describes it: “On the painting, there are stories of joys and sorrows, and of departures and reunions. I tell the people what will happen to them according to where the tortoise goes on the painting.” The play describes this practice unambiguously as a method to “fake an immortal’s ability”: “I have a lovely and clever tortoise, / with which I defraud people of some money.” The stage directions indicate that the Daoist nun performing the divination “clumsily forces its crawling route on the painting.”<sup>46</sup> For each woman in *Plum*, the tortoise (shell?) lands on an image on her board, and each of the images bears the name of one of the “twelve palaces” found on the face, among which, according to some schools of physiognomy, are the “palace of fate” (*minggong*), “palace of illness and adversity” (*ji’egong*), and the “palace of sons and daughters” (*ernügong*). Her predictions tally with those of Immortal Wu (which also combine physiognomy with other divinatory strategies), simultaneously justifying their methods of divination and establishing the predictions as fact.

Pan Jinlian complicates *Plum*’s attitude toward fortune telling. She is late to the gathering, and when she is told that she has missed her chance to learn her destiny, she remarks that fate is unchangeable and discovering its details is depressing. She repeats her aversion to fortune telling and then cites the aphorism “You may predict a person’s fate, but you can’t predict his conduct.”<sup>47</sup> This idea resolves the tension between the narrative’s insistence on destiny, doubtful characters, the story’s plot that bears out their fates, and the length of the novel, which could have been much shorter had the reader simply accepted foreknowledge of characters’ ends as fact. While prognostications in *Plum* are accurate, particularly in the case of Jinlian, who the reader knows is doomed from sources outside of the novel, they are not undisputed. All the characters who have died over the course of the novel reappear, in ghostly form, in the last chapter to report on the cause of their deaths, which at times seem to contradict what the reader has witnessed.<sup>48</sup>

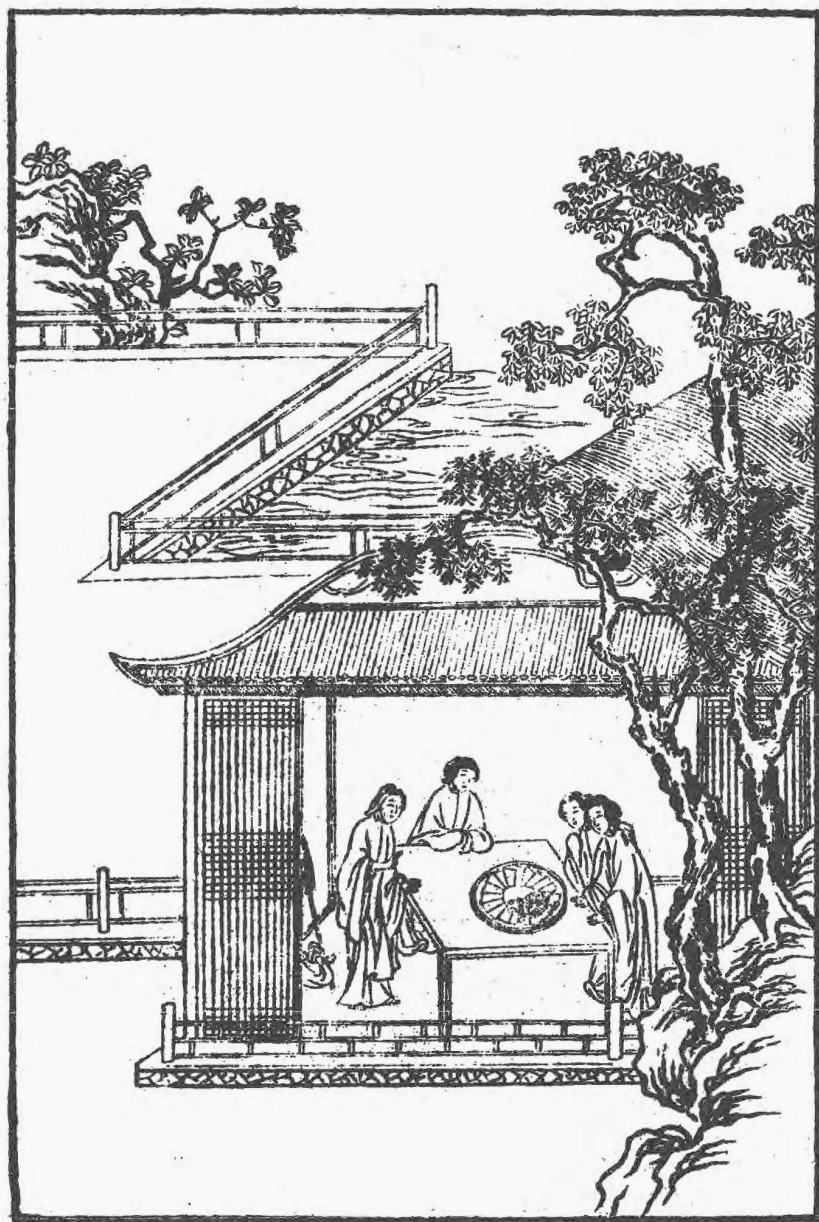


FIG 3. "Wife and concubines laughingly consult the tortoise oracle," from *Gaohe Tang's Commentary Edition of the Foremost Extraordinary Book: Plum in the Golden Vase* (Gaohe tang piping diyi qi shu Jin ping mei), chapter 46. Unfortunately, the image does not clarify whether the tortoise is alive or just a shell, or what images are on the diviner's board. Waseda University Libraries.

Pan Jinlian's claim that you can predict a person's fate but you cannot predict his actions is a key to understanding these seeming contradictions. Fortune is contingent. The tortoise diviner says to Li Ping'er, one of Ximen's wives, "This year the planet Jidu impinges on your fate, meaning that you may suffer a bloody catastrophe.<sup>49</sup> Only if you can avoid hearing weeping in the seventh and eighth months will you be all right."<sup>50</sup> This is a contingent fortune that takes the "if . . . then" form. Fate makes room for behavior. In this case, Jinlian is determined to make Li Ping'er miserable, which leads to much weeping in the household, and in the end, Li Ping'er is not able to escape her bloody catastrophe. Most of the prognostications in *Plum* are contingent on human action, and many are specific about time but vague about mechanism of fate. The predictions allow for the future to be in motion, for characters to change their fates enough to survive them. None of the wives do.

Ximen Qing repeats the claim that "one can calculate fate, but one cannot calculate behavior" and adds, "The physiognomic marks are produced following the heart [i.e., internal conditions]."<sup>51</sup> That is, marks on the face literally appear or disappear depending on one's intentions. Ximen is just repeating what Immortal Wu himself had said to explain physiognomy.<sup>52</sup> Physiognomic features are not physical markers of an immutable fate but are mutable signs pointing to a fate that changes with behavior and intention.

Poems, sayings, and asides in the novel often suggest that all is determined by heaven and one must accept the inevitabilities of change and fate. But the characters evince a different attitude; none shows a profound belief in fate or fate calculation but only differing degrees of skepticism. Divination is also a game in these novels. Characters in *Plum* and other entertainment literature consult fortune tellers on a lark, a chance encounter, or in the case of *Plum*, when they pass by the house and there is nothing better to do. Very often, divination occurs in *xiaoshuo* as a diversion from boredom, but then, inevitably, it foreshadows something grave. When consulted as a game, the divinatory texts are like other omens—a kite breaking its string, a tree blooming out of season—in that they have meaning only to those who notice them, and when that happens, it is alienating and sad. That each character fulfils his or her destiny, no matter how bleak, is a testament to the characters' normalcy, their unremarkable willpower, and their willful ignorance of the knowable

but invisible forces that undergird their daily existence. They are, essentially, poor readers of their own lives.

## Divination outside of Narrative Constraints

Fictional practitioners of mantic arts usually do not go into detail about why they practice one method of divination over another or even why there are multiple kinds of divination.

Each divinatory method presumably accesses the same cosmic information, so why is there a need to have more than one method? We see in *Plum* that the Ziping method, based on the date and times of one's birth, provides more detail about the future than does the physiognomic *mayi* method, whereas "emolument and horse" seems to limit prognostication to a yes/no answer. Beyond the proclivities and fates of characters, divinatory methods reveal information about the real historical author by which practices are mentioned, esteemed, denigrated, omitted, or unknown.

One notable argument in trying to identify the anonymous author of *Plum* is that he affiliated himself with the philosopher Xunzi (third century BCE). Readers of David T. Roy's English translation of *Plum* encounter this claim in the first pages of his introduction.<sup>53</sup> The most famous tenet of Xunzi's philosophy holds that human nature is basically evil, and if allowed to find expression without the conscious molding and restraint of ritual, it is certain to lead the individual disastrously astray. This belief, Roy and others argue, lies at the heart of the novel.<sup>54</sup> The historian Sima Qian (145?–86? BCE) writes of Xunzi that he "hated the corrupt governments of his day, the decadent states and evil princes who did not follow the way but gave their attention to magic and prayers and believed in omens and luck."<sup>55</sup> But the novel's detailed descriptions of mantic arts, the invocation of spirits, and the various accurate prognostications of fortune and disaster at least argue against a *complete* adherence to Xunzi's beliefs.

Xunzi's work contains an entire chapter titled "Against Physiognomy" (Feixiang), and he remarks elsewhere in the book attributed to him:

One performs the rain sacrifice and it rains. Why? I say, there is no special reason why. It is the same as when one does not perform the

rain sacrifice and it rains anyway. . . . One performs divination and only then decides on important affairs. But this is not to be regarded as bringing one what one seeks, but rather is done to give things proper form. Thus, the gentleman regards this as proper form, but the common people regard it as connecting with spirits.<sup>56</sup>

Xunzi concludes this thought by saying, “If one regards it as proper form, one will have good fortune. If one regards it as connecting with spirits, one will have misfortune.” In other words, ritual propriety (“form”) is function. He acknowledges that it is fitting and proper to perform mantic arts, particularly at court, and particularly by those whose job it is to perform them. “The work of the hunchbacked shamans and lame-footed seers,” he writes, “is to assess the yin and the yang, to divine the omens and portents, to drill the tortoise-shells and lay out the hexagrams, to preside over ceremonies for warding off ills, selecting lucky days and the five prognostications, and to know good and bad fortune, the auspicious and the inauspicious.”<sup>57</sup> It is not the apotropaic methods that bring good fortune but an awareness of their form and the appropriate performance of their ritual aspects that please heaven and bring its rewards.

How is the reader to make sense of these views in *Plum*? On the one hand, the narrator and the story clearly criticize almost every character in the book for their behavior, and by extension, denounce late-Ming society and the court for the same selfish, decadent acts. The characters presented in *Plum* are squarely middlebrow—marginally literate nouveau riche social climbers—perhaps not the “common people” Xunzi refers to in his remarks but certainly less wise than Confucian “gentlemen” and officials. But if fortune telling is used in *Plum* to begin a conversation about fate, human nature, and individual agency, the resonances between human action the natural worlds’ responses to it are real. *Plum* is a work of such sophistication that it would be obtuse to assert that it cannot contain contradictory or complicated attitudes toward divination and toward Xunzi (or some similar moral vision), but the novel’s attitude toward divination does impugn the assertion that the author followed or asserted the views of Xunzi wholesale.

Apologies for *xiaoshuo* in late imperial China, whether prefatory or commentary or within the novel text itself, tended to focus on the act of reading

as a particular kind of seeing. Reading about debauched characters with a detached air of sympathy could lead to enlightenment, some claimed, while others warned that the allure of representation would tempt naive readers to imitate what they encountered there.<sup>58</sup> Both apologies and accusations reinforced the notion that *xiaoshuo* were for sophisticated readers only, those who could look beyond the surface meaning to read between the lines and to appreciate the finely wrought structure of the novel, its devices and methods.<sup>59</sup> Reading fortunes included similar talent and implied dangers—whether it was reading facial features, images that corresponded to them, or dates and times of birth or interpreting obscure verses produced by an oracle—there were dire consequences for those who kept only to the surface meaning.

Fate both limits and makes room for human action. Realistic stories had to represent mantic and apotropaic practice, and the demands of fiction required prognostication to be tantamount to foreshadowing. But characters needed to misread or disbelieve their fates to make for an interesting tale; they also had to have the possibility to change their fates. The story knows that its readers, if not its characters, could discern the hidden meanings of oracular texts, be they verse or image, and had to provide those readers with the possibility of change. Hence, we have in *Plum* the repeated statement that “you can know a man’s fate, but not his actions,” and in *Stone*, that “you can know a man’s face, but never his heart.”<sup>60</sup> Some stories undermine fatalism through changing physiognomic feature, or the dates and times of birth. The latter is reflected in Li Yu’s story “After Modifying the Eight Characters, Suffering Ends and Happiness Comes” (*Gai bazi kujin ganlai*), in which young yamen runner Jiang Cheng sees his bad luck unexpectedly turn into good luck after a hermit fortune teller jokingly modifies the eight characters of his birth date and time. But more often, and more poignantly, *xiaoshuo* remind readers of the limits of our ability to read the world around us accurately. That is, even if we divine correctly and interpret the signs and images or texts that are produced during divination, there is still the matter of whimsy and the inscrutability of human behavior.

## CHAPTER 2

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# Thunder, Writing, and Justice

A young bride in Liyang was admired by her new family for her warmth, grace, and virtue. One day, a violent thunderbolt struck her dead [*baolei zhensi*]<sup>1</sup>—for no apparent reason. The thunder continued to rumble around the bedroom. Suddenly, with a loud crack, it shattered her trunk. Upon inspection, it was found that all her shoe insoles were made of paper with writing. This shows that irreverence for writing cannot be forgiven. Using such paper as shoe insoles, intentionally trampling on it, is an extreme violation of principle. Thus, heaven specifically demonstrated its punishment. Alas! Should we not take heed?

—*Dianshizhai Pictorial*, 1896

*Dianshizhai Pictorial* admonished readers repeatedly to gather, burn, and then reverently dispose of the ashes of paper with written words on it.<sup>1</sup> While this is a fascinating practice with implications for the study of language and literature, modernization, literacy, print culture, and beyond, what interests me here is the method of punishment.<sup>2</sup> It was clear that thunder killed people and that it did so for retribution. Thunder was often depicted in illustrations as a god wielding both thunder/drums and lightning/fire, and worshippers of the thunder god and practitioners of thunder rituals viewed the primary power in a storm to be that of thunder rather than lightning. Thunder's explosions were more dangerous than lightning's fire, which may explain why it is much less common to encounter the unitary word "lightning" (*dian*) than

the word “thunder” (*lei*) in premodern texts. While lightning and thunder occur together in nature, they are not always paired in texts. Thus, I refer to the deadly force in thunderstorms as “thunder.” When someone was struck dead by thunder, it was because they had done something considerably naughty and needed to be punished in a public way as a warning to others. In the example above, the justness of thunder’s execution is revealed by heaven with a second thunderstrike, uncovering the profaned written word. Fate made room for human action, but retribution for bad acts tended to be swift and certain.

That retributory thunder strikes are among the strange events recorded most frequently in the Shanghai newspaper *Shenbao* and its illustrated periodical, *Dianshizhai*, reflects the sensationalist and moralizing impulses of those publications. Such stories kept alive a long tradition of retributory tales, repackaged in the late nineteenth century as news.<sup>3</sup> They record events like “thunder strikes those who neglect to show respect for the written word or grain” and “thunder kills an unfilial woman.”<sup>4</sup> Inquiries into the mechanisms and nature of thunder/lightning, however, were less common. One such report opens with a juxtaposition of Chinese and Western views of thunder:

The Chinese say thunder is the wrath of heaven and those who are struck must have committed secret misdeeds; Westerners say when the electricity in the human body collides with the electricity in the atmosphere, [the person] will die, regardless of the individual’s virtues or vices. Debates abound, but who can knock on the gates of heaven and clarify the matter? It is worth noting that thunder seldom strikes loyal officials, filial children, righteous husbands, or chaste wives.<sup>5</sup>

An explanation of the physical principles underlying thunder’s behavior was less convincing than the clarity of poetic justice at the end of the nineteenth century. This account begins on a doubtful note but ends with a report of thunder and lightning-fire striking the lips off a procuress and the ears of the brothel’—male servant—precise retribution for lewd gossip.<sup>6</sup>

*Dianshizhai Pictorial*, like other early newspapers, took many of its reports, or details for reports, from entertainment literature like *xiaoshuo* and

brush notes, sources that modern scholars often term “fiction” or “tales of the strange.” Anomalous accounts were entertaining, even newsworthy, but so was debating their veracity and meaning. Ji Yun (Ji Xiaolan, 1724- 1805), among the most sophisticated readers in the empire, records in his *Perceptions* (Yuewei caotang biji) accounts of thunder striking to death a passive-aggressive daughter-in-law, the son of disreputable doctor, a man who wanted to murder his mother, a man who raped a widow, and others for unknown reasons.<sup>7</sup> Other accounts relied on thunder as a *deus ex machina* to point out the guilty party when the magistrate was unable to discern him, frequently leaving a corpse with characters burned upon it to explain the crime.<sup>8</sup> These accounts are just as common in epistemic literature as in entertainment literature.<sup>9</sup> The long, complex novels of the Ming and Qing often invoke this notion of heavenly punishment, sometimes in the disingenuous oaths of characters, “May heaven strike me with a thunderbolt” (Tian dalei pi).<sup>10</sup>

## Thunder’s Logic

Thunder was unseen but not unknowable. Although it was threatening, it operated logically, if not at predictable intervals. Many guidebooks and manuals explained the heavenly retribution for certain misdeeds that hinted at these forces, such as the many versions of the *Tract of Taishang on Action and Response* (Taishang ganying pian), which claimed that “inside a person’s body there are the three corpse worm/spirits (*sanchong/sanshi*) who on every fifty-seventh day of each sixty-day cycle report a person’s crimes and transgressions to the heavenly tribunal. On the last day of each month, the Kitchen God (Zaoshen) also makes such a report.”<sup>11</sup> These misdeeds might then meet with retribution from heaven or its servants. The system of retribution at work in the world was multifarious. As historian Cynthia Brokaw has noted, “Man was on intimate, even familiar terms with the supernatural, what with the [three corpse worms] living in his body, the Kitchen God resident in his home, and constellations of overseer stars hovering over his head.”<sup>12</sup> These greater systems of moral surveillance and retribution were panoptical but not infallible. The agents, gods, and sentient powers that brought judgement and punishment were perceived to be open to human manipulation, just as fate was.

Aside from adhering to social mores, people could protect themselves from thunder by attempting to pollute it, especially with urine or excrement. In 1762, for instance, “thunder broke out in Huai’an and was about to strike an old lady from an institution that cared for orphans and the poor. The old lady had just taken off her trousers to pee and became worried [about the approaching storm] so she poured out the chamber pot toward [the thunder].” The thunder god appeared, squatting beside the old lady. He was about two feet tall, with a black body, sharp beak, and glittering wings fluttering constantly. It was not able to leave until the magistrate called in a Daoist who chanted spells and poured clean water on the god’s head. The next day, it rained again, and the thunder god was able to fly away.<sup>13</sup> Thunder can become polluted, presumably for the same reason all god-like things can be, since their natures are pure, and since thunder is associated with the cleanliness of rain. But why would thunder plan to strike an old lady who cares for orphans and the poor?

Retribution from thunder was not strange; it was the norm. But puzzling out its forms, mechanisms, and occasional mistakes required investigating anomalous thunderstrikes. Depicting thunder as a bird-like figure was consistent with texts designed for popular consumption such as *Illustrated Exhortations and Admonishments* (Quan jie tushuo; hereafter *Illustrated Admonishments*), by Zou Diguang (1549–1625).<sup>14</sup> Published in 1589, it presents two hundred stories of only a few sentences each about the retribution incurred by varieties of virtuous or dastardly behaviors. The language is very clear and simple classical Chinese, and each story is accompanied by a woodblock illustration. It was written by an official for consumption by general readers. It must have been somewhat popular, since it was republished in 1594 by Wanshou Temple in Beijing, and by Anzheng Tang, a Fujian commercial house that specialized in popular texts with an eye to either entertainment or utility.<sup>15</sup> Anzheng Tang also published medical texts, *xiaoshuo*, and encyclopedias for daily use. They had a broad readership and sold many books.<sup>16</sup>

Thunder, lacking subtlety, often makes its lesson explicit. In one instance in *Illustrated Admonishments*, adulterers are struck by thunder, leaving the phrase “adultery is theft” written down their sides to “let the public know [why they were punished].”<sup>17</sup> A man who stole lumber that had been designated for a coffin was similarly punished and exposed, with “Did not allow

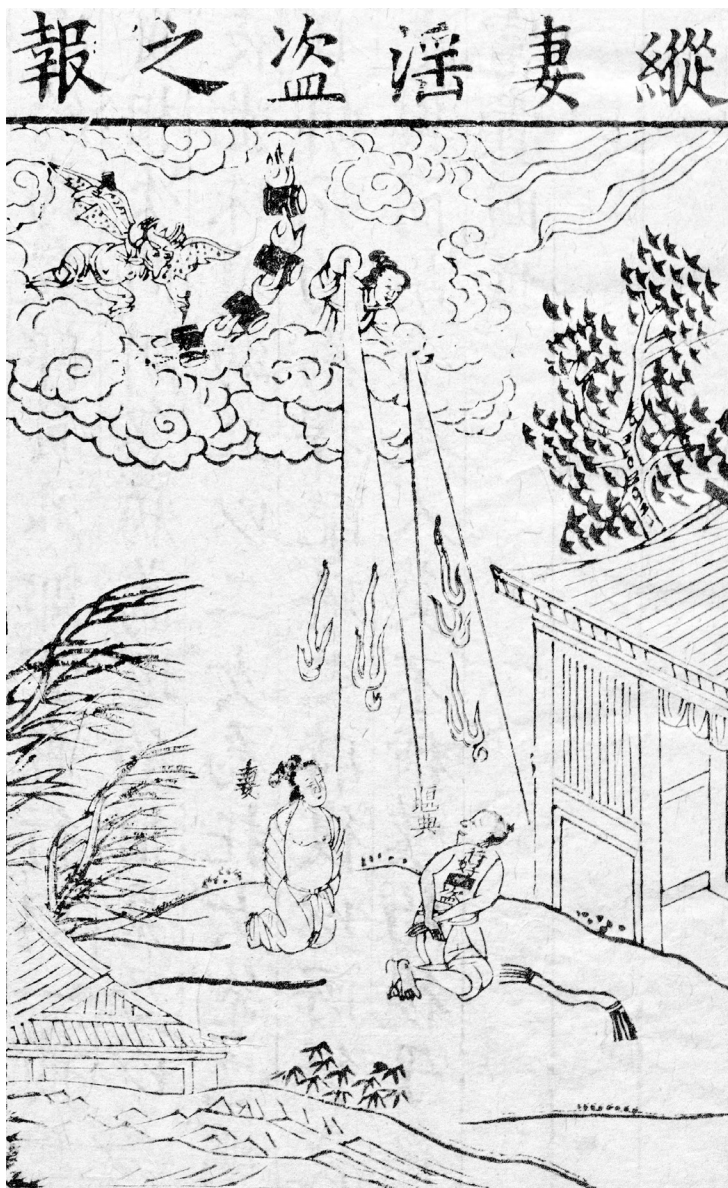


FIG. 4. Image of thunder killing adulterers and leaving the words “committing adultery is theft” emblazoned on their bodies. From *Illustrated Admonishments*, 1589. Thunder seems to be accompanied by the Master of Clouds, shooting “thunder-fire” (*leihuo*) or lightning from his fingertips, suggesting that the illustrator was influenced by the thunderbolt story later popularized in the novel *The Creation of the Gods* (Fengshen yanyi), first published circa 1605. National Archives of Japan.

family member to be buried” branded on the side of his corpse.<sup>18</sup> Thunder explains its reasons in writing in *Illustrated Admonishments*, while in other texts, it writes on the corpse in scorched letters “retribution for a former life,” seemingly defending itself for striking dead people who otherwise seem quite decent.<sup>19</sup>

*Illustrated Admonishments* depicts thunder as a winged humanoid with bird-like features, carrying a hammer in one hand and an awl or stake in the other, flying in clouds and accompanied by fire (lightning) and drums, obscured from the view of those who are about to be struck. Thunder seems to be the primary retribution for lack of filiality and for infidelity, whereas other punishments, such as drowning, being eaten by tigers, being made by demons to vomit fish, and being made to eat feces fit their crimes in a flourish of poetic justice. Some of the images in *Illustrated Admonishments* show the ammunition of thunder, at times referred to as lightning-fire (*dianhuo*), raining down on the evil doers while they are kneeling with their wrists bound behind their backs in a recognizable pose of one about to be executed with a sword. There must have been some confusion or collation with the vengeful *shashen*, another bird-like spirit or demon that would return to the scene of a death to collect a soul, killing all in its path.

The thunder god’s origins are detailed in the early seventeenth-century novel *Canonization of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi*). Ji Chang finds a baby on Mount Yan after a thunderstorm and leaves it with the Daoist Master of the Clouds (Yunzhong Zi) to raise for seven years until he can return to fetch the boy (chapter 10). Seven years later, the boy, nicknamed Thunderbolt (Leizhen), is sent to find a weapon so that he may assist his father, but instead he finds two delicious apricots. After eating them, he sprouts wings and bird feet, grows twenty feet tall, and is given a golden cudgel (chapter 21). With a blue face, green body, red hair, and fangs, he fights alongside Nezha and other gods under the command of Jiang Ziya. Oddly, he attacks not with thunder but only with his cudgel, while it is Master of the Clouds who emits thunder from his fingers (chapter 52). This last image, with thunder accompanied by Master of the Clouds (or a similar deity) shooting thunder-fire from their fingers explains the woodblock depictions featured in roughly contemporaneous moral tracts such as *Illustrated Admonishments*.



FIG. 5. A page from the medical manuscript *Magic Amulets Prompting the Gods to Come Down* (Jiangshen lingfu). At the end of the section on *sha* and eliminating evil is this talisman, which looks like the bird-demon *sha* but also the god of thunder. Berlin Library Unschuld Collection, Slg. 8812.

The overlap between the didactic *Illustrated Admonishments* and the fantastical myths of *Canonization of the Gods* reinforced some aspects of thunder but left many questions unanswered.<sup>20</sup> Did it have moral agency? Was it fallible? In the example from *Dianshizhai* above, when the wife of Liyang was struck dead, “no one could understand the reason” (*mojie qigu*), suggesting that thunder has thoughts. Presumably, heaven takes reports from spirit/corpse worms and others, the way the earthly emperor receives reports from his ministers and then orders thunder to mete out punishment. The entry

for thunder in many daily-use encyclopedias consider thunder an omen: “If there is thunder without clouds, it foretells sudden upheaval or commotion.”<sup>21</sup> Others say thunder forewarns of “sickness, bandits, and the like.”<sup>22</sup> This text is repeated, almost unchanged, in subsequent editions of encyclopedias for decades, but by the middle of the eighteenth century, some reprinted (or pirated) editions changed the image of thunder from a bird-like figure to an abstract representation. Perhaps editors of encyclopedias were beginning to lose faith in the thunder god and beginning to see thunder as a more natural phenomenon.

Little of thunder’s public displays of retribution would be clear without the helpful inscription of writing on the corpses he punishes and leaves exposed. Often though, these messages were indecipherable. Shen Gua writes, “When I was in Handong, two men were struck dead by a thunderbolt in the garden of the local magistrate’s house on the day of the Qingming festival. Two words were found under their armpits, which were shaped like cypress leaves and looked as if they were painted with an ink brush. Nobody could discern these two characters.”<sup>23</sup> Why would heaven send a message explaining its actions and exposing crimes in garbled words? Everyone recognized the charred marks on bodies and pillars and other struck things as words. But what words were they? Huang Liuhong, writing in his handbook for local officials about how to investigate corpses for evidence of foul play, states, “In the area where thunder strikes, the skin and flesh will be hardened and black. . . . Some victims bear what seems to be, on the chest or shoulders, great-seal-character writing.”<sup>24</sup> Huang apparently was paraphrasing from the handbook for coroners, *Washing away Wrongs* (Xiyuan lu), which contains identical information. Although written characters are unintelligible, in this case the medium is truly the message.

There was widespread discussion in texts about the possible miscarriage of thunder’s justice. What explanation could be given for the inconsistent punishment of the wicked and the casual disaster brought to the innocent? One possibility was that the messengers of heaven were fallible. Ji Yun seems to think that thunder generally does not strike crowded places, expressly to avoid collateral damage. He writes that a thunderbolt once struck a house where his cousin was staying, and the next day, he discovered holes the size of a coin in the east and west walls of the house. This was the thunder god pursuing

demons, he concludes: “Generally, thunder that strikes people comes down from the sky. Thunder that strikes demons, often moves horizontally, to chase after those that flee [it]. As for ordinary thunder, it is the earth’s qi accumulating and surging upward.” But it seems that Ji Yun also suspects that thunder is a naturally occurring phenomenon. He writes that he has seen thunder come down from the sky and he has seen it rise up from the earth, both like smoke and vapor, gathering in density until there was a flash and a boom, exactly like the firing of a cannon. Yet all these instances, Ji says, occurred in uninhabited areas. It is not that heaven fears killing people but that thunder occurs where qi accumulates: “Where people gather, the qi of heaven and earth flows freely, and where it flows, it doesn’t accumulate. So how could there be thunder?”<sup>25</sup>

There is little tension in the comingling of supernatural and natural logic here. Ji Yun sees physical phenomena, the qi of heaven and earth, behaving according to recurring principles. Those natural patterns may or may not reflect the will of heaven. Yet the god of thunder chases demons. Ji admits, however, that there are targeted thunderstrikes that come from heaven above, and he recalls an anecdote he heard as a child about how Li Shanren was struck dead by thunder and his body was found kneeling upright, looking up at the sky with red script on his back, the characters entangled and unrecognizable.<sup>26</sup>

Ji Yun also offers evidence for his argument that retributory thunder comes from above and natural thunder from earth. He tells of a big storm in the sixth month of the tenth year of the Yongzheng reign (1732) in which a villager was struck by thunder and killed. The local magistrate, Ming Sheng, arrested and questioned a man about why he bought so much gunpowder at the market recently, many times the amount needed for a hunting excursion of a few days. The magistrate elicited a confession from the man that he had murdered the husband of a woman with whom he was having an affair. Ming Sheng then explains that the effects of a thunderbolt cannot be faked with less than thirty pounds of gunpowder. This must be mixed with sulfur (*liuhuang*) and charcoal powder to produce an explosion. It was then high summer, not the New Year when firecrackers are let off, so very few people were buying sulfur. The magistrate had secretly sent someone to the marketplace to find out who was buying sulfur in large quantities, and the answer came back that it was this man. The magistrate was asked how he knew that the thunderbolt

had been faked. He replied, “When thunder strikes people, it comes down from above and does not split the ground open. Even when it destroys a house, it’s from top to bottom. But here, the thatched roof and rafters were sent flying up in the air, and the top of the *kang* was also blown off. Thus, it was clear that the explosion came from below.”<sup>27</sup> The murderer relies on the common knowledge that thunder rises up out of the ground, not realizing the distinction that when it strikes people it comes from above. Ji Yun recorded this event about fifty-seven years after it was purported to have happened, suggesting that the insight of the magistrate to contravene this bit of common knowledge was considered remarkable. The extraordinary event in this story is not the perpetrator’s ability to smuggle so much gunpowder into the home of his lover’s husband or to make it explode at the very moment there was a thunderstorm, but the magistrate’s perception of the ruse. If thunder reveals its intentions in striking villains in some accounts, here the clever magistrate reveals that this was *not* heaven’s will but the actions of a villain who did not understand the properties of thunder.

Thunder was not infallible. *Tales Overheard* (Ertan, 1602) and its categorized expansion, *Ertan leizeng* (1603), recount thunder striking dead a person riding a reddish-colored horse. Shortly after, another person riding a similar horse in the same place was also struck dead. That night, the first horse rider returned to life. People who heard about it said that a voice came from the sky saying, “That was a mistake. It was supposed to be the second rider.” Following this, a host of demons took the first corpse and “blew qi into his rectum and stimulated his nose, so that the qi would come out [reviving him]. Others urged him not to file a complaint against the thunder division.”<sup>28</sup> Despite the serious investigations into the mechanisms of thunder in these texts, this account seems to take a satirical stance, questioning the infallibility of thunder and also resuscitation methods.

Huang Liuhong, writing in the last decades of the seventeenth century, refers to the restraint of thunder as an example of the temperament expected of good magistrates: “The world is not perfect and is full of rogues and criminals, just as a forest is full of tigers and wolves. Society is fraught with injustice as the jungle is fraught with danger. If the magistrate is obsessed with the complete elimination of all rogues and criminals in society, he should ponder why heaven does not eradicate all the tigers and wolves in the forest

with a thunderbolt.”<sup>29</sup> In a similar line of thinking many pondered why thunder would strike down cows in the field. Hong Mai (1123–1202) wondered why thunderbolts kill dogs or chickens at times, remarking that “the crimes of dogs are unknowable.”<sup>30</sup> It was unclear if Hong Mai presumed that the dog was a reincarnated human who had not fully atoned for his misdeeds, but he may have been, like others, objectively curious why cows would be struck down in the field. Huang must have known arguments that all natural phenomena can be explained by stimulus and response (*ganying*): “When people do bad things, there is bad *qi* that clashes with the bad *qi* of heaven-and-earth and then brings on death by shock. Thunder is the angry *qi* of heaven-and-earth.”<sup>31</sup>

Ji Yun illuminates debates surrounding thunder, justice, and the circulation of information in a discussion about the evil eunuch Wei Zhongxian (1568–1627). It was common knowledge, according to Ji, that Wei had attempted, nearly a century and a half earlier, to avoid arrest by secretly keeping an incredibly fast horse to escape on and a doppelganger of himself who could be executed in his stead. Ji writes that Wei could escape neither the laws of man nor the retribution of heaven: “I think [that theory] is a load of nonsense. In terms of the way of heaven, unless we are deceived about the thoroughness of divine justice, there is absolutely no reason why [Wei] should have been spared. From the point of view of the realities of life on earth, Wei Zhongxian strode about the court for seven years, so who did not know him?” He surely would have been recognized, trussed up, and brought to the authorities had he tried to escape justice. Had he been decent, like the overthrown Jianwen emperor, perhaps loyalists would have taken him in and hidden him, but “in contrast, Wei Zhongxian’s barbarity stank to heaven and his poison infected the whole land.” Therefore, Ji Yun firmly rejects the idea that Wei escaped heaven’s justice. Apparently, it was not common knowledge in 1791, even to Ji Yun, one of the most widely read people in the empire, that Wei Zhongxian committed suicide in 1627 and that a year later, the details of Wei’s end were published in official accounts and entertainment literature (*xiaoshuo*) accounts.<sup>32</sup>

Ji Yun struggles to explain how heaven does not punish all crimes. He writes about fox spirits who escape thunderbolts. How could the way of heaven allow these licentious foxes to escape? How could heaven allow them

to know the preordained date and time they were scheduled to be executed? If foxes did have foreknowledge and escape, why wouldn't heaven execute them at some other time?

Indeed, not to follow up with punishment would be miscarriage of justice, which is again inconsistent with the way of heaven. Is there a plausible theory to explain this? I happened across an entry about the burning of a drought demon [*hanba*] and two entries about foxes eluding [thunderbolts] in *Compiled Notes from Evening Chats* [Yetan conglu] by a contemporary writer.<sup>33</sup> I record [here] my doubts, to await future inspection by scholars investigating things and interrogating patterns.<sup>34</sup>

Ji questioned the veracity of some of the information he encountered in various *biji* and miscellanies, and by implication, he generally expected to encounter reliable information in them. But there were limits to his curiosity and his incredulity. He questions the possibility that licentious fox spirits are so clever that they can elude the justice of heaven's thunder, but he does not attempt to replace common knowledge with a more plausible theory.

Ji, unaware that Wei had committed suicide, was confident that Wei Zhongxian's crimes were so extreme that he would certainly have been punished by heaven. Wei, like the fox spirits, should not be able to evade heaven. Ji recounts a story from Wang Yuefang, who told of a violent storm that shook the Confucian temple in Wen An. Thunder and lightning filled the sky. Wang Zhuqi, the director of studies, thought this strange and entered the temple, where he saw a huge centipede crawling over the sage's spirit tablet. He grabbed it with tongs and threw it down the steps, where it was immediately struck by thunder and killed. The sky cleared and he investigated the centipede, finding the characters "Wei Zhongxian" inscribed in red on its back. Ji Yun then states, "It is said so, and I tend to believe it."<sup>35</sup> How much sarcasm is implied in this statement is unclear, and Ji Yun's point is simply that Wei Zhongxian, like evil fox spirits, cannot avoid heaven's punishment. But this piece rings familiar, invoking as it does thunder striking huge centipedes, reports of which were common. Moreover, this anecdote, like many others, also raises the question of thunder's engravings,

making explicit the judgement implied in any thunderstrike. But why did thunder not dispense justice to everyone who deserved it? To cite just one 1884 account from *Dianshizhai Pictorial*:<sup>36</sup>

Within the four seas, those who use poisons to harm people are without limit, yet heaven is unable to punish them all. The reason heaven neglects to punish some is unfathomable. In Cixi, one day, the heavens suddenly became black, wind and rain intertwined, lightning flashing and thunderbolts following. Residents sat anxiously in their homes, as if they could hear something in the sky battling with the thunder and lightning. After a short while, the rain stopped and the sky cleared, revealing a giant centipede, half in the river and half hanging on the hillside, apparently struck dead by lightning. Its length was unknown, and its width was about three feet, truly an extraordinary and monstrous creature.<sup>37</sup>

Centipedes were tantamount to, or perhaps created by, poisoners (see chapter 5). There were too many of both for heaven to eliminate all of them. Perhaps it was because bugs, like dragons, had a special relationship with thunder that it took so long for thunder to grapple with the giant centipede in this account.

Li Shizhen explains that when bugs drink rainwater in late autumn, they hide and go into hibernation. By spring, “when they hear thunderclaps, they rise from hibernation and come out again.”<sup>38</sup> Bugs respond to natural markers of seasons passing, but their relation to thunder is deeper than just clocking time. Li Shizhen quotes and edits an account recorded in “Idle Views from a Secluded Study” (*Dunzhai*), a collection of brush notes from the Northern Song dynasty written by Chen Zhengmin that Li must have read secondhand in the late-Yuan collection and brush notes *Purlieu of Exposition*.<sup>39</sup> Li, again quoting a text modern scholars might consider to be “fiction,” read this story for its useful information. He excised the words struck through:

My friend Liu Bo often met with Yang Mian, a scholar living in Huai xi. He told him that [Yang Mian] in his prime got a strange illness. Whenever he said something to answer [a question], this was right away echoed by a low voice in his abdomen. Over time, the voices

became louder and louder. A Daoist witnessed this and said, frightened: “This is an echo bug [*yingsheng chong*] (!) If this is not cured soon, it will be transferred to your wife and children. You should read the *Bencao*. When you come to [a substance] that the bug does not repeat, you should ingest it.” [Yang] Mian did as [the Daoist] had said. He read [the list of drugs in the *Bencao*] and when he reached thunderbolt mushroom [*leiwan*], the bug did not respond. He ingested several servings [of *leiwan*] and was cured.<sup>40</sup>

The cure, and understanding the point of the story, relies on the common knowledge that bugs, like dragons, respond to the call of thunder—or the ingestion of physical manifestations of thunder, as thunderbolt mushrooms were believed to be.<sup>41</sup> Li Shizhen, removing the suspense and some details unrelated to the facts of *leiwan*, not only reads the story as fact but ensures that his readers will do so as well. Li Ruzhen (1763–1830?), author of the 1828 novel *Flowers in the Mirror* (Jinghua yuan), may have been one of these readers, since his character Tang Ao expels parasitic worms from a young woman with the use of thunderbolt mushroom.<sup>42</sup>

The mechanism of thunder was still somewhat mysterious as were its resonances among certain animals. Li writes that when the tusks of an elephant (*xiang*) feel thunder, patterns arise on them in a manner analogous to patterns arising in celestial phenomena (also pronounced *xiang*) in response to qi.<sup>43</sup> These patterns, created in a response to thunder, are what made elephant’s tusks good medicine for eliminating evil, expelling the strange, and curing bewilderment caused by demons. Other animals were also responsive to thunder—some going underground at the sound of thunder and there transforming into something else. Snakes and pheasant eggs, for instance, were thought to transform into flood dragons. Tadpoles lost their tails at the sound of thunder, and clams shrank. Thunder was a mechanism of justice, and it was a catalyst of change.

## Thunder/Gods

The relationship between thunder gods and thunder is not at all clear. Like dragons and dragon spirits, thunder and thunder gods seemed to coexist in

the popular imaginary without much conflict. Perhaps at some time in antiquity the god anthropomorphized unseen forces by giving them physical, animal shape, but over time, the connection between the two became fuzzier. Even in antiquity, Wang Chong (27–97 CE), in his *Balanced Inquiries* (Lunheng), took issue with the possibility that thunder, or thunder gods, have a representable image:

When painters represent thunder, [he/it] has the form of many drums joined together. They also paint a man who looks very strong and call him Thunder God [Leigong]. Holding the linked drums in his left hand, he swings a hammer with his right, as if ready to strike. It means that the rolling sound of thunder is produced by the drums knocking together, and that the sudden crashing noise is the blow of the hammer. When a man is killed, he is struck with the drums and the hammer at the same time. People in the world believe this and do not doubt it. But if we get at the bottom of it, we find that these images are mere fabrications. . . . The divine is formless and moves without limits, hence it is called divine. Now, if Thunder God has a form and thunder has a device, how can they be divine? If it is formless, it cannot be depicted; if it has form, it cannot be called divine.<sup>44</sup>

Wang Chong's argument here is not that there is no thunder god but rather that this could not be an accurate portrait of him. If spirits are diffuse and incorporeal, then they cannot be seen, and if they can be seen, they have a body and are not spirits. Wang Chong was taking issue not with thunder being a spirit with agency and will but with the notion that such a spirit would have a physical form. Envisioning thunder was not the problem; seeing it was. Using the same reasoning, he goes on to suggest that there is no dragon spirit: "The best proof that, as a fact, there is no [dragon] god is that it can be pictorially represented."<sup>45</sup> Wang Chong makes it clear that dragons are animals, foremost among the scaly creatures, but not spirits.

Wang Chong postulated that thunder is an "outburst of solar qi" (*taiyang zhi jiqi*). Like later observers, Wang notes that this qi rises in the spring and reaches its height in summer, when there are sudden claps of thunder. In autumn and winter, *yang* declines, and with it, thunder retires:

At the height of summer the sun does its business, but yin seeks to intercede. Yin and yang contend and become entangled; entangled there are outbursts and shooting; the outbursts and shooting lead to danger [lit., poison]. A man caught in the middle of this struggle is struck dead, a tree caught in the middle is split, a house caught in the middle is demolished. How can one prove it? Take some water and pour it onto a fire used for smelting and casting. The qi will explode with a sound like thunder. . . . Heaven and Earth are a great furnace; yang qi is an immense fire, clouds and rain are copious water.<sup>46</sup>

Wang Chong also discussed the nature of traces left by a thunder strike. He argues that because the charred writing is illegible, thunder is not punishment sent by heaven. When heaven wishes to make itself known to man, its messages are perfectly clear.<sup>47</sup> Wang writes that it is common knowledge that thunder splits trees, demolishes houses, and occasionally kills people because it is either fetching a dragon or punishing people for their hidden faults: “Everyone, no matter whether intelligent or stupid, says so. But if we look into the matter rationally, we find that this is all nonsense.”<sup>48</sup>

Wang Chong’s attempt to argue against the common knowledge that thunder gods create thunder or that thunder is the growl of an angry heaven does not seem to have been adopted by many. Although Wang argues that thunder gods wielding drums and hammers to create thunder are a human invention, thunder god rituals were practiced locally and at court well into the early modern period. Thunder god rituals were popular and institutional. Official and anecdotal records narrate how the emperor himself was personally confronted with the wrath of the Thunder Division. Thunder shook the court of the first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98), who witnessed the thunder god inside the Forbidden City in 1380. In his own words, on the eve of the fifth day of the fifth month, “thunder has struck at Prudence Hall. We, the emperor, are very frightened by it.” Thinking that thunder struck because he had not done enough good deeds, Zhu issued a general amnesty for all prisoners.<sup>49</sup> A month later, the magnitude of the event was confirmed when Zhu issued another decree, in which he openly assumed guilt by saying that he lacked virtue and had neglected sacrifices to his ancestors, inviting thunderstrikes.<sup>50</sup> The influence of the event had a powerful effect on the cultural imagination,

occasioning stories and other adaptations. The late Ming author Qian Xiyan (1562–1638) retells the story in which thunder struck unexpectedly right in front of the hall where the emperor was seated. The emperor beheld a figure three feet tall, with a dark blue body, wings, and flashing eyes. It bowed to the emperor and then soared off into the sky and disappeared. This story revises the emperor's own account, explaining his authority over the gods of thunder but also popularizes the historical account via *xiaoshuo*.<sup>51</sup>

Thunder had long been perceived as both a beneficial and a harmful force, a welcome sign of rain and an unexpected cause of destruction. Thunder magic was a human attempt to ritually harness thunder's benevolent and destructive powers to bring relief in times of drought and also to destroy illness demons. The divinization of thunder was already well established in classical times, as evidenced by its discussion by Wang Chong.<sup>52</sup> Magicians who summoned thunder to various ends appear in sources as far back as the Han dynasty.<sup>53</sup> Natural forces continued to be mediated both by thunder gods and human masters of thunder rituals for centuries. Du Guangting's (850–933) *Traditions of Responsive Encounters with Divine Transcendents* (Shenxian ganyu zhuan), a collection of tales relating meetings between Daoist transcendents and humans, includes a biography of Ye Qianshao. When Ye was a young man, the thunder god appeared and transmitted to him a scroll that enabled its possessor to bring down thunder and rain and to cure sickness for the benefit of mankind.<sup>54</sup> The power to control thunder was, according to official documents, no myth; the *Ming Histories* record that Liu Yuanran (1351–1432), the Ming founder's last known Daoist advisor, was "quite accomplished in calling wind and summoning thunder."<sup>55</sup> Some ritual masters called upon the thunder god and some were able to summon thunder itself.

By the late eighteenth century, at least as recorded in *biji* and *zhiguai*, the thunder god had mostly disappeared or become the butt of humorous accounts. In the work of Pu Songling, and Yuan Mei (1716–97), the thunder god is repelled with the contents of chamber pots, has his awl stolen, and is generally described with scorn, perhaps suggesting, as Ji Yun makes explicit, that thunder was a natural force wielded by heaven and not men or gods as many people still believed.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps it was the contending influences of entertainment literature—raising gods from the status of demons and making them powerful protagonists, as in *Canonization of the Gods* in the late Ming and the



FIG. 6. Sa Zhenren (a.k.a. Sa Tianshi), folk god, performs thunder rites to exorcise plague demons. From *The Enchanted Date* (*Qie wudai sa zhenren de dao zhouzao ji*) 16b–17a by Deng Zhimo (1603). The caption reads, “With a wave of his immortal fan, he instantly brings the sick man back from the dead; [using the] method of thunder, he eradicates all the plague demons in a flash.” National Diet Library, Tokyo.

mid-Qing accounts in brush-note literature—that either derided the thunder god or sought secular explanations for the machinations of thunder that contributed to a sense that thunder gods had become figures of fantasy and satire.

### Thunder and Healing

In addition to its associations with dragons, bugs, destruction, and justice, thunder also was called upon by healers to drive out illness demons or plague

demons since at least the Tang dynasty. But thunder was also invoked for more personal illnesses, usually in the form of written talismans. Talismans attest to the power of the written Chinese character. Talismans were often prescribed along with pharmaceuticals. The talisman was burned and its ashes ingested, after which the drugs guided the talisman to the right place in the body to apply its effects. Simpler character talismans, by contrast, were often not meant to be taken internally but to be applied to a surface such as a door, written on water in a bowl that was to be ingested, or written directly onto the body with ink or water.<sup>57</sup>

The combined characters of “water” and “ghost,” “rain” and “ghost,” and “thunder” and “ghost” constitute many of the talismans found in apotropaic manuscripts and daily life encyclopedias. We see thunder and rain in many talismans of the “elaborate” (*huafu* or *fushi*) type that combine images and characters. With rain 雨 on top and ghost 鬼 on the bottom left, the bottom right seems to have been the place to write what one hoped for. This may have evolved into the character for thunder / lightning *lei* 雷 / 電, which had a similar shape, especially when exaggerated with a flourish as was common in talismans.

Water, thunder, and Chinese characters all combined for powerful healing magic. In one manuscript, we see “amulets to be drawn on ulcers” (*huachuang fushi*) and “ink method for spells written on ulcers (*huachuang zhou mofa*).”<sup>58</sup> These amulets have the character for thunder, *lei* 雷, to their left. The final stroke of the character *lei* is drawn far to the right, creating the character *dian* 電, lightning. and creating an ink border below one of the seven following characters written to the right of the amulet: *shou* 收 (to gather), *tui* 退 (to withdraw), *zhan* 斬 (to cut), *sha* 殺 (to kill), *ji* 急 (quickly), *xiao* 消 (to vanish), *mie* 滅 (to perish). The meaning of these amulets seems straightforward given that they were used to treat an ulcer or tumor. Other talismans are similar in shape but less clear in mechanism. Again, the character for thunder is on the left, with a long, sweeping stroke across the bottom and a smaller character to the right: “dragon” 龍 “tiger” 虎, or “wind” 風, as seen in figure 2.6. The method of “drawing [an amulet on] an ulcer” is as follows: First, an amulet is drawn on the door. Then it is drawn on the ulcer with “sourceless water” (*wugen shui*, different kinds of water are discussed in chapter 4). The seven talismans mentioned above are then to be written one after the other,

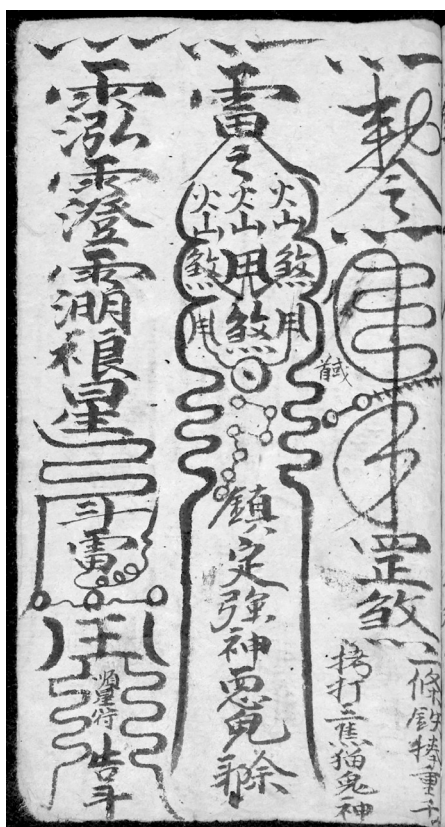
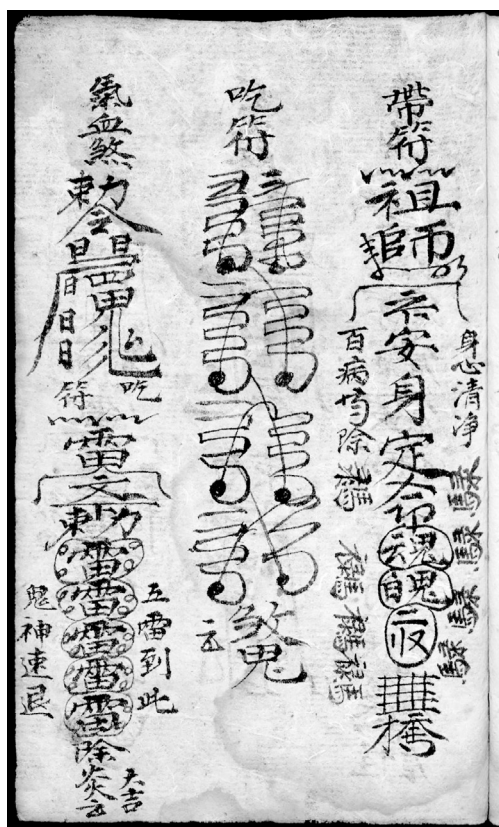


FIG. 7. (left) A page from the *Manuscript on Apotropaic Healing* (Zhuyou chao-ben) depicting talismans made of the Chinese character for thunder (*lei* 雷), designed to be taken internally. The talisman on the right seems to incorporate rotated *lu* and *ma* characters on either side. The talisman on the left is flanked by the phrase “The Five Thunders Have Arrived; Ghosts and Deities, Retreat Swiftly!” Another item in this manuscript, “method to use a mat as a cloud reaching everywhere” (*tong bian xi yun fa*), may be related to Sun Wukong’s ability to stride on clouds in the novel *Journey to the West*. Berlin Library Unschuld collection, BUC 8806.

FIG. 8. (right) A page from the medical manuscript *Text on Apotropaic Healing* (Zhuyou shu), featuring talismans made of the Chinese character “thunder” (*lei* 雷) 42b. This manuscript also contains a “thunder bill to arrest demons” (*Juna xiemo leipiao*); Berlin Library Unschuld collection, Slg. 8650.

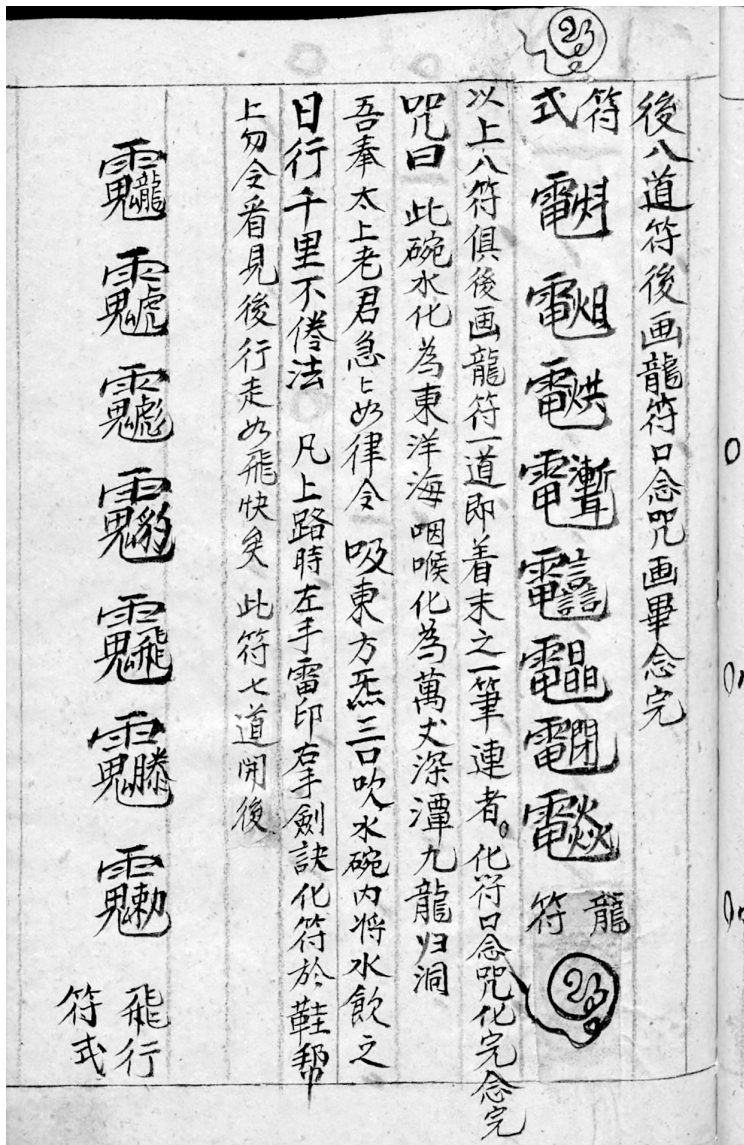


FIG. 9. A page from a medical manuscript, *Invocation of the Origins: Thirteen Disciplines* (Zhuyou shisan ke), 8a. In the column on the far left, a series of Chinese characters for rain (yu 雨) and ghost (gui 鬼) are combined with characters for animals/demons that choke victims, enabling the talisman to expel harm. In the second column from right are talismans that combine the character for lightning (dian 電) with verbs, such as “shine” and “barricade” to ward off demons. Berlin Library Unschuld collection, Slg. 8910.

with incantations interspersed. Similar methods of constructing and applying talismans appear in other manuscripts. Some seem to have their origins in the south, which may be another example of the perception of these practices as anomalous accounts, coming from the periphery to the center.<sup>59</sup>

In the medical manuscripts of the Unschuld collection housed in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, an important archive of texts made by practitioners for their own use, the word “thunder” is often used either in discussing the practice that is now called moxibustion, or in creating written talismans to expel demons, ulcers, and other illness causing things.<sup>60</sup> The thunder god who can dispel plague becomes a talisman that can do the same. Contrastingly, in printed *bencao* (*materia medica*) works, thunder is more likely to strike the earth and to bury important medicines in the ground or tree that it struck, to be dug up and employed by healers. Li Shizhen explains this phenomenon:

Wait until a [thunderbolt] has struck somewhere and dig three *chi* deep to obtain it. It occurs in different physical forms—it may resemble the blade of an axe, knife, chisel, and some have two holes. . . . Some say these are stones crafted by humans and offered to the heavens, but the truth is unknown. Thunderclap is a sound caused by the clash of yin and yang qi but this is controlled by gods. Hence it commences and ends just like all the other myriad items. Axes, borers, anvils and mallets are all real items. It is said that these are images in heaven that assume a physical appearance once they have reached earth.

Just like stars that fall [from the sky] and become stones [once they reach earth]. Now, when it rains metals and stones, when it rains millet and wheat, when it rains hair and blood, and all types of strange items, is it that they, too, assume a physical appearance when they reach earth?<sup>61</sup> Somewhere in the great void there must be some god who is responsible for all this. . . . The way of demons and spirits is obscure and invisible. It really cannot be investigated completely.<sup>62</sup>

This seems an evolution of Wang Chong’s claim that things that are in the sky, like thunder and stars, are without form, but when they fall from heaven, they take shape on earth. Li’s stance also resonates with that of Zhu Xi (1130–

1200), writing four centuries earlier, who discussed rainbows as an analogue to thunder (a conversation we will take up in chapter 4).

## Thunder as a Phenomenal Thing

Like other things with substance but no form, thunder was thought to be accessible via objects with which it had come into contact. *Bencao* authors, with their interest in physical substances, understandably focused on its tangible transformations. Li Shizhen shares with Wang Tingxiang (1474–1544) a disenchantment with the understanding of thunder as caused, as were so many things, by the interaction of yin and yang qi or even by retributory qi provoked in response to evil qi.<sup>63</sup> That formulaic explanation of natural phenomena seemed to be able to explain everything and yet nothing.<sup>64</sup> Hence, Li's claim that thunder must be controlled by gods. Wang agrees that there must be other forces at work:

It is said that thunder is caused by the blocking of yin qi by yang qi: when the yin breaks out of the blockage, it makes a loud clap. While this may explain thunder that comes on suddenly and loudly, it does not seem to apply to thunder that sounds either slow and deep or long-winded and meandering. To call these the sounds of yin and yang striking at each other is simply nonsense. Yin and yang are both qi; how could their collisions produce such [varied] noises? I suspect that these are the workings of some living beings which come out only when clouds and rain are present. They may entwine themselves and copulate, or engage each other in a fight, while we humans have no way to see such goings-on from far below. In recent years, in Huayin and Wuyang counties, *lin* [a unicorn-like creature] have been spotted in the fields. They roared like thunder, and their mouths spewed out a fire which resembled lightning. Such is the power of some living beings. . . . The ancients said that the divine dragons can expand and contract their bodies; after making rain in the sky, they withdraw their essences, return, and hide in the earth.

This is why human beings cannot see them well. Could thunder be the work of dragons? It is regrettable that we do not know whether dragons are able to make thunderous noises and spew out

fire like *lin*. Or could there be still some other animal that is responsible for it?<sup>65</sup>

The clash of two kinds of *qi* is, in Wang's view, an overly simplistic explanation. We now know that this explanation mirrors closely the modern scientific understanding of thunder. Air, superheated by lightning, rapidly cools and produces sound; the closer it is, the more it sounds like a crack, and the farther, the more like a rumble. Wang was willing to debunk one theory without fully exploring a new one, an understandable impulse when the dominant paradigm was one of transformation. As Wang frequently remarked in his works, the universe is vast, and the capacity for the spontaneous transformation of *qi* to bring new things into being is limitless. In a sentiment later echoed by Li Shizhen, Wang asks, "What can be too strange to exist?"<sup>66</sup> Many had doubts, but few dared to challenge the hegemonic paradigm of transformation.

Modern scientific understandings of thunder coexisted with traditional ones for many years. Understanding the certain, calculable realities of thunder did not seem to undermine the knowledge that it was sent by heaven to punish the wicked. In a scene from the 1828 novel *Flowers in the Mirror*, young, intelligent women characters discuss charlatans who claim to "steal the sky and change the sun." One character, Lanfen, replies that those are indeed the words of swindlers, but she *can* calculate the distance of thunder based on its sound. She then demonstrates how to use the "self-chiming clock on the table" to measure the time elapsed between a flash of lightning and a thunderclap. Lanfen calculates how far away the thunder is based on the speed of thunder and the time elapsed. She announces that the thunder has struck about ten *li* away, and her friend jokingly comments that this is just another swindle.<sup>67</sup> Despite the cheeky implication that Lanfen's calculations are as difficult to believe as those of fortune tellers, the scene that follows proves them correct. A wet nurse reports that thunder avenges injustices and that she had just witnessed a thunderbolt strike and kill a wicked man who had committed all sorts of misdeeds. When asked where this happened, she replies that it was just ten *li* away. This comment verifies both Lanfen's understanding of thunder as a natural phenomenon and its traditional role as heaven's executioner.

It is likely that Li Ruzhen's math was derived from the *Collected Basic Principles of Mathematics* (Shuli jingyun, 1724), reflecting the academic mood

among evidential scholars and propagating it through popular *xiaoshuo*.<sup>68</sup> The “challenge” of “new” knowledge to traditional belief did not replace it in the popular imagination, though, at least according to an 1877 report in the *Shenbao*: “On Thunder and Lightning: The matter of lightning strikes is disputed between Chinese and Westerners. Chinese believe that it is the work of divine beings, while Westerners argue that it is caused by the contact of electric charges. Both views have their merits, and it is difficult to say which is entirely right.”<sup>69</sup> Just as in *Flowers in the Mirror* fifty years earlier (and reprinted by the publishers of *Shenbao* repeatedly in the 1880s), this newspaper account makes it clear that thunder’s phenomenological realities did not need to supplant its heavenly purpose.

# Dragons and Bugs

In the early summer of 1519, after heavy rain in Jiangxi, Poyang Lake rose, and Xiaogu Mountain disappeared. After the water receded, one dead black dragon and over twenty water monsters were found. Soon after, Zhu Chenhao rebelled and was captured in Fanyang.

—Shen Defu, *Unofficial Gleanings from the Wanli Era*

Lantai said that once, on a clear day, he looked up and saw a dragon flying from west to east. Its head and horns were roughly the same as those depicted in drawings, but its four legs were spread out and shaking, as if it were rowing a boat with four oars. Its tail was flat and wide, gradually becoming thinner at the end, resembling both a snake and a fish. Its belly was pure white like a piece of silk. Seeing a dragon during rainy weather is not uncommon, but to witness one with such clarity on a day without clouds, wind, rain, lightning, or thunder is truly remarkable. Recording this enriches knowledge about the natural world.

—Ji Yun, *Perceptions*

Dragons were a category problem. Many texts agreed that “nothing is as *ling* as a dragon,” but what did that mean?<sup>1</sup> *Ling* referred to numinous or spiritual things that were imperfectly knowable and likely associated with other powerful but unseen forces. But *ling* also meant “potent” or even “lustful,” as made explicit in texts such as Xie Zhaozhe’s *Five Miscellanies*, which asserts

that nothing is as lustful (*yin*) as a dragon. It seems contradictory that something can be both the most numinous creature and the most mundane in its desires. Yet in a world in which transformation was the dominant paradigm, what was strange? What was contradictory?

This is not to say that dragons were all things. They had properties and proclivities. They could be classified among those things they were related to or with whom they associated. Many texts that classified dragons did so at the beginning of chapters on “things” (*wu*). These chapters, or those of similar title and content, followed those focused on larger, more important topics—heaven, earth, and humankind—and preceded “accounts” or “mundane affairs” (*shi*). “Things” usually meant living things—animals, then plants—but also at times encompassed matters of connoisseurship—ink stones, the best hair for calligraphy brushes, and so on. In the sections on animals, authors often began with dragons and ended with bugs. We see this categorical impulse in materia medica, brush notes, and daily use texts, too. They open with the most important, powerful, lofty thing and work their way down to the most mundane, most easily investigable one. Though separated by this textual space, dragons and bugs had a great deal in common. Both were simultaneously visible and invisible, both invaded the human body, both hibernated in winter and awoke in spring at the call of thunder, both could cause great destruction on their own and at the behest of others.

The dragon was “the chief of the creatures with scales,” according to Li Shizhen, though he claims he was the first to make this distinction, since “in Tang and Song *bencao* bugs and fish were not disambiguated [*chong yu bufen*],” and he introduces a section covering “[creatures] with scales [*linchong*]), including dragons, snakes, fish, and fish without scales.”<sup>22</sup> Although he places dragons in this new category, he says in his chapter on insects that “even though *chong* are small creatures and cannot be grouped together with creatures such as *lin*, phoenix, tortoise, and dragon, . . . still all these wrigglers have some numinous potential.”<sup>23</sup> Numinous things (*lingwu*) such as dragons and snakes and animals living in the waters, “even though they are different kinds, they are interrelated through their changes and transformations. The fact is their substance differs while their resonances are identical.”<sup>24</sup> Though *chong* can mean simply “creature,” if it refers to a category other than “bug,” it is usually modified, such as “creatures with scales” (*linchong*) or “creatures

with shells” (*jiechong*). When the word *chong* appears in the *Systematic Compendium* by itself, it invariably means “bug.” Hundreds of the medicines in the *Systematic Compendium* are said to be able to “kill *chong*” (*shachong*), by which Li certainly means insects, bugs, and worms that invade the body. These *chong* did share properties, transformations, and resonances (*gan*) with other small creatures that wiggle or slither, belying traditional materia medica categories that grouped them together. But all of these are distinct from fowls, mammals, and humans. Even though dragons were the chief of creatures with scales, reclassifying them into a new group did not entirely disentangle them from their prior status as bugs/worms, primarily because of their shared potential for transformation.

The mundanity and omnipresence of *chong* paradoxically hinted at the numinous power of dragons. In this way, *chong* were like chickens, which, though ubiquitous, could also pull away the screen that hides the unseen realm. Li tells us that chickens, while food for people, are also numinous creatures. Chickens would fly away from a household in which a magical poison (*gu*) was at work. If a chicken feather is burned, the wind will rise, wishes will come true, and evil will be warded off.<sup>5</sup> Bugs, too, in their tininess and weirdness, pointed to something much larger. *Chong*, with or without scales, born from eggs or water or transformation, poisonous or nonpoisonous, were a glimpse into the numinous underpinnings of the mundane world.

## Reconciling Information about Dragons

Records of dragon sightings taper off in histories and gazetteers in the late nineteenth century. The last sighting of a dragon listed in *Draft History of the Qing* (Qing shigao), for instance, was 1905 (the only one of that year), where the same text records at least seventy-seven prior dragon sightings since 1644.<sup>6</sup> In the late nineteenth century, there were many requests to the throne for inscribed plaques to be placed in the temple of the dragon king. These plaques were a way of honoring and thanking the dragon for appearing and making it rain in response to the prayers and sacrifices of the locals. Records of these requests become relatively fewer in the 1890s.<sup>7</sup> If dragons did indeed disappear from the historical records, there are some compelling explanations for this.

One could argue that in the literati appropriation of dragons as metaphor—“hidden dragon” meaning unsung talent, “real dragon” referring to the emperor, and a thousand more terms including the word “dragon” alluding to striving for or holding official power undermined its reality—the signified obscured the signifier. The fall of empire—the fact that China no longer had an emperor, the “true dragon”—coincided with the general period in which dragon sightings reported in gazetteers, newspapers, and semi-official histories diminished. With no “true dragon,” how could there be any other dragons?

Another explanation for the disappearance of dragons in China is the long-term success of those who adopted Jesuit notions that sought to undercut a qi-based worldview in favor of a more Christian-friendly Aristotelianism. This vision sees the gradual acceptance, over many years, of what would become meteorology. The scientific principles undergirding meteorology did not become widespread until the late nineteenth century, when the translation of Western meteorological books, such as the influential *Meteorology from the Encyclopedia Britannica* (Cehou congtan, 1877), became more common. In the early twentieth century, when they were reflected in and propagated by modern textbooks such as *Illustrated Character Lessons from Chengzhong Elementary School* (Chengzhong Mengxuetaang zike tushuo, 1901), secular understandings of weather gained widespread recognition.<sup>8</sup>

It is also possible that dragons became dinosaurs. At some point after 1841, when Richard Owen coined the term “dinosaur,” or “fearsome lizard,” excavated fossilized skeletons in China of what previously would have been considered dragons were understood to be the remains of dinosaurs, whose modern Chinese name (*konglong*, lit., “fearsome dragons”), retains this connection. Perhaps when the concept of dinosaurs gained common currency in China, it became gauche to write of dragons. A similar possibility may be that with the popularization of the notion of evolution or with a growing sense that the modern world was a place without magic, dragons simply devolved into, or were subsumed by, snakes, bugs, alligators, and the other “animals with scales” (*linchong*), with which they had long been associated in discussions of natural history and in materia medica. Perhaps dragons devolved into the ubiquitous, but equally unseen, “nine dragon bug” (*jiulongchong*) that was the silver-bullet of late-Qing and republican vernacular medicine.

Dragons were known to be able to transform into other animals. Perhaps they did it one final time.

To be clear, dragons did not disappear from the world altogether. People in China and Chinese communities still see dragons during storms, and temples to dragon kings still stand. But dragons were discussed less and less in the textual record. This is true not only of dragons but of dragon-like things: turtle demons, water spirits, snake demons, and all sorts of liminally supernatural or numinous creatures.

One more possibility to explain the disappearance of dragons from the textual record, and the idea I would like to pursue in this chapter, is that dragons disappear when they become fictional creatures, and they became fictional creatures only very late, when the texts that contained them became classed as fiction. Texts that modern literary scholars often refer to as “fiction”—brush notes (*biji*), amazing tales (*chuanqi*), anomalous accounts (*zhiguai*), and trivial talk (*xiaoshuo*)—were read, and likely written, for entertainment. These texts, however, were not considered by many readers to be entirely or even primarily fictional until the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Entertainment literature lived somewhere between the represented world and the actual world, often explicitly stating that their claims were true facts based on empirical evidence, eyewitness accounts, or reliable gossip. But they also included stories that were constructed literary creations. If we look at dragons in these texts, we see that they were discussed just as they were in decidedly nonfictional texts like histories, almanacs, and materia medica. We also see how dragons were a category problem, as was the entertainment literature that discussed them.

Chinese dragons, though celestial, were decidedly animals—they did not speak, scheme, covet gold, or kidnap princesses as their Western counterparts did at times. Li Shizhen discusses varieties of dragon: *long*, *jiao*, *diao*, *tuolong*, *shilongzi*, *qulong*, *yinglong*, *quanlong*, *shanlongzi*, *tulong*, and *yanlong*. A *long* does not correlate to Western “dragon,” in the same way that a *tuolong* was not an alligator, because *tuolong* had different medicinal properties, origins, and behaviors (they fly horizontally and capsize ships, for instance). *Shilongzi* does not correlate directly with skink; rather it was something like a small *long*. These other animals that were qualified *long* or *jiao* all shared some of the magical qualities of *long*, but were smaller, lesser, and more mundane.

Dragons were a category problem for everyone, but particularly for those who sought to set the natural historical record straight. The category in which Li Shizhen placed them—scaled creatures—listed nine kinds of dragon. Li cites Wang Fu in describing the dragon’s nine similarities to other animals: “the head of a camel, horns of a deer, eyes of a demon, ears of an ox, neck of a snake, the belly of a *shen* [giant clam whose exhalations form mirages of cities], the scales of a [golden] carp, claws of an eagle, and paws of a tiger.”<sup>10</sup> Other kinds of dragons in the *Bencao gangmu* are described in detail, through analogue, but incompletely: “*Diao* are a variety of dragon—how could they have the body of a tortoise? . . . *Jiaolong* resemble snakes but have four feet,” and so on.<sup>11</sup> Common knowledge also held that the dragon king had nine sons.<sup>12</sup>

Many texts were interested in determining dragons’ limitations and their precise location in the natural world. These investigations continued, or even intensified, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Could dragons die? What was their relationship to thunder? Why would they invade the human body? Epistemic and entertainment literature all weighed in. Dragons’ liminal, or hybrid, existence was not inherently strange; it was that dragons’ actions, at times, subverted the dominant paradigm. Were they god-like creatures that defied expectations about life and death, or were they animals that defied expectations of heaven? Authors were wrestling with empirical evidence (or second-hand empirical evidence) that did not conform to received knowledge. They were all contending with outlier accounts, with data points that did not fit known parameters. Brief accounts of anomalies, which derived entertainment value simply by the thought-content they conveyed, satisfied readers’ needs to add more data points to an underdetermined system.

## The Question of Dragon Mortality

The patterns and paradigms of dragon bodies and behavior were well known but poorly understood. Li Shizhen summarizes what we know about dragons: they are the leaders of creatures with scales, the qi they exhale generates clouds, and they in turn may change into water. They are also able to change to fire.<sup>13</sup> The dragon is a chimera of animals, with the ability to transform itself.

Some believed, however, that the transformations were not limitless. Li relied on unnamed *xiaoshuo* for some of his information about dragons, writing that he found in them evidence that dragons' nature is rough and ferocious; they love to eat the meat of swallows, and they fear iron.

Therefore, Li says, those who pray for rain, an occasion in which one wants to curry favor with dragons, use swallow meat, and those who suffer from floods and want to repel dragons use iron. Li records all this information because "when a dragon's bone is to be used as a drug, doctors should know [dragons'] dispositions." Dragon bones, ground and administered with wine, had long been used in medical treatment. They were known to be good for treating invasion by spirits and demons. They eliminated accumulations of anger that impeded breathing. Dragon bones were useful for treating paralysis, nightmares, and night sweats. They were prescribed for incontinence and nocturnal emission and to consolidate the soul and support the essence and spirit.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, dragons' teeth treated bug-witchcraft poison (*gudu*—see chapter 5), relieved palpitations, pacified the soul, and moderated boldness.<sup>15</sup>

But where did these bones and teeth come from? Li writes that they could be found in mountain valleys in the Jin area in Liangzhou, Yizhong, and Bazhong and in caves in Taishan Mountain. But were they the detritus and slough of dragon transformation, or entire dragon remains? If the latter, that meant dragons could die.

Li and his sources were puzzled by the question of dragon mortality. In his entry on dragon bones and teeth he states, "All these items were shed [by living dragons]—they are not derived from dead dragons." But he weighs the evidence and quotes Kou Zongshi [early twelfth century]: "Everyone says different things [about dragons], but in the end it is all speculation. There was once a skeleton unearthed from a cliff, complete with limbs and horns, but it is unknown whether it was slough or a deceased body [*buzhi tuiye biye*]. If it is said to be shed skin, it is a tangible object that cannot be seen [when they are] alive but only after they die. If it is said to be a transformation, then why is its form not transformed?"<sup>16</sup> That is, why do we ever see the bones of a dragon? Li struggles not just with mortality but with visibility. He quotes five other sources that contradict each other, and after discussing them briefly, he concludes that "even among dragons, there are those who have died."<sup>17</sup> To see

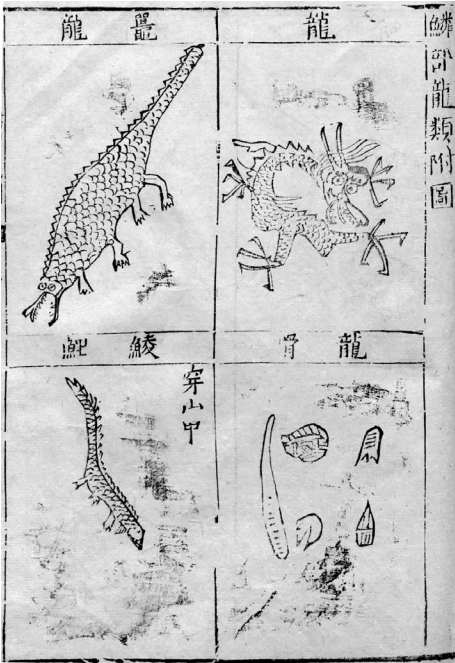


FIG. 10A. A page from the *Systematic Compendium* (Bencao gangmu) featuring a long (upper right corner) a tuolong dragon (upper left corner), and dragon bones (lower right corner). This is the Hu Chenglong engraved edition of 1596, only six copies of which are known to remain. Library of Congress.



FIG. 10B. A page from the *Systematic Compendium* (Bencao gangmu) opposite the images of dragons and dragon bones in fig. 10a, featuring various bugs from the chapter immediately preceding the chapter on dragons. Library of Congress.

a dragon was to see a dead dragon, and like a fallen star or thunder, they were realized on earth as stone.

Does “turning into stone” mean something fundamentally different in a culture in which transformation rather than creation was the dominant force of nature? In early modern China, such a transformation would likely have been less wonderous than the possibility of a dragon dying. Shen Gua tells of a county magistrate who determined that a stone dragon found while digging a well was a giant clam-dragon (*shen*) that had turned into stone, in the same category as the “stone-crab” and other minor dragons.<sup>18</sup> Accounts about

dragon mortality in *Strange Stories from Liaozhai* (1766), *What the Master Would Not Discuss* (Zibuyu, 1788), and *Perceptions* (*Yuewei caotang biji*, 1800) focus on the terrifying reality of dragons falling out of the sky.<sup>19</sup> These dragons were clearly ailing, unable to fly back up into the sky, and often lay in plain sight in the mud for days. Sometimes flies would gather on them, suggesting injury and oncoming death. Inevitably, it would rain, either fortuitously or because of prayer, followed by a thunderbolt, after which the dragons were able to disappear into the sky.<sup>20</sup>

In these records, the dragon is acting sick, as if mortal. This is what makes the account anomalous—not that dragons are inherently strange or destructive, but as spiritual beings, they should not be subject to malady. Dan Minglun (1782–1853) writes that this is indeed strange behavior from a dragon, since dragons are usually strong and graceful. He reaffirms that dragons can fall out of the sky and says that observers were right to be afraid and shoot firearms to try to scare off the ailing creature. Some might read Dan’s commentary as an allegory for the fluctuations in peoples’ attitude toward fallen scholars who rise out of ignominy, but this conclusion ignores his other comments on dragon stories that, taken together, demonstrate that he was trying to puzzle out the nature of dragons. He Shouqi takes this account literally when he comments in 1823, “[If] dragons do not control clouds and thunder, how are they different from snakes and worms? As for hibernating dragons, from ancient times until the present, [everyone] has regarded them as spiritual creatures [*shenwu*].”<sup>21</sup> If dragons were celestial creatures, how could they fall out of the sky? The *Supplement to “Strange Stories from Liaozhai,”* also includes accounts of fallen dragons: “A heavy rain was falling in Yishui, when suddenly a dragon that had no eyes dropped from the sky, barely breathing. On the order of the county magistrate, it was protected with eighty bamboo mats, though they proved insufficient to cover its entire body. People also made sacrifices to it. And every time its tail struck the ground, it sounded like clumps of earth falling.”<sup>22</sup> This is the entire entry—scarcely worthy of being called a story. It is just a record of a thing that happened, and it was read as such, at least by some commentators. Feng Xisai (the Yutang commentary) wrote an appendix (*fujī*) to this record in 1824 in which he details an eyeless dragon falling out of the sky in 1794 in Guangzhou. The crash caused houses in the village to collapse. The dragon lay there, emitting a foul, fishy smell that filled the air.<sup>23</sup> It was June, and locals tried to shield

the dragon from the sun. They held a sacrificial ceremony to pray for rain. After a few days, there was a heavy thunderstorm, and the dragon rose into the sky and flew away, causing further damage to hundreds of houses.<sup>24</sup>

The appendix comment to the “Eyeless Dragon” piece is written in almost identical style to the entries in the “disasters and anomalies” section of the official histories. The official history of the Qing dynasty records twenty-four dragon sightings during the reign of Qianlong (though none in 1794), but gazetteers reported many more. The appendix here gives no hint of irony or humor. It simply states an actual event like the record to which it is appended.

Comments usually explain or try to decipher something in the record, as does another comment to this “Eyeless Dragon” piece, which focuses on why the dragon lost his eyes: “[As for] this visit by a perverse dragon (*nielong*) . . . heaven took its eyes. [It is like] those who have eyes [yet] cannot distinguish right from wrong. This, then, is why [it was] punished.”<sup>25</sup> Although the commentator may be employing a metaphor for a scholar being punished by the emperor and then rising again, he seeks to explain how a dragon might lose its eyes and fall from the sky. These comments do not point out the artistry of the author; they seek only to explore or explain the facts of the matter.

Xie Zhaozhe and Ji Yun also record the strange event of dragons falling out of the sky. Xie includes his account among thirteen other entries on dragons in a chapter devoted to animals.<sup>26</sup> Among these entries is one about a dragon who, on a summer morning in 1598, fell from the sky after mating in Jurong. People came from miles around to see it, and after three days, “wind and thunder picked it up,” and it flew off.<sup>27</sup> Xie does not question or comment on this account, but presumably he recorded it as evidence that, like other animals, dragons mate and reproduce, can be injured, and perhaps can die.

Whether these divine creatures suffered the limits of mortality, and how one could ever know, was a debate that continued into the nineteenth century. Ji Yun attempts to explain why a dragon fell out of the sky in 1796 north of Caochuan, destroying over a square kilometer of grain in the field with its wriggling and stomping. He concludes that there are two kinds of rain: gentle rain, sent by heaven, and fierce wind and thunderstorms that pass quickly, caused by dragons. Ji writes that both phenomena need to be comprehended together to account for the variability of rain.<sup>28</sup> Yet this explanation indicates that there are meteorological forces independent of dragons. If dragons were

mortal and not responsible for life-giving rain, perhaps they could not only die, but die out.

### Licentious and Lazy, but Proper

Dragons were a category problem in both their phenomenological reality and their behavior. They were numinous creatures that responded to the call of thunder and had great power. But they were also wild beasts that acted as such. How then did curious readers reconcile this beastly behavior with their responsiveness to ritual propriety? It was known that dragons frequently caused floods or neglected to provide relief during droughts, but this was because “dragons are, by nature, extremely lazy.”<sup>29</sup> But they could be roused to action when people sacrificed to them at the local temple to the dragon king or threw iron or clay dragons into caves or wells where dragons were hiding.<sup>30</sup> These complicated and contradictory behaviors were all encompassed by the concept of a numinous animal (*lingwu*). *Ling* can refer to that which animates bodies, a “vital principle,” or to a sacred or spiritual power, or it to both, reflecting the potency of the disembodied world. In the following harrowing, violent account, Ji Yun wondered whether dragons were vicious beasts:

Cattle, sheep, and horses may sometimes give birth to creatures with unicorn horns, or mate with dragons and serpents, but [the offspring] are not true unicorns. The same is true for women who claim to have mated with supernatural beings. However, in the household of the Ma family, there was a tenant farmer who was nearly sixty years old. One day, while he was walking alone in the rain, thunder and lightning obscured his vision, and a dragon claw pressed down on his hat. Thinking that he was about to be punished by heaven, he trembled in fear and fell to the ground. He felt the dragon tear his pants, thinking that it was removing his clothes before executing him. But to his surprise, the dragon turned him over and began to violate him. Whenever he tried to move or turn away, the dragon would roar angrily and grind its teeth against his head. Fearing that he would be devoured, he lay still and did not dare to move. After a minute or two, there was a loud thunderclap, and the dragon disappeared. He groaned and

moaned on the embankment, covered in foul-smelling saliva. Fortunately, his son came with an umbrella to fetch him home. At first, he kept the incident hidden, but his wounds worsened, so he had to seek medical treatment and reveal the truth.<sup>31</sup>

The humanity of this story makes it seem real, with the victim trying to hide the facts of an assault out of a feeling of shame, and the information about dragons' essential lasciviousness and their status as wild beasts circulating only after the victim seeks help from a doctor.

Collections of texts, whether catalogued as “anomalous accounts” or “local histories,” gathered informational texts, often contradictory, and put them in conversation with each other, sometimes on facing pages. *Liaozhai* is one text that does this, but unlike Li Shizhen, who feels the need to assess which was correct and to reconcile contradictions, Pu Songling deals in juxtaposition. The textual history of *Liaozhai* makes it difficult to know if it was Pu or his editors who created the curious entries on dragons, but the collection's structure hints at these “debates.” In a popular nineteenth-century annotated edition, under one heading there are three items about dragons.<sup>32</sup> The first is about a fallen dragon and the second about a dragon that transforms from a snake. The last account finds a woman working in the fields. Dust blows into her eye, causing discomfort. On inspection, it looks like her eye has a red line wiggling in it. Someone says this is a dormant dragon. She fears that this means that she will die, but three months later, there is heavy rain, along with a loud clap of thunder, and the dragon leaves through her eye socket, leaving no trace. To this account, Yuan Xuansi adds that he and others once saw a dragon grip a human head in its talons. Yet no one near had heard of any decapitations.<sup>33</sup> He Shouqi remarks, “As for dragons hibernating in the eye, this has happened since ancient times. It can truly be called a numinous creature.” Whether dragons were vicious beasts or agents of retribution was unclear, even in accounts of anomalies.

Dragons were often described as lazy and lascivious, yet they also observed ritual and obeyed heaven's commands. Among the expressions of numinosity was adherence to ritual propriety. It seemed that dragons were wild beasts but could be subdued by invoking Confucian mores. Commissioner Qu, of Wuling County, Shandong, was reading in his study during a heavy rain when he

caught sight of a little creature, bright as a firefly, wriggling its way across his scroll, scorching the paper as it went and leaving a trail behind it, like a slug.<sup>34</sup> Qu figured that it must be a dragon and, lifting the scroll in both hands, carried it outside. He stood in the doorway for some time holding it solemnly aloft, but the creature coiled in on itself like a caterpillar and refused to budge. Wondering if he had offended the little dragon, Qu donned full official attire, made a deep bow, and carried it once more to the door, where it took off into the air, its body now huge, whirring and emitting a great stream of light. It flew off into the clouds, with a sound just like a thunderbolt, and disappeared.<sup>35</sup> Dan Minglun states simply, “Everyone [knows] ritual [should be] performed with sincerity and respect. Dragons, also, follow and accept [ritual] conduct.”<sup>36</sup> Dragons inhabit the material realm but communicate with the numinous one.

When Xie Zhaozhe accompanied his uncle on a 1589 diplomatic mission to the Ryukyu Islands, they encountered a furious storm with thunder, lightning, rain, and hail all at once. Three dragons appeared at the front and rear of the ship, their whiskers pulling the sea water up into the clouds. Everybody panicked, but an elder said that the dragons were drawn to the ship because it carried the emperor’s edict. The envoy then wrote a large sign saying, “Court dismissed!” He showed it to the dragons, which complied and withdrew from sight. Xie writes, “The authority of the son of heaven over the manifold spirits is a principle about which there can be no doubt. But if I had not witnessed this [event] personally, I would not have believed it.”<sup>37</sup>

Xie explains the dragons’ behavior as following a cosmic pattern in which the authority of heaven and the son of heaven align. He is surprised that dragons are not unique in this regard—they are among those beings that abide by a heavenly principle, animals of a higher order that understand ritual propriety.<sup>38</sup> Obedience to ritual propriety may have seemed especially strange to those who recorded these events, because it was well known that dragons were extremely licentious creatures. Xie discusses dragons as mating frequently with all kinds of animals, producing hybrid breeds of dragons that share features of both parents.<sup>39</sup> “When they mate with a cow, then a *lin* [unicorn] is born, when they mate with a pig, an elephant is born, when they mate with a horse, a dragon-horse [*longma*] is born.”<sup>40</sup> Xie goes on to discuss how when a dragon sees a woman, it will want to copulate with her. In Lingnan, he says, locals bring rain by exploiting dragons’ lasciviousness. They place a young woman out in

the open as bait, and when a dragon descends, they hide her, and the dragon retreats, followed by rain. Some, predictably, wondered what would happen if a dragon and a woman were to conceive. Pu Songling tells of Ms. Li of Xing village, who in 1682 suddenly went into labor. For a day and a half, she was unable to give birth, whereupon a dragon head appeared but then quickly withdrew. Old woman Wang came and burned incense to Yu, the flood queller, and incanted spells. Soon after, the placenta fell out, followed by several scales, each as large as a wine cup. Finally, a baby girl was born, her flesh so sparkling and crystal clear that all her internal organs could be counted.<sup>41</sup>

Translucency, even transparency, was a mark of beauty, like the luminescence thought to be found in milky-white jade. Another account features a pair of white birds thought to be extraordinarily rare and beautiful. They “had markings around their eyes like black peppercorns. Then they spread their wings, revealing the transparent flesh of their sides, and several of the vital organs inside them.”<sup>42</sup> *Draft History of the Qing* records that a chicken gave birth to transparent eggs. After a few days, the eggs hatched, and five-colored chicks flew away, another instance of transparency as a marker of beauty and special ability.<sup>43</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, doubts began to arise, not about the existence of dragons but about their spiritual nature. A *Shenbao* article of 1877 typifies this attempt to reclassify dragons simply as animals:

The dragon is nothing more than the leader of aquatic creatures [*shuizu zhi chang*]. . . . These creatures are simply stupid things, just like flood dragons and snakes. . . . Their bones and teeth can be used as medicine, and their saliva can be used as incense. These are all common in the world. Why then did earlier generations regard them as numinous creatures? If they are numinous creatures, they should not easily reveal themselves to people.<sup>44</sup>

Although the author dismisses beliefs that dragons have a numinous quality or special powers, the many recorded sightings of dragons were accepted as proof of their existence. That one could buy pieces of dragons in any market in turn testified to dragons’ mortality and mundanity.

## Dragons, Bugs, and Medicine

The logic behind using dragon parts as medicine, as with many medicines, employed literary logic, figurative reasoning, and geographic and elemental correspondences.<sup>45</sup> Dragons were thought to be creatures of the east (ocean), and therefore their bones, horns, and teeth were good for treating diseases of the liver, an organ thought to correlate to the east. The liver was the seat of the *hun*-soul, thus, when “the *hun*-soul roams and is not fixed, it can be cured with dragon teeth,” based on this resonance.<sup>46</sup> Dragon bones were also useful for treating illnesses related to death and the demonic, such as flying corpse (*feishi*) qi, demon attachment-illness (*guizhu*), and *gu* poison (see chapter 5)—which spoke to the persistence of the notion that dragons were numinous and therefore effective in curing the demonic.<sup>47</sup>

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the vernacular medical community witnessed a popular panacea drug known as “the foreign bug” (*yang-chong*) or “nine dragons bug” (*jiulongchong*), likely referring to the nine chimeric sons of the dragon.<sup>48</sup> It seems to have been mentioned for the first time in Long Bo’s work *Investigation of Medicinal Properties* (*Yaoxing kao*), published in 1795 and discussed at length in *Supplement to the Systematic Compendium* of 1803 and in a number of medical manuscripts held in the Berlin collection, some dedicated exclusively to it.<sup>49</sup> Zhao Xuemin writes that “nine dragons bug” originated abroad and was first introduced to China at the end of the Ming dynasty.<sup>50</sup> Berlin manuscripts repeat this information, followed by lengthy descriptions of the abilities of the “foreign bug” to nourish yin and supplement yang, to eliminate evil and to end sweating, as well as to regenerate blood and strengthen sinews and muscles.

Three manuscripts contain over a hundred medical recipes each, with the nine dragons bug as the primary or only ingredient in each, beneficial in maintaining health and nourishing life as well as being effective in the treatment of countless illnesses.<sup>51</sup> The “nine dragons bug” was popular in folk medicine but received no recognition in orthodox Chinese medical treatises. In the Republican era (1911–49), this enigmatic medicinal seems to have diminished in prominence, as did dragon bones and teeth, until all disappeared from folk medicine by the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>52</sup>

Bones and teeth weren't the only dragon products on the marketplace, however. The *Systematic Compendium* discusses the medical properties of nine kinds of dragon. These mostly describe what we now know as alligators, pangolins, water monitors, and other large lizards. Two marketplace examples from versions of the famous painting *Along the River during the Qingming Festival* (Qingming shanghe tu) include such smaller dragons hanging in the doorway of medicine shops. In one, the shop's sign reads, "Authentic Materia Medica" (*Daodi Yaocai*). Substantiating the claim of authenticity, strings of fresh and dried plants hang from the shop's walls—as does a *tuolong*, a kind of small dragon. According to Li Shizhen:

The physical appearance of *tu* is that of dragons. . . . The sound of their voices is extremely terrifying. Those reaching a length of one *zhang* can spit out qi generating clouds and rain. That is, they belong to the group of dragons. . . . Tuolong can fly above the ground, but they cannot rise high. . . . Nowadays, one often sees them hanging in apothecary shops; it is said that they can keep away moths. This, too, is based on the idea that as a medication they kill bugs.<sup>53</sup>

Dragon traces, and minor dragons, were products of the marketplace—commonplace things that expelled bugs.

*Miscellaneous Records [from the Time] of Emperor Ming* (Minghuang zalu), records a case in which an imperial gatekeeper who had just returned from Guangdong, in the south, was told by Doctor Zhou Gu of the Imperial Hospital that there was a dragon in his abdomen. The emperor was surprised to hear this and asked the officer if he was feeling any discomfort. The officer reported that after drinking from a mountain stream, he began to feel something in his abdomen like a stone. Doctor Zhou prescribed for him liquified *xionghuang* (realgar).<sup>54</sup> Shortly after taking the decoction, the officer vomited out a small thing with scales, several *cun* long—the dragon mentioned by the doctor. Li Shizhen points out that from this case, we can conclude positively *xionghuang*'s function of killing insects and noxious agents, as attested to by many other sources he quotes. That is, when they hibernate in the body, dragons are no different from bugs.<sup>55</sup> Elsewhere, Li writes that if *chong* die from the fumes of heated realgar, you know it is genuine.<sup>56</sup> This is also why

in “white snake stories” (*baishe zhuan*), drinking wine with realgar pains Madam White Snake and ultimately forces her to reveal her true form as a snake demon.<sup>57</sup> Ever since the lexicon *Wings of the Ready Guide* (*Erya yi*) by Luo Yuan (1136–84), dragons were classed as the leading figure among creatures with scales, insects, and worms. But there was no clear understanding of whether dragons were good or bad, and their association with bugs (*chong*), which were both medicine and pathogen, did not clarify anything. In late imperial vernacular literature, *chong*, including dragons, were the solution almost as often as they were the problem.

The pharmakon of dragons was expanded by *Supplement to Systematic Materia Medica* (preface 1765), a further appendix to and critique of Li’s text.<sup>58</sup> Zhao Xuemin culled much of his information from travel accounts and local gazetteers from distant reaches of the empire, including the first detailed instructions in a Chinese text for smoking opium and a now famous account of cinchona bark (*jinjilei*) that served as a cure for malaria and an antidote to the effects of wine. Many of the added drugs came from foreign countries, such as “protects-from-fright” stone from Spain, and “wonderfully effective stone” from somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. Among his several emendations was a set of notes on parts of the dragon that Li had missed: dragon’s saliva and semen *longxie* that solidified into chunks patterned with a spiral design like elephants’ ivory. One could distinguish real dragon ejaculate from fake by placing a small bit in boiling water, where it would immediately emit a cloud of mist, which would then encircle the hair of any woman standing nearby—“possibly due to the dragon’s lustful nature.”<sup>59</sup> It is somewhat surprising that Li Shizhen did not include dragon saliva in his *Bencao gangmu*, since it appeared in *xiaoshuo* that he drew upon heavily.<sup>60</sup> As Li had done for many other drugs, Zhao noted ways to tell the real spit (a solid thing) from the fake in the marketplace, especially important because many specimens came from faraway places like Africa, Spain, Ceylon, Mogadishu, Sri Lanka, Lhasa, and Hormuz.

Zhao was also concerned with the veracity of claims of dragon semen, particularly regarding the belief that dragon semen fell from the sky when dragons encountered a woman.<sup>61</sup> Consistent with sympathetic logic, dragon semen was good for strengthening the uterus and as an aphrodisiac. But this potency is confounding, Zhao writes. He says a friend had seen pieces of dragon’s

(hardened) blood the size of chess pieces, smooth and reflective and cool to the touch, like ice. He writes that dragons are supposed to be pure yang, which was puzzling to him because their blood was uniquely cold, and he admits that “it’s unclear what dragon excretion is—whether it’s saliva, blood, semen, or urine. These accounts are preserved here awaiting further verification.”<sup>62</sup>

When asked why he would bother wasting time trying to go beyond the *Systematic Compendium* in making a supplement to it, Zhao replied, “With the passage of time, species and categories become more numerous. Even ordinary people are curious about extraordinary things [*sushang haoqi*], so surely [I should] collect [and describe] them in all their utmost complexity. . . . These then are new sorts and varieties. If I do not describe them, whoever will get to know them?”<sup>63</sup>

Whether publications like the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* were primarily news or entertainment, they presented and interrogated information about the natural world and reflected a commercial desire to learn more about them. Newspapers and secondary schools in Shanghai and other large cities increasingly taught about science and technological advances.<sup>64</sup> But curious impulses and new information also faced backlashes at times, as seen in some defenses of dragons in the face of new Western knowledge:

Westerners, known for their precision and rigorous reasoning, deny the existence of dragons. . . . Recently, a Western newspaper reported that a steamship traveling off the southern coast of Africa suddenly saw tumultuous waves with scales and claws angrily poking out. At first, it was thought to be a large fish, but as they approached, both the head and tail were revealed, rising more than twenty feet above the water. They estimated that the body was no less than a hundred feet long. Thus, Westerners, who claim there is no such thing, want to confirm the truth. It’s said they will not believe without evidence. People in China understand that dragons are unpredictable, they move freely above and below, wind and clouds protect their bodies, and thunder and rain amplify their powers. They symbolize supreme dignity, so how could they be compared to ordinary things we usually see? The saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” does not necessarily mean that we must change to the Roman way.<sup>65</sup>

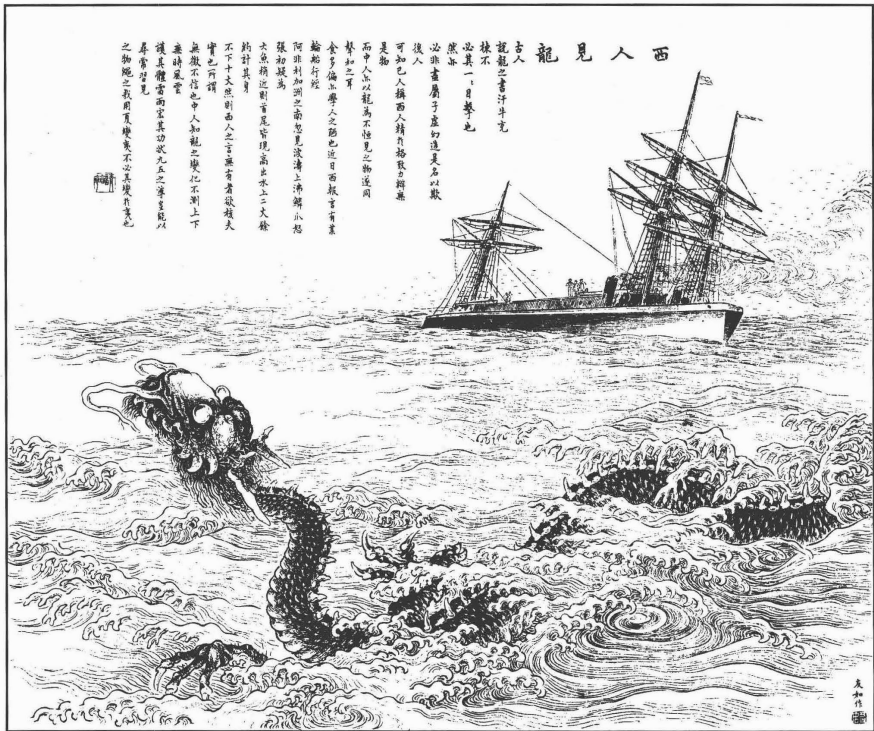


FIG. 11. An article, “Westerners See Dragons” (Xiren jian long) and image from *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, 1886. Bavarian State Libraries.

### Dragon Mirage

To think about the problem of understanding a creature that was inherently transformative, consider the *shen*. A *shen* was a type of flood dragon that could create mirages floating over the sea. They are mentioned in *History of the Former Han* and other ancient texts and were discussed and debated until the twentieth century. The qi of the *shen* was thought to produce vaporous offshore cities, castles, and pavilions called *shenlou* “*shen* buildings,” a word we now translate as “mirage.” These were also known as “*shen* qi buildings” or *shen* cities in the sea (*haishi shenlou*).<sup>66</sup> Shen Gua either suspected that these mirages were independent phenomena or doubted that the animals producing these cities were confined to the sea, writing, “In the sea near Dengzhou,

there is often cloud qi that resembles palaces, towers, city walls, people, carriages and horses, and ceremonial caps and gowns, all vividly visible. These are called ‘cities in the sea.’ Some say they are the transformations of ‘flood dragon and *shen* [*jiaoshen*] qi,’ but this is doubtful.”<sup>67</sup> Ouyang Wenzhong observed similar phenomena far inland, and the locals there also called it “cities in the sea” (*haishi*). Xie Zhaozhe reiterates the common saying, “Dragons follow flood dragons [*jiao*] and *shen* in their transformations.”<sup>68</sup> Li Shizhen appends *shen* to the end of his entry on flood dragons, describing them as looking like a large snake with dragon horns and a red mane. They are “capable of emitting qi forming shapes of cities with inner and outer walls and tall buildings that are visible when it is going to rain. They are called *shen* buildings and sea cities.” Xie argues that it is not the qi from *shen* that creates the towers and terraces over the sea in Dingzhou, but the qi of the sea itself. “In general, the essence of seawater [*haishui zhi jing*] can form shapes when it condenses and light when it disperses. All things in the sea, when their qi becomes old, can change, and transform, not just the *shen*.” Ji Yun, writing another century and a half later, tried to puzzle out why the city of his ancestors, Jingcheng, was still vaguely discernable as a shadow in the mist, “with towers and battlements that are a kind of *shen* qi [*leihu shenqi*].” Ji writes that many books have recorded this phenomenon but that its reason was still unknown. He postulates, that “everything that has a form must have essence and qi, and where the soil is thick, the vital energy of the earth gathers, just as humans have souls.” He explains that the city of his ancestors stood for a thousand years, soaking the ground with vital energy all that time, which then takes many years to disperse. Just as ghosts retain the shape of their human selves, so this image emanates after the city’s destruction. Yet not all ancient cities manifest their form like Jingcheng. Ji asks, “What is the reason for this? When a person dies, sometimes there is a ghost, sometimes there is no ghost. And when a ghost exists, sometimes it is seen, sometimes it is not. It is just like that.”<sup>69</sup>

It was difficult to delimit the transformations of the world. Dragons, often seen only obscurely, could not only transform but produce illusions. Li Shizhen was keen to disambiguate between two animals that were both called *shen*. One was a type of flood dragon that created images of cities, complete with horses, carts, and people bustling about, and the other was an enormous

clam that produced pearls that emitted light. *Shen* needed explanation, and reclassification.

Consistent with other entries, Li gathers claims about *shen* from earlier texts, all of which discuss various mechanisms in which the progeny of snakes and pheasants transform into *shen* transforming after their eggs lie in the soil for hundreds of years, responding to thunder, and so on. Li writes, “Seen from these various reports, flood dragons and *shen* belong to the same group. They may be born [from eggs], and they may be the result of transformation.” *Shen* were like bugs in that they could be “born” from water, eggs, or transformation.<sup>70</sup>

*Shen* were real creatures that produced mirages, which were real phenomena made of real qi that depicted images of cities that may or may not have had substance. *Liaozhai* wrestles with the simultaneous phenomenological reality and unreality of *shenlou*: “The Mountain City of Mount Huan is acknowledged to be one of the wonders of my home district, even though many a year goes by when it is not seen at all.” He goes on to describe how a friend witnessed, on the mountainside opposite their drinking party, a pagoda. There was no monastery in that vicinity. Subsequently, a host of palaces and halls sprang into view, and it dawned on them that this was the mountain city of Mount Huan. High walls and battlements became visible, and within the walls, they could distinguish countless storied buildings and residential districts, with people moving about, some hurrying about, others leaning and standing in a variety of postures. Then suddenly, a great wind arose, the air grew thick with dust, and the city could scarcely be seen any longer. By and by, the wind subsided, the air cleared, and the city vanished.<sup>71</sup>

Pu Songling, as Historian of the Strange does not provide interpretative comments on this account, as there is no moral to the story the reader might miss.<sup>72</sup> He rarely weighs in on curious accounts of real things. But in a more fully fleshed-out story, “Rakshas and the City in the Sea” (*Luosha haishi*), cities made by *shen* are not mirages but actual cities in the sea, lost paradises in which talented scholars are recognized for their contributions but from which the protagonist needs to escape, having loved ones back in the human realm. Lamenting the choice between a scholar’s paradise and a world of mundane disappointment, Pu discusses the deceptions and indignities of

the world and concludes, “Alas! If one wants to achieve fame, wealth, and honor, he should look for it in the *shen* buildings and cities in the sea!” Cities in the sea are both the perfect place and no place. Mirages are real things that people experience and overly perfect things that call into question the quotidian world. In *Liaozhai*, the mirage is a real phenomenon, but it contains a fantasy. A *shen* produces a *shenlou*—a dragon produces a mirage.

Whether or not readers generally understood *shen* to be a type of dragon, most often the *shen* was depicted as a large clam-type creature producing a mirage represented with swirls and clouds. Though the notion of a city on the sea—one that seemed alive, beautiful, tranquil, and elusive—was a metaphor pregnant with meaning for many authors of entertainment literature, it was also considered by many to be a reality they longed to see. In 1890, *Dianshizhai huabao*, published an entry:

It is traditionally said that the *shen* city [mirage creature] exists in the mud, with its vapor and qi forming buildings and towers. These can occasionally be seen over rivers and seas, but not frequently. Near the sea in Ningbo, there’s a place called Xiepu, where recently, at dawn, the mirage has been appearing frequently with buildings, pavilions, people, and their unpredictable transformations and illusions [*bianhuan wuchang*]. One day at dawn, someone saw a beautiful woman with bright eyes and white teeth weaving in a high tower, with two other women and a dozen children playing and running around. . . . These kinds of illusions, with their miraculous transformations—if someone skilled in photography were to take their equipment there and capture these scenes one by one, it would certainly make a truly natural landscape picture! How fortunate one would be to personally witness such an extraordinary sight!<sup>73</sup>

The wish for a photograph to validate this illusion, inscribed on a published line drawing, suggests a longing for veracity. This particular mirage was a traditional male fantasy, with beautiful women spinning and children playing. The print does not suggest mirage or dream (as would be indicated by swirly lines to clue the reader that this is an illusion), but the excitement on the faces and in the body language of the male onlookers reinforces the text’s

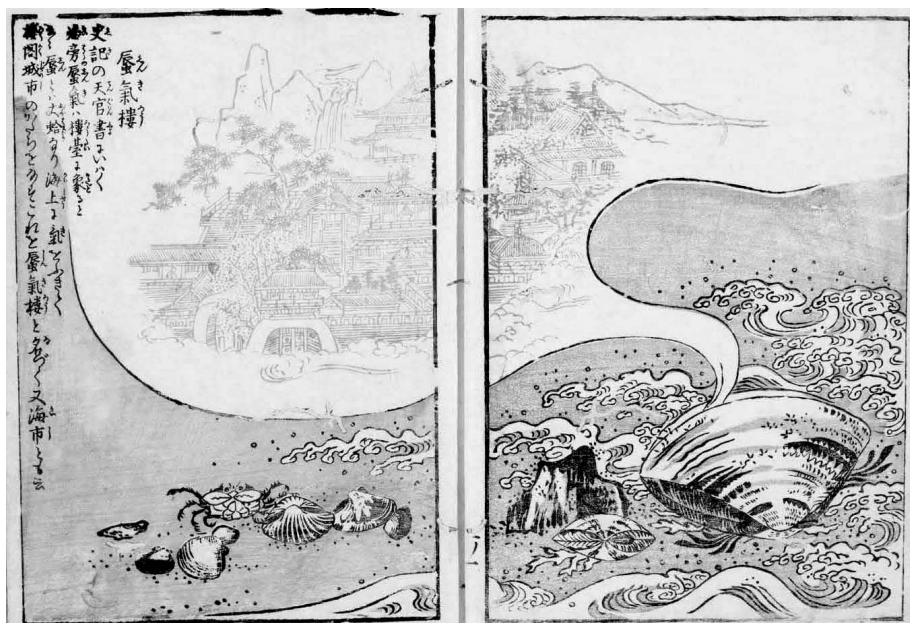


FIG. 12. A *shen* producing a mirage in *Night Parade of One Hundred Demons: A Sequel* (*Hyakki Yagyō Shūi*) by Toriyama Sekien, 1712–88 (Japan). Toriyama quotes Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*: “*Shenqi* take the form of buildings and towers.” He explains further, “The *shen* is a giant clam. Exhaling its *qi* upon the sea, it generates the image of a multi-storied city. This phenomenon is called *shenqi* buildings. It is also known as ‘city on the sea.’” Courtesy Waseda University Libraries. See also figure 1.

desire for proof that this kind of traditional utopia can really exist. What is captured in this image is the fervent excitement for the past and the fear that its reality, like the minor dragon that produced it, might be ineffable, illusory. It also encapsulated the paradox of studying dragons, rarely seen creatures that were emblems of traditional culture and glory and which could produce mirages. The notion of capturing this mirage of a dragon on film reflects a tension implicit in anomalous accounts, *Systematic Compendium*, and other texts. Readers were transfixed by the fantastic, fascinated by realism, convinced by the arguments, understanding its elusiveness, but longing for proof of the unseen.

## Water, Connoisseurship, and Curiosity

“According to the people of our region, the way to get sourceless water is to take a container to a river or a well, fill it with water, and go straight back to the house without spilling a drop or looking back. When you return to the house, that will be considered sourceless water with which the person who is sick may take the medicine.”

“But both well water and river water,” said Sun Wukong, “have sources. That’s not what I mean by sourceless water.”

—Wu Cheng’en, *Journey to the West*, chapter 69

It was widely known that dragons were a source of water. That was why dutiful officials for hundreds of years sacrificed to dragon king temples in times of drought and fearful farmers prayed to dragons for rain.<sup>1</sup> It is also why Sun Wukong asks Aoguang, the dragon king of the Eastern Ocean, for some of his saliva—the *real* sourceless water. While the satire of this passage from *Journey to the West* is largely about feeding a foreign king dragon spit and horse urine, it also hints at some very real debates about the nature of water and its different kinds and properties. Consider this passage from *The Story of the Stone*:

“Is this tea made with last year’s rainwater too?” Daiyu asked her.

Adamantina looked scornful. “Oh! You are so vulgar. Can you *really* not tell the difference? I am quite disappointed in you. This is

melted snow that I collected from the branches of winter-flowering plum trees five years ago, when I was living at the Coiled Incense Temple on Mt. Xuanmu. I managed to fill the whole of that demon-green glaze water jar with it. For years I couldn't bring myself to start it; so, I left it buried in the earth all these years, then this summer I opened it for the first time. Today is only the second time I have ever used any. I am *most* surprised that you cannot tell the difference. When did stored rainwater have such buoyant lightness? How could one *possibly* use it for a tea like this?"<sup>2</sup>

In terms of history, technology, myth, culture, and economy, the degree to which Chinese society and civilization has been entwined with water can hardly be overstated. The history of water control in China has been discussed extensively, to the point that China has been termed a "hydraulic society."<sup>3</sup> Massive projects—such as dredging the grand canal, building its locks and dams, controlling flooding rivers, and terracing mountains—require top-down organization, a huge labor force, and technological sophistication. But there were more personal relationships with water—drinking, cooking, bathing, making tea, mixing ink, and preparing medicine. These uses of water were subjects of curiosity and investigation for many authors in the Ming and Qing periods.

Was water really an object of connoisseurship, as Adamantina (Miaoyu) suggests in *The Story of the Stone*? Were tea drinkers supposed to be able to tell the difference, if they were refined enough, between last year's rainwater and the melted snow collected from the branches of winter-flowering plum trees five years ago?<sup>4</sup> It seems a joke meant to highlight Adamantina's eccentricity (*guaipi*) and obsession with purity, given that she would throw away a priceless cup from the Cheng Hua period because a rustic woman drank from it.<sup>5</sup> But perhaps readers took her seriously.

The market does seem to have distinguished between waters. A story in *Liaozhai* mentions that in some places, "the price of the mountain water was like that of jade liquor, and it was of such a quality that there was no one willing to give it freely."<sup>6</sup> Mountain water's premier status in the *Classic of Tea* might also explain its cost: "Mountain water is the best, river water is second, and well water is the worst," since it seems that exotic waters were necessarily far from

urban centers.<sup>7</sup> Because water could take on the properties of its environment, its origin was crucial. If one had to use well water, it was important to use wells that were frequently drawn from. But it was also possible that water drawn from mountain valleys might contain hidden dragons or their poison, so it was best not to draw from these locations during summer or autumn.<sup>8</sup>

Waters differed in ways that did not correspond to modern assumptions about mineral content, pH levels, or contaminants. Discussions of waters, origins, and flavors greatly increased in number from the mid-sixteenth century on, and so did the number of waters identified.<sup>9</sup>

The poet, scholar, and gastronome Yuan Mei (1716–97) writes in *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment* (Suiyuan shidan) about the different flavors of pure water for the brewing of tea: “If one wants to make good tea, one must first store good water. Specifically, one should insist on storing water from Zhongleng Spring or Hui Spring.”<sup>10</sup> He tells stories of people attempting (and failing) to transport mountain water from Hui Spring and of inadvertently unmasking pretentious connoisseurs when they could not tell that the Hui water had been switched with another water during the long journey.<sup>11</sup> He emphasizes the importance of collecting and storing rain and snow water properly. Newly collected water has a harsh flavor, but aged water has a sweet flavor. “Boil the water over an aggressive flame using a hollow-centered jar,” Yuan counsels.<sup>12</sup> “Brew the tea immediately when the water boils. If one boils it for too long, its flavors will change.”<sup>13</sup> The water itself, even from a spring or melted snow, has flavors that ideally contribute to the overall experience of tea, but if not stored properly or for long enough or if boiled too long, those flavors change. Zhang Dai (1597–1689) describes the process of bringing water from hundreds of miles away without letting flavor-altering bubbles develop along the journey.<sup>14</sup> Ji Yun was curious why the water in Liu Quanzhi’s (1738–1818) well changed its taste every midday but explains this behavior by analogy to a place where the water has twelve tides a day, matching the sundial exactly.<sup>15</sup> Adamantina may have been finicky in distinguishing between melted snow and rainwater, but she was detecting subtle flavors given to water by its origins, its environment, and time, just as literati authors in the real world did.

Even if water is used in this scene as a proxy for purity, as it is elsewhere in *The Story of the Stone*, in many texts from tea manuals to materia medica,

water does take on properties of its age, surroundings, and source. The *Systematic Compendium* lists forty-three different kinds of water, eleven of which Li Shizhen described for the first time and all of which have their own medicinal properties, qualities, names, and origins. In his *Supplement to the Systematic Compendium*, Zhao Xuemin lists many additional kinds of water, including clouds, plum and cherry water, rising dragon water, chicken spirit water, twenty types of dew, among others, all with their own medicinal qualities. Although Zhao wrote the preface in 1765, *Supplement* was not published until the 1860s, which must have given readers in the late nineteenth century the impression that new waters were being discovered all the time. Li's discussion in the sixteenth century of so many waters argues against what some have seen as the commodification of water in the Qing dynasty, in response to the rise of populous urban centers and the relative lack of good drinking water. Perhaps it is just an early example of a nascent phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> Either way, longing for high-end water from far-away places was tantamount to longing for aspects of traditional culture in the middle of increasingly bustling, dirty, cities. A taste for water was created by this thirst for culture in the face of market forces that had already collapsed cultural and economic hierarchies.<sup>17</sup>

Late-nineteenth-century medical manuscripts repeatedly indicate the need to take medicine or prepare it with "sourceless water" (*wugen shui*), which may mean rainwater that has not touched the ground or simply very clear water.<sup>18</sup> These authors were thus unaware of, or dismissive of, Sun Wukong's satirical discussion of "sourceless water" in the popular novel.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the case, these medical texts, novels, and guidebooks were talking to each other, debating, and supplementing each other in their efforts to understand the nature and uses of water.

The *Systematic Compendia's* different waters take the form of rain, snow, dew, frost, hail, and ice, which have different characteristics depending on when and where they are collected. "Suspending water" is rain that gathers in the top section of cut bamboo or in a fencepost. "Plum rain" occurs in the heat of summer as an incessant drizzle that makes people sick and makes things become moldy. "Divine water" is collected from inside bamboo if it rains between 11am and 1pm on the fifth day of the fifth month. "Bright water" is extremely pure and suitable for religious ceremonies. Water from a leaking roof is good for eliminating warts but will poison any food it drips on (a story

from *Liaozhai* also mentions this cure).<sup>20</sup> Running water has the tendency to bring things downward and is therefore good for preparing drugs that treat diseases in the lower part of the body. Water from a quickly flowing stream is best for stewing drugs to urgently smooth stool and urination, while “adverse running water,” since it is going backward and upward, is good for making drugs that can induce vomiting.<sup>21</sup> It is possible to change the nature of certain waters—*laoshui*, “laboring water,” for instance, is made by putting running water in a basin, scooping some out with a large spoon, pouring it back from a height, and then repeating this a thousand times or more. After being splashed so many times, it becomes light in quality and sweet in taste, and in this way it benefits the spleen and stomach rather than the kidney.<sup>22</sup>

Water connoisseurship celebrated bringing the mountains to the city, an ideal reminiscent of Tao Qian’s “hut in the realm of men,” but it was also about the power and privilege to do so. Elevating water to commodity status was also about refinement—learning to see or taste what could not be seen—in an effort to reestablish distinctions between literati and their social inferiors, pretenders, or charlatans.<sup>23</sup> But it was also a fact that in early modern China, there were many different waters, with different effects on the body, and some were rarer than others.

## Water as Space-Time

Li Shizhen identified waters from a particular place as taking on properties of the environment, and the Ming and Qing dynasties were rapidly expanding to encompass new regions and new ecosystems. Moderns may see this as akin to the twenty different brands of bottled water at the local bodega, each claiming to come from a remote, pure, place, but Li saw them as categorically different types of water.

He tells the story of Doctor Ma Zhiji, who once visited an official who had a copper water clock that measured time by the dripping of water. While he was there, the official called a technician and told him that the water in the instrument, having circulated three times, was no longer good and should be changed. When water is used for a period, it becomes slippery. When it is slippery, it will leak at a slightly faster pace than normal and make the instrument tell the wrong time, and so it should be changed:

After learning this, I began to realize that the waters under heaven are the same only when they are used to put out fire or irrigate crops. Their quality may change in different locations and because of different uses. That is why in dyeing silk fabric, if water from a Sichuan river is used, the color will be bright. In paper making, when water from the Jiyuan River is used in processing paper mulberry leaf, the product will be white and lustrous. In the area of Nanyang, ponds are close to chrysanthemum farms, and the local people live longer lives, as they drink water which is close to chrysanthemums.<sup>24</sup>

Water was liquid time and space. It needed to be gathered at certain times for maximal effectiveness, and it also needed to be from a certain place or to have flowed a certain distance. Mountain water was desirable to help treat illnesses not just because mountain water was pure but because it took on the properties of mountains. In a similar manner, water that has accumulated in an ox's footprint can be substituted for water that has accumulated in the rut of a cart on a road.<sup>25</sup> This was not because there was some mineral or material on the road that dissolved into water that lay on it but rather that the water absorbed some of the qualities of roads, helping illnesses move out of the body as oxen and carts help move goods down the road. Mid-sky river water, (*bantian he shui*), water gathered when flowing out of a bamboo gutter, was efficacious against madness and demonic infestation, malign qi, and noxious poisons, but water gathered from a leaky roof (*wulou shui*) was highly poisonous, causing noxious diseases if imbibed. Presumably, the primary difference is that water that stays out of your house, running down the gutters, is obedient and useful, while that which leaks through the roof is obstinate and inappropriate for healing.

The distinct methods of fetching and storing water also mattered. Water fetched from a well and then poured into a container is water running adversely (*daoliu shui*), but if it is used right after being drawn from a well, it is rootless water (*wugen shui*). The first bucket of water fetched from a well, no matter the time of day, is newly fetched water (*xinji shui*), while if the first bucket is fetched early in the morning it is first-fetched water (*jinghua shui*), "therefore, water from the same well may have different names and functions when it is obtained in different ways."<sup>26</sup> Water that was used to sharpen a



FIG. 13. An image of water coming in through the roof of a house, from *Chinese Materia Dietetica* (Shiwu bencao), Ming dynasty. This is toxic “leaky-house water.” Not pictured is the facing page, the helpful medicine of “mid-air river water” that runs down the eaves of a house and into barrels. Wellcome Collection.

knife, water in which a red dragon has bathed, water used to dye clothes or wash dishes, and water from an ancient tomb all have their own properties, taking on characteristics of their source or environment via contact magic or figurative logic.

Li explains why there are different waters and why each takes on the properties of its environment:

When water flows, comes to a standstill, and becomes cold or warm, the quality pertaining to it changes accordingly. . . . Therefore, people of former times differentiated between waters and earths of the nine geographical regions of the earliest dynasties and could thereby distinguish between people [living in different areas] by their beauty,

ugliness, longevity, or meager years. This is because water is the source of the myriad transformations and earth the mother of the myriad things.<sup>27</sup>

Water is the source of all transformations, to include human transformations, and in this way, it is predictive of fate, even causative of it. How a person looks, grows, and dies is all dependent on the transformations of water according to its time and place.

Because it took on the properties of time and place, water could counteract bodies that were adversely affected by timing or place. This goes beyond metonymic logic—water was the conduit of local properties. Li Shizhen enumerates forty-three kinds of water, but there are really many more. Consider his discussion of “water endowed with seasonal qi” (*jieqi shui*). He begins by reminding readers that one year is comprised of twenty-four seasonal periods, each of which lasts half of a month. The qi and flavors of water change in accordance with the seasonal qi. Li encourages his readers to fill a bottle with water on each of the first twelve days of the first month. Each day stands for a different month in the year, and each bottle will have a different weight, the heavy ones indicating more rain in that month and the lighter ones less. Li points out that even among the days, the qi of water is not identical—how much more this applies to the qi of water from month to month.<sup>28</sup> Because water took on the properties of its place and time, it could cure human bodies that were adversely affected by space or time—unseasonable events in nature, statutory illnesses, miasmas, and so on—showing just how much space and time affected human bodies.

## Water, Demons, and Spit

Water was an instrument of healing but also of deception. Records of mendicant healers explain how to perform magic tricks with water and pass them off as evidence of miraculous efficacy. One account explains a trick called “water makes black characters appear.”<sup>29</sup> It describes dissolving *wubeizi* (sumac gallnut) in water and then writing characters with the decoction on white paper. Once the liquid dries, the writing is invisible. When the paper is moistened again with water, the characters become visible. This creates the

illusion of demonic activity. The same source details a similar practice: boiling *wubeizi* in water and then adding white lime and using the liquid to write a talisman on a white wall. Once the lime has dried, the writing is illegible. The mendicant salesman then dissolves *zaofan* (melanterite) in hot water, invites a crowd to watch him write a talisman on the surface of the water, and then splashes the water on the wall, where the same talisman then appears. Presumably the fraudster could then claim that a spirit had written the talisman or that a demon was expelled by it.<sup>30</sup> Such sleights were in the repertoire of some itinerant healers as well. Two other healers' manuscripts (a small sample of the over eight hundred manuscripts in the Berlin collection) feature similar methods of making invisible writing appear or of writing on the surface of water.<sup>31</sup> How widespread these practices really were is impossible to discern and is complicated by their mention in manuscripts that contained apotropaic methods and talismans that were widespread in other books and manuscripts.

Zhang Yingyu's late-Ming collection *A New Book for Foiling Swindlers, Based on Worldly Experience* (*Jianghu lilan dupian xinshu*) includes an account of Buddhists enchanting people by casting a spell on water. When the person looks in the water, the form of the thing they desire will appear before them. A rich man with no aspirations to political power is convinced by sorcery and trickery that he should rebel against the throne, to disastrous results. Zhang Yingyu depicts these practices as fact, not fantasy. To Zhang, these techniques can indeed be efficacious (though they can also be faked), and, as scholars Bruce Rusk and Christopher Rea note in the introduction to their translation of Zhang's *Book of Swindles*, "his main concern is to alert the unwary to their potential use for evil. . . . Deaths *can* be foretold, and the netherworld does exist. The charlatan is cribbing from the true clairvoyant, and Zhang merely mocks the implausibility of the fraudster's ruse. Discernment is a type of competence, and competence is vital for the man of the world."<sup>32</sup> To be swindled by what one sees written on or reflected in water is not just a story warning about charlatans. It is a story warning about stories, about reading itself, and about the discernment required to avoid being deceived by desires and illusions.

That water can be used to reveal invisible spirit writing suggests water's connection to the unseen realm, at least in the minds of those whom the char-

latan seeks to swindle. Accounts of anomalies invoke water of one kind or another as a weapon to battle demons or a conduit between seen and unseen realms. Water's metaphorical purity and its ability to cleanse and combat dirt also made it a weapon against unseen, malicious forces. Death was a contaminant, a pollutant, and ghosts were thought to be dirty and smelly. *Strange Stories from Liaozhai* comments that ghosts do not see dirt, just as fish do not see water.<sup>33</sup> Sorcery, demonic magic, and black arts (*yaofu xieshu*) are practices that cross the boundary between life and death, legitimate and illegal, needed and dangerous, seen and unseen. Water is a part of these practices, being both tangible and insubstantial, seen and unseen. Apotropaic measures were often attempts to thwart being soiled by the impurity of death or contaminated by ghosts and demons.<sup>34</sup> Yuan Mei's anomaly accounts describe methods to combat ghosts that involve ingesting water, spitting it, writing on it, or throwing it. In one instance, a monk writes some spells and chants incantations, in addition to tossing a cup of magical water in the direction of the ghost's head.<sup>35</sup> Water was also key to combating bugs and other pollutants in the body, in turn a key to achieving Daoist enlightenment. In one account, a Daoist adept teaches a scholar the "method of drinking water" (*yinshui zhi fa*):

By eating too much, our bodies become heavy and littered with filthy bugs that grow in the stomach. . . . A person who wants to learn the Dao must first cleanse his mouth and purify his intestines. Without food, all the bugs inside the stomach will starve to death and be flushed out of the body. Water is the first essential life force. At the birth of the universe, water was the first of the five elements to appear. So, drinking water is the secret to becoming immortal. However, the water from the towns and cities is dirty and polluted—drinking such water will harm your spirit, so one must obtain the purest water from the mountains and swallow it slowly, so that a gurgling sound is produced in your throat.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to the purity of mountain water and long life, bugs and ghosts have the stink of death.<sup>37</sup>

Ghosts smelled bad.<sup>38</sup> "Each type of ghost has its own odor," Yuan Mei writes, and "a ghost has a strong fishy smell."<sup>39</sup> It makes perfect sense, then,

that ghosts “fear the qi of water,” a phrase that recurs in medical manuscripts used by healers in the late twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> One manuscript, for instance, discusses the exorcistic practice “method to spill water,” (*qishui fa*), in which one utters specific words and says the names of large numbers of spirits and dragons. After that, one sprinkles water with one’s hands and shouts, “Spirit water is spilled!,” driving out the demons.<sup>41</sup>

Expelling ghosts and demons with spit does not figure prominently in very many texts, but it does figure in a wide variety of them.<sup>42</sup> Spit was liquid life that could repel demons and revive the recently deceased. Li Shizhen repeatedly records a method to revive someone who has recently died from “corpse [-like condition] due to recession” (*shijue*, a kind of reversal of qi) or from nightmares. Several drugs may be rubbed on the eyes or blown into the nostrils, but in every case, it is recommended to bite the patient’s big toe and spit on their face.<sup>43</sup> An account from *Liaozhai*, in a similar gesture, records a monk spitting water on the face of a wicked woman, who then becomes able to recall past incarnations and reforms her ways.<sup>44</sup> To moderns, this may just seem like expedient means to startle the patient out of an unconscious or selfish state, but there is medical logic behind the practice. Saliva (*koujintou*) also known as “divine water” (*shenshui*), “numinous liquid” (*lingye*), “golden serum” (*jinjiang*), and “sweet spring” (*liquan*), was effective in reviving the recently deceased for the same reason that it was effective in repelling ghosts, namely, that it was liquid qi—liquid life.<sup>45</sup> By extension, the spit of a demon is liquid death. In addition to nourishing vital organs and making eyes bright and clear, saliva is good, according to Li, for exorcising evil spirits and ghosts. He recounts a story about Zong Dingbo of the Jin dynasty, who, meeting a newly dead ghost one night, asked it what it was afraid of. It said it was averse to saliva. Zong grabbed it and it turned into a sheep. Fearing its further transformations, he spat on it repeatedly, after which it stopped transforming. He then sold it for one thousand cash. “From this,” Li says, “we know that ghosts really are afraid of saliva.”<sup>46</sup>

Spit could reveal whether a patient was suffering from *gu* poison, a kind of poisoning- bewitchment (see chapter 5). Li recommended having the patient spit into a basin of water, and “if the saliva sinks to the bottom, it is a case of *gudu*. If it floats, it is not.”<sup>47</sup> The polluting, demon aspect of the poison tainted the body and made saliva heavier than normal. Because saliva was a transfor-

mation of human essence and qi, it was assumed to be useful in combating demons and death, but as liquid life, it was also not to be spat out casually or often.

## Rainbows

Like water, rainbows were visible yet transparent and mysterious. Like water, bugs, thunder, and prophecy, rainbows in China were tied to time; *The Book of Rites* (Liji) says simply that rainbows begin to be seen in the last month of spring, and in the first month of winter they are seen no more.<sup>48</sup> This is not a description of meteorological phenomena, however, but a record of animal behavior. Rainbows were animals, and like other bug-like creatures, rainbows hibernated in winter.<sup>49</sup> The earliest depictions of rainbows conflated them with a two-headed creature, a kind of dragon, that came down from the sky and drank from rivers. A royal divination inscribed on a Shang dynasty (seventeenth–eleventh century BCE) ox scapula reads, “There were great clouds from the east; in the afternoon a rainbow came out of the north and drank from the Yellow River.”<sup>50</sup> Another ominous divination reads, “The king prognosticated, saying, ‘There shall be misfortune.’ On the eighth day, clouds in the form of a face covered the sun; a rainbow appeared and drank from the Yellow River.”<sup>51</sup>

Dragons were long classed with aquatic animals, or animals that have scales, and those in turn were classed with bugs and snakes. That rainbows were animals that came down from the sky to drink from rivers with their two heads is reflected in the character for rainbow, *hong* 虹, which contains the radical (classificatory portion of Chinese characters) for bug/worm, *chong* 虫 (or animal) on the left and the phonetic *hong* (or *gong*) 工 on the right.

The early geography *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (Shanhai jing) reads, “Rainbows are located north of the Land of Gentlemen. Each one has two heads.”<sup>52</sup> Guo Pu (276–324) explains in his commentary on the text, as does the early dictionary *Explaining and Analyzing Characters* (Shuowen jiezi, first or second century CE) “*hong* are *didong*.” *Didong* is an archaic word for rainbow, but in works such as the eleventh-century dictionary *Lei pian*, *di* is a kind of bug. The late-Ming illustrations of Jiang Yinghao depict the rainbow as a very long, two-headed, snake-like creature. Some of the earliest texts also

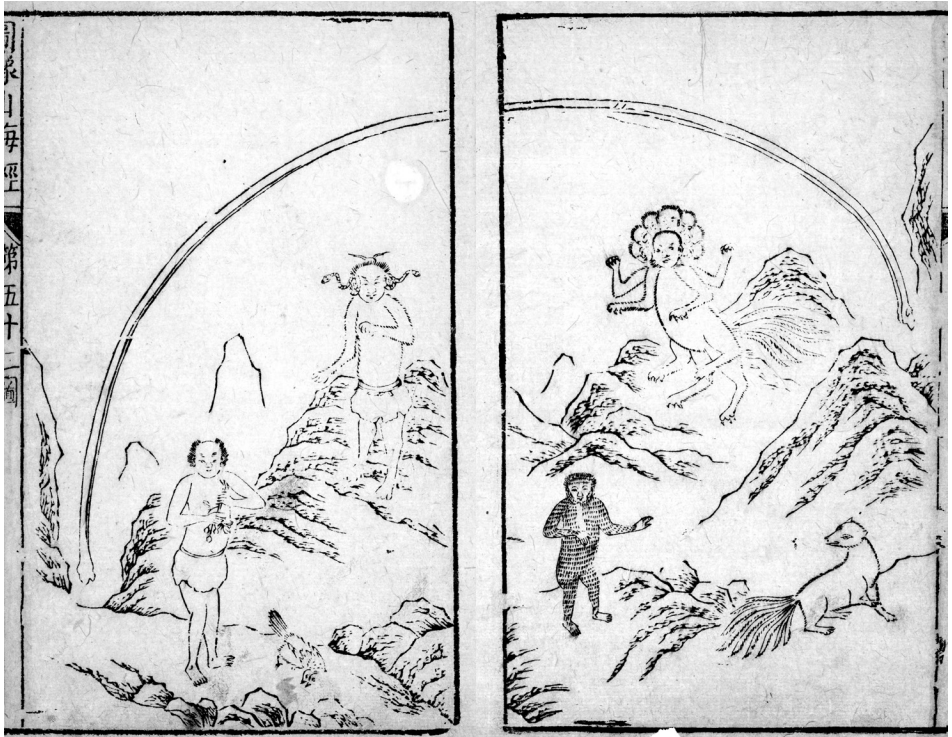


FIG. 14. The two-headed rainbow/dragon hong, from *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (Shanhai jing), illustrated by Jiang Yinghao. Ming Wanli (1572–1620) edition. Keio University Library.

discuss other kinds of rainbows (*di* and *ni*), which are classed lexicographically as being in the “bug” family and medically/phenomenologically as snake-like, dragon-like creatures.<sup>53</sup>

There was still debate about the animal nature of rainbows right up to the modern period. Although there were several discussions that focused on rainbows being made of a combination of sun and water in the Tang and Song period; just as often they implied or explicitly discussed rainbows as living things.<sup>54</sup> Shen Gua (1031–95) discusses the nature of rainbows in an inquiry into common knowledge.<sup>55</sup> He writes that it is generally known that rainbows dive into and drink from rivers, which he finds believable. He then recounts his own inquiry. On a diplomatic mission to the Liao, one day, after

rain stopped and the sky cleared, a rainbow descended into the mountain stream in front of his tent. Shen and his fellow emissaries went to examine it closely and saw that both of its heads were submerged in the stream. He sent colleagues to the other side of the stream to repeat the observation. Looking east, the rainbow was visible, but those on the other side of the bank, looking west into the setting sun, could see nothing. After a long while, the rainbow moved east and disappeared. The next day, after walking a while, they saw the rainbow again. Shen takes the movement of the rainbow—descending, moving, reappearing—and its two heads as evidence that the rainbow is indeed alive, although transparent. At the end of the account, Shen quotes Sun Yanxian as saying, “The rainbow is the shadow of the sun in the rain; when the sun shines on the rain, it appears.”<sup>56</sup> The rainbow animal was a being created by the interaction of sun and rain, in a generative process akin to previous writers’ descriptions of heaven giving birth to rainbows.

That a rainbow could be both an animal and a phenomenon did not trouble Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Zhu Xi classed rainbows with spirits, ghosts, and thunder as being both material and immaterial. In a conversation about Xie Shilong’s household having seen a ghost, Zhu writes, “What the Xies had seen was real, but they did not realize it was just a special type of rainbow.” A student, Bida, then asked, “Is a rainbow simply qi or does it have form and substance?” Zhu Xi replied, “being able to drink water they must have intestines and stomach; only when it disperses does it become nonexistent. It’s like thunder and spirits—these are similar things.”<sup>57</sup> That immaterial thunder can produce material objects (chapter 2), that spirits can appear, have physical bodies, and then disappear, that the world is constantly transforming, explains how some creatures, such as rainbows, can be born from sun and rain, have internal organs, be transparent, and then disappear.

Some remarks suggest that tolerance of multivalent phenomenological reality of rainbows and other such things was waning by the Ming.<sup>58</sup> You Yi (1614?–84?), a scholar influenced by Western learning, asks, “Are rainbows really a kind of creature [*chong*]? If so, how could such a huge creature appear or disappear suddenly? Supposing that it is only a natural phenomenon, why can it suck water or drink?”<sup>59</sup> But this comment is an aside, indicating suspicion but stopping short of rebuking Zhu Xi, the preeminent neo-Confucian (*daoxue*) master of the Southern Song (1126–1271), and the long tradition of

accepting that some creatures can be physical and intangible simultaneously.<sup>60</sup> Other Ming scholars were similarly ambivalent about the nature of rainbows. Few were willing to repudiate the millennia-old notion that rainbows were worm/dragon-like creatures that drank from rivers and streams, despite the evidence of their own eyes. Xie Zhaozhe discussed the history of rainbows in major texts and concluded that “although they have form, they do not have substance, yet they eat and drink, so this is quite curious [*ke qi*]. Today, in mountain valleys, rainbows drink [from] creeks and streams; people often encounter them, and they also drink from ponds. There are both male and female rainbows, and they can eat and drink, which is why the ancient form of the characters all used ‘*chong*’ 蟲 to indicate that they were animals.”<sup>61</sup>

The animal nature of rainbows seemed obvious based on their behavior. The anecdotes collected in *Taiping guangji* (Extensive Records of the Taiping [976–83] era) typify those found in florilegia before and after it, depicting *hong*, though especially *ni*, the second of a double rainbow, and white *hong* as often entering bedrooms, living in temples, and crashing banquets.<sup>62</sup> Like dragons, rainbows were also omens, and like dragons, the meaning of those omens was a topic of debate. Most often, they were considered baleful omens, even perverse or licentious omens.<sup>63</sup> Fang Yizhi (1611–71) mentions that “in ancient times, rainbows were thought to indicate licentious *qi*. Daoist adepts by the eastern sea dug into the ground at the location of a rainbow and found red worms that can be used as aphrodisiacs, also based on this principle.”<sup>64</sup> Their licentiousness must have reminded readers that rainbows were, or were like, dragons. Daoist ritual manuals include talismans to ward off rainbows, presumably guarding against the bad luck they were believed to augur, rather than the destructive power the animal was thought to have.

Rainbows had form but were insubstantial. They were made of water and drank water from rivers. As for animal and phenomena, they were born from the yang of the sun and the yin of rain. Yet like dragons, the nature of rainbows was numinous, mysterious, licentious, and scary—cause for trepidation.

There was more clarity about the meaning of *baihong*, “white rainbows” or possibly “transparent rainbows,” a decidedly ominous portent, often of assassination. “A white rainbow pierced [*guan*] the sun” is a phrase that occurs in Qin and Han texts and dynastic histories and other texts ever since.<sup>65</sup> White rainbows inevitably appear as evil omens in retellings of Jing

Ke trying to assassinate the King of Qin and Nie Zheng assassinating Han Gui in differing texts.<sup>66</sup> It is not clear what a “white rainbow” correlates to in modern meteorology, be it an aurora, solar halo, “fogbow,” or other phenomenon.<sup>67</sup> That they were evil omens, though, was rarely in doubt in premodern China. Wang Chong argued that human actions and intentions could not influence the machinations of heaven when he claimed that it was “not Jing Ke’s essence that made the white rainbow pierce the sun.”<sup>68</sup> This statement seems to have been a rebuke to the philosopher/politician Dong Zhongshu’s (179–104 BCE) assertion that the origin of anomalies and portents was malice and injustice on earth, which disturbed the delicate cosmological balance with heaven, not an argument about the nature of white rainbows and their connection to the attempted assassination of the king of Qin (who later became the first emperor of China).<sup>69</sup> White rainbows most frequently were recorded as “passing though” (*guan*) or possibly “encircling” the sun, but they also descended into cities and military camps, and wreaked chaos.<sup>70</sup> In the *Taiping yulan* (Imperial overview from the Taiping [xingguo] reign-period [976–83]), the first large encyclopedia of ancient China, white rainbows are omens of drought, chaos, and execution.<sup>71</sup> That rainbows and white rainbows portended unpleasantness would have been clear to a desultory reader from the way that *Taiping yulan* classified them in a chapter on “provoking calamity.” In the Ming histories, they are omens of the same, classed with baleful stars, just as they are in the second century BCE collection of philosophical treatises *Huainanzi*.<sup>72</sup>

Late-Ming encyclopedias follow each other, or some lost ur-text, in depicting white rainbows *piercing* the sun rather than encircling it. This suggests that white rainbows are denser than the sun and that the sun was quite low in the sky, appearing to be the same distance from the earth as a cloud and perhaps made of similar stuff. Encyclopedias are also consistent in saying that white rainbows are baleful omens, but consistent with their intended readership, the marginally literate and upwardly mobile, omens are represented as having less to do with the intrigues at court and more with omens of concern to regular people, such as earthquakes and plague.

Novels preserved these ancient notions about rainbows as baleful omens, especially for the court. For instance, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* begins with the fall of the Han dynasty and the omens that presaged it—

an earthquake, tidal waves, hens transformed into roosters, and a rainbow appearing in the chamber of the consorts: “All these evil portents, and more, appeared—too many to be dismissed as isolated signs. Emperor Ling called on his officials to explain these disasters and omens. A court counselor, Cai Yong, argued bluntly that the rainbow and the transformation of the hens were the result of interference in government by empresses and eunuchs.”<sup>73</sup> The *xiaoshuo* version of the Three Kingdoms story omits many other omens recorded in histories for the year 178.<sup>74</sup> The selections possibly were made based on their literary merits; the commentator Mao Zonggang remarks about the omens, “Eunuchs represent male turned into female. Eunuch interference in government represents female turned into male [like hens turning into roosters].” Double rainbows, believed to occur in male/female pairs (*hong* and *ni*), seem to serve as similar tropes.<sup>75</sup>

Like the popular belief that thunder issues from the ground, *Three Kingdoms* discusses white rainbows rising out of the ground and soaring up into the sky. On the eve of his invasion of the heartland, General Zhuge Ke noticed a white trail of vapor emanating from the ground, obscuring the road his armies were to take. An adviser, Jiang Yan said, “This qi is a white rainbow, and it signifies the loss of troops.” Zhuge Ke dismissed it, wanting to have Jiang Yan executed for speaking of ill omens and lowering the fighting spirit of the troops, but the next day, he noticed a white rainbow before the carriage, like a white ribbon reaching from the ground into the sky, an omen that troops would be lost, and he turned back.<sup>76</sup> The meaning of white rainbows, likely reflective of associations of the color white with death, was less ambiguous than that of rainbows generally, but ideas about their phenomenological natures were varied. Most who discussed them seemed to agree that colorful rainbows came down from the sky to touch the earth and white rainbows rose from the ground up to the sky. That a white rainbow could rise from the earth to pass through or pierce the sun points to the shallowness of the premodern sky. The sun, clouds, moon, and stars all were of approximately equal distance from earth.

Xie Zhaozhe (1567–1624) was skeptical of the animalistic aspects of rainbows, and he focused on their relationship to sun and water. He wrote that the sun is the essence of yang and thunder, lightning, and rainbows all belong to the *yang* category. The moon is the essence of yin, and clouds

travel between yin and yang, since they are all born in the earth and rise to the sky.<sup>77</sup>

If the belief was widespread that clouds emanated from the earth, as Xie Zhaozhe and Li Shizhen state, then it was not a stretch to think of white rainbows and clouds in all five colors as coming out of the earth and ascending into the sky as well.<sup>78</sup> The evolution of *hong* toward clouds and away from animals still carried an association with dragons and with water though. An example of this is the entry on earthworms (*qiuyin*) in the *Systematic Compendium*: “The experts in the arts of longevity claim that earthworms can make clouds rise, and that they know whether the skies are covered or clear. Hence, they were given names such as earth dragon *tulong*.”<sup>79</sup>

In the last days of the eighteenth century, Ji Yun was still struggling to grasp the nature of rainbows and what they meant for the shape of the sky:

It is common knowledge [*shiyán*] that when a rainbow appears, it will stop raining, but it is the opposite. It is when it stops raining that a rainbow appears. When the clouds break and the sun shines, the light reflects and refracts on the other side of the clouds. The shape of the sky is perfectly round, and on top [it is] covered like [a person’s head wearing] a bamboo rain hat. . . . [The rainbow’s] form droops down according to the shape of the sky. The ends curve like a bow. . . . [rainbows] are layer upon layer of clouds and qi, appearing to have clear borders and limits. [They are] piles, layer upon layer, of green and red color, and not physical objects like a belt extending halfway across the sky. As for coming down to streams to drink water or having heads that look like those of donkeys (see Zhu Xi’s *yulei*), or seducing women (see *Taiping Guangji*), [those things] are actually demon qi that look similar to a rainbow or some other demon thing that can change its shape into a rainbow.<sup>80</sup>

Ji Yun disambiguates between rainbows and their animalistic doppelgangers, making clear that rainbows are meteorological phenomena. His world had not entirely shed its magical aspects, though. It was still one in which demons could take the shape of rainbows and one in which textual authority was not easily contradicted. The sky held sun, moon, stars, and clouds, all contained

within an upper limit, and rainbows, like dragons and rain, were a key to understanding their relationships and resonances.

## Water Methods, Water Magic

Between heaven and earth was humanity, for whom water was essential, not just for life but to restore health. Some apotropaic remedies recorded in the Berlin medical manuscripts direct the patient to burn a talisman and then eat the ashes with particular kinds of water. Others specify writing the talisman directly on water and drinking it.<sup>81</sup> A prescription to be applied in cases of difficult birth recommends taking hair from the head of the woman and boiling it in river water, which would then help her baby pass through the birth canal as easily as a river flows.<sup>82</sup>

One mysterious entry in multiple medical manuscripts is “Hua Tuo xian-sheng shuifa” (Mr. Hua Tuo’s water method).<sup>83</sup> This was recorded in the last decades of the nineteenth century but was likely much older. It is not entirely clear what the method (or magic) was exactly, but it was some kind of apotropaic healing that drew on daily-life taboos, the combination of medicine with talismans and spells, and the apotheosis of an ancient healer to the status of god-like figure.<sup>84</sup> Hua Tuo morphed into something mythological, beginning with his biographies in *History of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo zhi) and *Dynastic History of the Later Han* (Hou Hanshu), where he is depicted as an immortal, expert in moxabustion, acupuncture, and notably, surgery. They record that Hua Tuo could recognize immediately if a sickness was concentrated internally where acupuncture needles and medicines could not reach, and in such cases, he recommend surgery. He would have patients drink a solution of a drug called *mafeisan*, whereupon they would immediately become as though dead from intoxication and completely insensate.<sup>85</sup> Then he could make an incision and remove the diseased tissues. If the disease were in the intestines, he would sever them and wash them in water, after which he would replace them, stitch the abdomen together, and rub on an ointment. After a period of about four or five days, there would be no more pain. The patient would awaken, and within a month, he would return to normal.<sup>86</sup> The Song dynasty scholar Ye Mengde (1077–1148) criticized these biographical accounts of Hua Tuo as myth. His essay “Physicians Cannot Raise the Dead”

repeated the descriptions of Hua Tuo using anesthesia to perform internal surgery, and reasoned:

Qi enlivens the physical form. . . . Once the abdomen, back, intestines, or stomach have been cut open and dissected, how can they again be infused with vital breath? Being in such a condition, how could they be brought back to life again? If Hua Tuo could do this, then whoever was subjected to the punishment of dismemberment could be brought back to life again and there would no longer be any reason for carrying out royal punishments [involving physical mutilation].<sup>87</sup>

This criticism did not seem to tarnish Hua Tuo's reputation for miraculous cures, however. His abilities were intertwined with recognizing and curing worm disorders, in which patients suffered from feelings of vexation and oppression and were prescribed a decoction. Worms could also be drawn out of the body with other enticements. Hua Tuo would hang such worms from his medical cart. The healing practices for which Hua Tuo was most famous, moxa and acupuncture, and especially surgery and worm disorders, existed outside of mainstream medicine's focus on pulses, prescriptions, and systematic correspondences.<sup>88</sup> It is not surprising that certain practices, prescriptions, and titles of medical texts invoke Hua Tuo, especially if they were products in the marketplace trading on Hua Tuo's reputation as a "divine physician," medical god, or Daoist immortal. He was invoked as an honorific given to talented doctors—"Hua Tuo reincarnated." A set of acupuncture points along the spine is named after him, and one Berlin medical manuscript that focuses mostly on bone setting and traumatology takes as its title *Secret Transmission from the Immortal Teacher Hua Tuo* (Hua Tuo xianshi michuan).<sup>89</sup>

Hua Tuo's water method is unusual. In printed apotropaic texts it is common to see one talisman accompanied by one written invocation, and the text of the spell is usually quite simple.<sup>90</sup> It may be one or two mnemonic rhymes written in seven-character verse. The incantation for Hua Tuo's water magic, found in a late nineteenth-century medical manuscript titled *The Five Stars Consulted Jointly* (Wuxing hecan) is quite long and melds claims from history

and fiction, inventing new Hua Tuo episodes (or recording episodes now lost to us), and associating his surgical talent with water:<sup>91</sup>

I address this request to old Mr. Hua Tuo.

The military commander at the time of the Three Kingdoms, You took the knife and set the bone, that is for sure.

Liu Bei, Guan ye [sic], and Zhang Fei<sup>92</sup>

I ask to place this bowl of water in front of the oven.

To raise this dead [person] and return him to life, only he [can do so]. In the camps of the Three Kingdoms, he saved the sacred ruler.

To this very day, in the world of mortals help all who live! Use your obvious power and authority to pacify the world.

Employ iron scalpel and silver needle to save the life of the people.

These statements refer to popular tales, specifically *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* stories, adding to Hua Tuo's miraculous powers in a manner similar to Zhuge Liang's apotheosis based on his achievements in entertainment literature rather than histories (chapter 1). The use of water in this and other incantations calling on Hua Tuo may simply reflect the status of those to whom it appealed—it was cheap and available. It may be related to surgery and cleaning the wound or washing away wrongs and achieving justice for the dead; it may be its physical properties and attendant metaphors life-giving, and potentially life-restoring; or it may be the association of water control with control of bodily fluids that brought the fictionalized and deified Hua Tuo together with water in these apotropaic healing methods.

The author of this medical manuscript does not mention rhetorical strategies for deceiving patients and selling healing services, as some do, and thus seems to have believed that the water method was efficacious. Zhao Xue-min, decidedly, did not. Zhao, author of *Supplementing the Systematic Materia Medica*, also wrote *Strings of Refined Therapies*, the first book published concerning the therapeutic skills of itinerant physicians. Zhao's informant was a relative, Zhao Boyun, whose own medical manuscript testified to the secret transmission of healers' knowledge. Zhao selected the contents he thought might not immediately draw harsh criticism by regular physicians

and excised what he thought controversial, spurious, or intentionally deceptive.<sup>93</sup> Zhao writes, “Much of what is said in this [manuscript] is not found in the classics. It may lead later people to make a profit with illegal practices and had to be erased.” Among these were water methods: “Of the secret methods, none is more widespread than the ‘water method.’ Next is the ‘invocation of the origin.’<sup>94</sup> . . . All that bordered on shamanism and wizardry was discarded without exception.”<sup>95</sup> It is unknown if the water methods Zhao excised and excoriated were like those that invoke Hua Tuo’s name. Water methods, like water itself, were liminal, crossing between boundaries and disciplines, having tangible and figurative aspects, seen and unseen.

In the Qing, perhaps due to expanding imperial borders, some water methods were regarded as exotic, foreign, or mysterious. There was Taixi’s (“Far West”) water methods, hydrology using Western technology of the late Ming, aptly given names like “dragon’s tail” for Archimedes’s screw, a hydraulic device for moving water uphill, since dragons were thought to draw water from rivers and lakes up into the sky, as the screw could make water flow uphill. Water methods also included distillation techniques to make medicines and alcohol.<sup>96</sup> Painters wrote about “water methods” for viewing and representing water in paint from the perspective of foreigners.<sup>97</sup> Feng shui masters had secret water methods of their own, detailed in manuals such as *Geographical Assistant to the Mysterious Mechanism: Collection of the Immortal Woman* (Dili canzan xuanji xianpo ji). There were water methods to divine the future and determine auspicious days found in books published in the fourteenth century by Dong Dezhang and used into the twentieth century.

*Journey to the West* records water methods that appear more fully magical but are also found in the manuscripts of practicing healers. A tricky dragon uses the “forcing water method” (*bishuifa*) or to pour wine half an inch higher than the top of the cup, and the same trick is recorded in the medical manuscripts that record making invisible writing appear.<sup>98</sup> *Journey to the West* seems to reflect the real magic and argot of hucksters in the marketplace as often as it invents them.<sup>99</sup> Sun Wukong later employs a water method with this same name to open up a pathway for himself in the Eastern Ocean to visit the dragon king and request rain.<sup>100</sup> Controlling water, though one of the oldest technical endeavors in China, became even more magical and diffuse in the vernacular literature and common knowledge of the Ming and Qing. Perhaps it was the diffusion

of water methods in popular literature that made them seem magical through an imperfect trickling-down of information from court to interested readers. If the dissemination of information about water methods was decentralized, as was much information about the natural world, or if it lacked detail, it may have provided lacunae for the imagination to fill.

Zhao Xuemin excised water methods from one book while expounding on twenty-two new kinds of water and twenty kinds of dew unknown to the *Bencao gangmu*. Some of these were newly discovered; some introduced by Westerners. Zhao writes that he does not know much about the Western waters, as in the case of “knife wound water,” which “comes from across the Western Ocean.”<sup>101</sup> I don’t know what kind of things it is composed of, but it is brought from other countries by boat. They have it in Guangdong and Macao.”<sup>102</sup> “Westerners also use a method to make strong water” (*Xiren zao qiangshui zhi fa*), which can bore through rock and metal and that only glass can hold. Strong water (presumably acid of some kind) was useful for etching copper and was not to be ingested, though it was also good for removing carbuncles and necrotic flesh (*e’rou*). The properties, origins, and methods of water were becoming more diverse.

The most common water methods mentioned in materia medica overlap with those in the Daoist canon—methods for liquifying solids. The *Systematic Compendium* makes frequent reference to those texts—like the *Huinanzi* and *Thirty-Six Water Methods* (*Sanshiliu shuifa*)—for liquifying gold and jade so they can more easily be used in medical prescriptions.<sup>103</sup> Li often quotes the Northern Song Daoist Ma Zhi, who repeatedly discusses the “water” produced as a side-effect of liquifying precious solids, particularly jade, as something good for prolonging life.<sup>104</sup> Certain waters could also be used to produce valuable metals.<sup>105</sup> These waters and water methods were drugs and techniques for making medical drugs, though they were believed to be less potent than the naturally occurring liquid versions of precious minerals and metals. Water methods in *Supplement to the Systematic Compendium* frequently also are ways to “waterify” cinnabar (*dansha shuifa*, turn cinnabar into mercury) or gold. These methods produce medicinal “water” from an otherwise inedible solid, and do so without using water as an ingredient, suggesting that it is not just liquifying a solid, but releasing the healing water within.<sup>106</sup>

Stories such as “Plague Ghost” (Wengui; literally, “Warmth-epidemic ghost”) in Yuan Mei’s *What the Master Did Not Discuss* (Zibuyu) suggest that water methods were a common way of making pills. In 1756, a man discovers a ghost in his home because it has a terrible, fishy smell. The ghost had trapped itself in an urn, hiding from punishment by thunder, and asks to be released. The man engages it and discovers that the ghost has been causing the plague (*dawen*) raging in Suzhou. The ghost gives the man the recipe for medicine to treat people with the plague in exchange for its release. The man deceives the ghost and throws the urn into Tai Lake. At the end of the story, the reader is told the details of that prescription: “Five ounces of thunder pills [*leiwan*], thirty pieces of ‘flying gold,’ a tenth of an ounce of cinnabar [*zhusha*], one ounce of alum [*mingfan*], and five ounces of rhubarb [*dahuang*]. Using the water method, make pills. A dose is four-tenths of an ounce.”<sup>107</sup> The prescription was given to Zhao Wenshan, the prefect of Suzhou, and indeed, the patients all survived.<sup>108</sup> The water method here must allude to making mercury (lit: “watery silver” *shuiyin*) out of cinnabar and then using it to create pills with other powders. It required no explanation in the story, which suggests it must have been common knowledge.

Yuan Mei repeated a contemporary prescription from *Supplement to Systematic Compendium* (but not the parent text) that reflected the practices of itinerant healers and practical Daoist alchemy. The prescription, given not just by a ghost but by the one who had caused the epidemic, was real. Zhao Xue-min claims that water from cinnabar can “prolong life, kill ‘essence demons,’ repel evil ghosts, nurture vitality, and calm the *hun* and *po* souls.” Among the many uses of cinnabar, expelling epidemics is one. The origin story of this medicine may seem dubious to moderns, but it holds to a traditional logic—that ghosts know what is dangerous to them. If the water method can unleash a kind of water that can repel ghosts and kill demons, they would likely know it. Like many anomalous accounts, this one is also given an additional layer of veracity by citing real historical officials who attest to the effectiveness of the medicine and the logic of its origins and mechanisms. The great epidemic of 1756 that ravaged the Jiangnan (Lower Yangzi) region (and those of 1748 and 1786) would have been fresh in Yuan Mei’s memory and in the memories of his readers.<sup>109</sup> Suzhou was the center for the study of epidemics of “warm

disease” (*wenbing*) in the late eighteenth century, with many texts devoted to its discussion and treatment.<sup>110</sup>

Definitions and perceptions of water were malleable, as was its behavior. Water was transformation—all things and nothing. But it also materialized intangibles—space and time. Water methods repelled demons, moved water uphill, cured illness, and liquified stone. Water connected the world of demons and the world of technology, the magical and the mundane. It was everywhere but also precious, an object of connoisseurship, something to be cherished. Water was also an illusion, and water methods were widespread tricks to deceive and delude ordinary people.

The proliferation of printed texts, along with and intersecting with an already flourishing manuscript culture, increasingly presented water to curious readers as a site of contestation. The primary questions were not about what water was but how to obtain, store, and use it. Different waters, either different within a tradition like medicine or across traditions, reflect particular kinds of inquiries. Water’s properties divulged its origins, where and when it came from, and these properties defined its uses. How water was used said much about the user, and in this way, classifying water said more about those classifying it than it did about water’s material reality. Similarly, inquiries into water show ways in which different modes of inquiry intersected, whether cultural, medical, demonological, divinatory, artistic, technological, or hydrological. Water reflected more about the early modern world, its people and practices, than it revealed about itself.

# Unseen Practices

Ancient people, in their foolishness, created *gu* poison for wealth. They would take a hundred bugs and place them in a jar. After a year, they would open it. Inevitably, one insect would have devoured all the others. This was called “*gu*.”

It could become invisible like ghosts and spirits, bringing misfortune to people, yet it was still merely an insect demon. When it bit people to death, it might emerge from various orifices of the body. The people would then catch it and dry it in the sun. Those suffering from *gu* would burn it to ashes and consume them, as it was a matter of like subduing like. It is also said that any *gu* insect can treat *gu*. Knowing the name of the *gu* suffices to cure it. For example, snake *gu* can be treated with centipede *gu*, centipede *gu* with frog *gu*, and frog *gu* with snake *gu*, as they subdue each other and can thus be treated.

—*Systematic Compendium*

Understanding why someone was ill was tantamount to trying to read the unseen—the proximal, distal, and ultimate forces of life—the immediate surroundings, the supernatural world, and the retributory debts from previous lives or ancestors. Elite medicine usually relied on the paradigm of systematic correspondence (of elements and organs, such as between fire and the liver) to understand bodily imbalance or dysfunction. Vernacular medicine, on the other hand, entertained broader views in its understanding of the relationship between the cosmos and the body. Vernacular knowledge

sometimes coincided with or encompassed elite knowledge, but at times, the two remained distinct.

Two practices that were commonly discussed in popular entertainment and didactic texts—because they were fearsome, secret, and morally complex—were the use of *gudu* 蠱毒 (*gu* poison / demonological poison) and the practice of *gegu* 割股 (cutting the flesh [to make medicine]). While some versions of these may have been practiced, they were likely not as widespread as discussions about them made it seem. The nature of these practices relied on secrecy to achieve potency, and so there would have been few firsthand accounts of practitioners. Most accounts were anecdotes, case histories, and rumors. From a modern scientific perspective, it seems as if these practices, at least in their more extreme forms, must have been entirely imaginary. Yet to read accounts of how these practices were conceived, discussed, and reframed over hundreds of years is to glimpse how knowing itself evolved and who laid claim to the purview of that knowledge.

## *Gu* Poisoning, or the Scholar and the Hedgehog

The belief that bugs and demons played a decisive role in the generation of disease was an accepted conceptual basis of elite health care prior to the second century BCE. After that period, the medicine of systematic correspondences rose to prominence, and bugs were largely neglected as pathological agents by the sorts of elite medical texts collected in the eighteenth-century Complete Library of the Four Treasuries (*Siku Quanshu*). When modern Western bacteriology entered China in the late nineteenth century, *chong* made a comeback as a key factor in disease.<sup>1</sup> However, the belief that bugs and demons played an important role in the creation and transmission of disease persisted all along, as evidenced by their role in formularies, recipes, manuscripts, and practical medical texts of the Ming and Qing dynasties that were neither elite nor fringe.<sup>2</sup> *Gudu*, a kind of demonological bug poison, appeared almost exclusively in particular kinds of medical literature—practical texts such as pharmacopeia and *materia medica*—while it disappeared almost entirely from theoretical discussions of medicine for a millennium and a half, since the establishment of an elite scholarly medical tradition beginning perhaps with *Huang Di's Inner Classic* of the second century CE. Discussions of

*gu* survived outside of elite discourse, in practical texts and how-to guides, in stories and cases.

How to create *gu* or *gu* poison and how to treat it was clear enough—the *Systematic Compendium* lists hundreds of medicines that purge, treat, cure, expel or kill *gu*. But its mechanisms, how the bug related to the demon, was more of a mystery. *Gu* could refer to a disease not necessarily produced by witchcraft, to witchcraft not necessarily resulting in disease, and to states of befuddlement associated with *gu* disease and witchcraft but not necessarily caused by either.<sup>3</sup> Because it was so fearsome, complex, strange, exotic, and poorly defined, it begged for classification and delineation.

The basic concept is as follows. A person fills a container with various poisonous *chong*—insects, worms, centipedes, and snakes—and then buries the container (some accounts specify that one must bury the container on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, and some specify that it must remain buried for one hundred days). The creatures in the container sting, bite, and devour one another during this period, eventually leaving only one, which has absorbed the combined poisonousness of all the others. This creature is a *gu*. The process to create a *gu* is conveyed in the word's etymology—the Chinese character *gu* 蠱 has “insects” (*chong* 蟲) upon a “dish” (*min* 皿). The creator of *gu* then uses it (or its poisonous seed / excrement / venom) and must, within a given period (usually one day), administer it to their victim by secretly placing it in their food or drink. As soon as the victim has swallowed the *gu* poison, it develops into worms (or bugs) that resemble their parents and then gnaw on the viscera of the victim, producing pain, a swollen abdomen, bloody discharge from mouth or anus, emaciation, and ultimately death. The proof of *gu* poisoning is visible following the demise of the victim, when worms crawl out from the body. These worms, “similar to corpse worms,” were believed to live inside people and report their sins to heaven.<sup>4</sup> The reason a villain would create *gu* and go to the trouble and legal peril of killing someone with it involves the demon/spirit that is attached to or attendant upon the worm/bug. The mystical properties of *gu* reward its creator with the property of the victim. This is why Li Shizhen refers to the “stupid, selfish” people who seek wealth by creating *gu*. Thus, *gu* was tied to envy and jealousy, greed and gold.

One of the most fundamental paradigms in early medicine, literature, and life is that of sympathetic action, the notion that “like cures like” (*leizhiyi*).

In Chinese medicine, there is a strong trend of recording treatments that are meaningfully correlated to the illness, sharing certain linguistic properties (the teeth of the six domestic animals serve to cure the six kinds of epilepsy with animal names) or having literary or figurative significance (peach blossoms kill demons that have infected the body, because arrow shafts were made of peach wood and killed things outside of the body).<sup>5</sup> This is true also for several suggested treatments for *gu* poison where the demonic bug that causes destruction, if captured, killed, burned, and imbibed, will cure that harm.

*Gu* poison was widely discussed in the medical literature of the first and second millennia as well as in legal codes. Why it was so commonly discussed is not clear, but it was believed to be extremely potent and apparently morally worse than other methods of killing, even with other kinds of poison or other kinds of witchcraft. Medical literature provided treatments and preventative strategies, but *gu* deserves some consideration because it held doctors and patients in thrall for centuries as one of the most nefarious forces in society. The idea of *gu* encapsulated several different fears about human behavior, about the unseen natural world, about death, sex, familial relations, envy, and tempting fate.

Despite the many medicinal treatments to cure *gu*, the healing practice that made *gu* poison so fearful was to pass it along to someone else.<sup>6</sup> This is similar to the notion of “selling the sickness”—placing *gu* in a basket of riches and leaving it by the roadside, believing that some innocent passerby will contract the *gu* and thereby cure the perpetrator.<sup>7</sup> Writer Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967) discussed the prevalence of this belief even in 1937, saying that an ill person would write the name of his sickness on a piece of paper and leave it out for someone else to find. He who reads the name of the illness then falls ill with it, and the author is thereby cured. Often, the contagious words had to be left in a basket with food or money to entice passersby into reading them.<sup>8</sup> Zhou blames this practice on the common knowledge circulated by entertainment literature: “As for anomalous accounts and short stories, although they may be the works of the ancients or be very interesting and cherished by the public, they do not accord with reality. In the interest of truth, they should be corrected.”<sup>9</sup> Complaining that pharmacologists did not follow modern science but still relied on the “words of a novelist from over a hundred years ago,” Zhou writes, “despite the development of general

education in the past twenty years, common knowledge, tastes, and interests [*changshi yu quwei*] seem not to have improved, as the stain of old habits runs deep.”<sup>10</sup> Not all anomalous accounts were so alive in the public imagination, though. What was it about this mechanism that appealed to common sense? Was this a rudimentary understanding of the economy, in which one can only become wealthy by robbing his neighbor, applied to the body? Was fear of *gu* like a fear of the “evil eye,” according to which being too fortunate invited disaster?<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it was an awareness that one has “overloaded their luck,” reflecting the notion that when something reaches the extreme, it becomes its opposite.

Fears of *gu* combined fears of witchcraft and bugs. Bugs suffused the world of humans, and medical and religious traditions made it clear that bugs were present in the human body from birth. “Corpse worms,” also known as the “three corpses,” were discussed at length in Daoist texts and were normalized by medical ones. They were a dark force born at the same time as the rest of the body: “Inside the human body there are from the beginning all the three corpses. They come to life together with man, but they are most malicious. They communicate with demons and the numinous, and they regularly invite evil [*qi*] from outside, thereby causing human suffering.”<sup>12</sup> It was also believed that corpse worms were the root cause of desire for sex, delicious food, and luxury goods.<sup>13</sup> Corpse worms had a mundane aspect, weakening the body so that malignant *qi* could enter, and a demonic aspect, leaving the body to report the host’s misdeeds to heaven, thereby inviting retribution. Corpse worms used both aspects to turn the living into a corpse.

The idea of *gu* is ancient, but it evolved and persisted.<sup>14</sup> Healers’ manuscripts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries collected treatments for *gu* poison and related *gu* illnesses. It is evident from them that *gu* was evolving in the minds of healers from the arch-legendary demon bug into a secular malady, such as “*gu* swelling,” and “*gu* distension.” In one manuscript, *gu* became mosquitos. Others contain treatments, though not descriptions, of “false *gu* poisoning.” Yet others include treatments for “water *gu*” or “*qi gu*,” suggesting that it had evolved into something waterborne or airborne, perhaps even contagion itself. One manuscript from the south includes tests to diagnose *gu* poisoning that are found in other medical texts, such as the *Systematic Compendium*: “Have the patient spit into clean water. If the

saliva floats on the water, then it is not *gu* poisoning; if it sinks, then it is *gu*.<sup>15</sup> Another manuscript is more concerned with protecting travelers who enter a home that is either afflicted with *gu* or that raises *gu*.<sup>16</sup> In this case, the entire house was believed to be infectious, but a simple medicine, pills made of dried water chestnuts, prevents contracting it.<sup>17</sup>

Materia medica often prescribe mundane treatments for *gu* poison. Many involve drugs that induce vomiting or diarrhea, presumably to evacuate the poison or worms. Other remedies for *gudu* rely on sympathetic correlation—dragon's teeth, earthworms, centipedes, alligator meat, snakeskin, boa constrictor bile, pit viper meat, and so on all treat *gu* poison, because they share figurative or categorical properties with *gu*. Since *gu* is made up of worms, snakes, and bugs, other bugs or creatures that are normally thought to eat bugs will combat them. Centipedes, for instance, were thought to consume worms, so when ground and taken with wine, they could treat *gu*. These more material treatments are said to “disperse,” “treat,” “cure,” or “expel” *gu* poison. Other treatments focus on the demonological ramifications of *gu*, and these prescriptions are said to “kill” it.

The *gu* demon rewarded the person who created it by giving him the possessions of the deceased victim whom he poisoned. If the person who created the *gu* is unable to find his intended victim that day, he must find someone else to poison, or he himself will be killed by the *gu* spirit/demon. Hence there are records of people poisoning their own relatives if no other victim could be found on the day the *gu* was produced. The only way to rid himself of his duty to the *gu* demon was to gather valuables such as gold and silver, place them and the *gu* worm in a basket, and leave the basket by the side of the road. The person who finds the treasure and brings it home inherits the burden of the *gu*, and the cycle continues. Related afflictions, such as “gold silkworm” (*jincan*), are treated in a similar manner. Li Shizhen writes of them that “according to recent research,” southerners raise golden silkworms and put their excrement into beverages and food to poison people. One suggestion was to stir food with bronze chopsticks before eating, and if the chopsticks turned black, it indicated the presence of poison.<sup>18</sup> People poisoned by golden silkworm inevitably die, and the worms then give the victim's wealth to their creators. Golden silkworms cannot be destroyed but only gotten rid of by taking twice the amount of ill-gotten wealth and placing it in a basket

on the roadside along with the golden silkworm. If someone else happens to pick it up, the golden silkworm will follow him. This, Li says, is called “marrying the golden silkworm.” If one does not dispose of golden silkworms this way, they will enter their host’s abdomen and destroy their teeth, intestines, and stomach.<sup>19</sup> Amassing wealth in a subsistence economy was dangerous since the only way to do so was to steal from your neighbors, but the circulation of wealth was also dangerous, since there were few ways to make easy money without strings, or golden silkworms, attached.

Another vision of creating wealth using these demonic worms involves enslaving victims. Some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts claim that the *hun*-soul of the victim killed by *gu* becomes subjugated to the villain and must serve him, even in death: “The soul is sent to [the perpetrator’s] household to serve as a laborer. . . . The more people it kills, the more spiritually potent the *gu* becomes, making the household increasingly wealthy.”<sup>20</sup> Other accounts explain this villainous subjugation by *gu* as a kind of soul-stealing while the victim is alive: “In my native Fujian, there is *gu* poison. If someone is affected by it, they are made to work at night, with their souls being summoned in dreams. When they wake, they find themselves exhausted and drenched in sweat. Within a few months, they die from fatigue and disease.”<sup>21</sup> Whether it steals the victim’s wealth after he dies from subjugation or the *gu* master profits from his victim’s labor, this conception of *gu* is closer to witchcraft than poison, and closer to fears of soul-stealing in the eighteenth century and the literal witch hunt for *gu* practitioners in the Han dynasty, almost two millennia before.<sup>22</sup>

Li Shizhen investigates an account of an official in Fuqing who was accused of possessing golden silkworm poison. The suggestion was made to send two hedgehogs into his house, where they indeed found and killed “it” in a crevice in the wall behind his bed. Given that golden silkworms are very poisonous, “as if they were demon spirits,” Li asks rhetorically, “How can it be that hedgehogs are able to check them?”<sup>23</sup> By way of answer, he makes a logical analogue: “Centipedes can control dragons, and slugs can control centipedes. Why should this be related to size and intelligence? Whether creatures fear each other is determined by heaven.”<sup>24</sup> At ease with cataloguing the *kind* of mechanism, Li cites another story about a poor scholar from Chizhou named Zou Lang. Venturing outside one day, Zou found a small

basket filled with silver utensils. Bringing it inside, he suddenly felt a silkworm wriggling on his thigh. It was golden and looked rotten. He brushed it off, but it returned to the same spot. He stepped on it. He hacked at it with a knife. He threw it into the fire and tried to drown it in water. But every time, it returned exactly as before. A friend explained to him that this was a golden silkworm and told him what it meant. Zou said that he could not bear to pass it on to another family, and thereupon he swallowed it. His family thought that he would certainly die. However, he felt no *pai*, and unexpectedly lived a long life. Li asks, "Could it be that in view of such extraordinary honesty, even demons are unable to overcome righteousness? . . . The destruction caused by golden silkworm *gu* is extreme. Hence, I have recorded these two cases. In the first it is obvious that *gu* fear hedgehogs. In the other, utmost honesty overcomes evil."<sup>25</sup> Li cites this latter story from *Records Taken during Leisure Time at the Prefect's Office* (*Mufu yanxian lu*), a Northern Song collection of brush notes, although he abridges it, cutting out much of the suspense and characterization of the original account. In his hands the story illustrates a simple moral: virtue cures treachery.<sup>26</sup>

*Gu* was many fears rolled into one thing; it was a bug, a poison, and a way to steal one's wealth or soul. The meaning of *gu* poison seems to have been its relationship to ill-gotten wealth or to envy more generally. To guard against being poisoned generally, one had to be wary of eating outside of the home and be suspicious of strangers. But one also had to be upright, wary of lavish gifts and windfalls.

Suspicion of innkeepers seems to have been particularly intense, since they had regular contact with strangers, especially those from border regions or the miasmatic south.<sup>27</sup> Inn keepers "were continually suspected of being in league with a *gu* specter," and one way of verifying this nefarious alliance had to do with dirt. Paradoxically, it was thought that a house with *gu* would be suspiciously clean, so visitors to an inn or similar establishment should clean their shoes on an inner wall or spit on the floor. If the dirt produced in this manner disappeared immediately, it would be wise to lodge elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> These notions were still circulating as late as 1923:

Families that raise *gu*, regardless of dwelling size, keep their rooms meticulously clean. All chores are done by the *gu* as their servants.

Inns with *gu* often make guests disappear. Those who lodge overnight vanish without a trace, their belongings and money taken as the *gu* master's. Not even a corpse or trace of remains can be found, as the *gu* have completely devoured them. Travelers who wish to test if an inn has *gu* can enter a room and deliberately scatter their belongings about before locking the door and waiting outside. If the room is tidy again without any staff entering, that inn raises *gu*. One can then leave openly without paying, and that inn will not further harm you.<sup>29</sup>

The premodern world was a dusty, muddy, buggy place, and any home or inn that was spotless must have naturally seemed odd. Suspicion of overly clean places must have been tantamount to suspicion of wealthy establishments or families. But travel and travelers were cause for concern too. Many of the illnesses encountered in texts, be they literary, medical, or miscellaneous, are associated with travel, or with travelers, reflecting historical conflicts between the expanding empire and the non-Han people who suffered because of it. The cultural divide between people of conquered territories and their conquerors and the consequent suspicion of retaliation were real in the minds of authors. Chinese children were the preferred victims of *gu* poisoning by members of non-Chinese tribes, according to European accounts: “The Miao women carry pears in cloth bags, selling them to children. Many children are poisoned by *gu* in this way.”<sup>30</sup> Reports about *gu* poisoning of Chinese administrative officials also reflect the suspicion of reprisal by those living under minority rule.<sup>31</sup> *Gu* and golden silkworms were associated with amassing wealth, travelling merchants, and the uncivilized practices of border regions—some of the primary fears of poor Confucian scholars, like Zou Lang, the protagonist of the story mentioned above.

Some argue that *gu* played a foundational part in establishing fervent belief in Confucian values at court, and not merely state ideology.<sup>32</sup> The famous phrase “the witchcraft scandal” (*wugu zhi huo*) refers to an attempted coup d'état against Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty in 91 BCE and subsequent persecutions of suspected perpetrators. *Wugu*, the art of directing malevolent spirits to harm people, is mentioned in the dynastic histories alongside shamanic curses (*zhuzu*) and burying dolls representing the intended victims

(*maiouren*).<sup>33</sup> The histories are not clear about the specifics of *wugu* practice and exactly what happened in the *wugu* witchcraft scandal.<sup>34</sup> They record that Emperor Wu closed the gates of Chang'an for days to search for evil people. A prisoner then accused Gongsun Jingsheng, son of Chancellor Gongsun He, of having illicit sexual relations with Princess Yangshi, a daughter of the emperor. Jingsheng was also accused of *wugu*, offering sacrifices to evil spirits, placing curses on the emperor, and burying human images along the road the emperor traveled. Thereupon, the emperor ordered a sweeping investigation, which culminated in the deaths of the Gongsun father and son, princesses, the empress, and the heir apparent.<sup>35</sup>

Close to death and paranoid of betrayal by his most trusted advisers, Emperor Wu ordered the execution of hundreds of the hereditary elite, many of whom were members of his own extended royal family.<sup>36</sup> Rumors of *wugu* and treason thus disrupted the imperial succession and wiped out established families who had dominated court since the beginning of the Western Han dynasty. The resulting power vacuum was filled by men from obscure backgrounds, including a group of officials identified with a commitment to the Confucian classics.<sup>37</sup> While *History of the Former Han* does not specify what, exactly, it means by *gu*, it is clearly something tied up with demons or black magic, an effigy buried along the road, a weapon of the envious or vengeful, something feared by a suspicious emperor, something that can result in the death of your own family members, and something punished with great severity.

While historians may debate the degree to which the “calamity of *wugu*” actually altered the course of Han dynasty politics and even of Confucian values in China, the dramatic story, with which *wugu* is virtually synonymous, and its outcome, rely on essentially the same logic as the story of Zou Lang eating the golden silkworm: the treachery, malevolence, and sedition encapsulated by *wugu* is counteracted with Confucian virtue.

The fear of *gu*—a combination of premeditated murder, heterodox practice, treason, and bugs—endured for centuries. Legal codes and cases punished those who practiced *gu* through the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup> The Ming and Qing dynasty legal codes list particularly harsh punishments for those who “make or keep” *gu* poison.<sup>39</sup> Both codes list the Ten Great Wrongs (Shi E) before going on to discuss the hundreds of other articles on transgressions

and punishments. Most of the great wrongs relate to crimes against the crown or one's own family. The fifth of the Ten Great Wrongs is called "depravity" or "acts not in accordance with the Way" (*bu Dao*) and refers to killing three people of the same family, dismembering or mutilating someone (see the next chapter), making or keeping *gu* poison, or practicing sorcery. Criminals convicted of these crimes were sentenced to the most severe punishments—beheading or slow slicing.<sup>40</sup> The codes date back as far as Han dynasty law, which itself was based on earlier codes that said, "Those who dare to poison people with *gu*, or teach others to do it, will be publicly executed."<sup>41</sup> Ming and Qing laws may or may not have reflected contemporary concerns, but they did suggest the magnitude of historical fears intermixed with the direst threats to Confucian harmony and stability.

The "calamity of *wugu*" is not the first account of *gu*, nor was it, despite its renown, the only frame through which *gu* was viewed. Earlier accounts occur in *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*) by Sima Qian (145–86? BCE), *Zuo Tradition* (or *Zuo Commentary*, *Zuozhuan*) and *The Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), which respectively cast *gu* in terms of other ancient fears besides treachery—demons, women, and wind. *Zuo Tradition* tells a brief story of the Prince of Jin (Jin Hou) calling a physician from Qin to diagnose him. The physician says that he has an incurable illness:

This is what is known as proximity to the female,  
A sexual exhaustion that is like *gu*.  
It is not from ghosts, not from diet,  
But is a bewilderment that destroys the will.  
A good subject will die,  
And Heaven's command does not protect him.<sup>42</sup>

Here, *gu* seems to mean "a spell" or "bewitchment." The physician clarifies his rhymed diagnosis/divination, saying that "too extended a contact with females brings illnesses of internal heat, bewilderment and *gu*."<sup>43</sup> The good minister, Zhao Wu, probed further, asking what exactly is meant by *gu*, to which the physician replied, "It is what arises from excess, indulgence, bewilderment, and disorderly living. In writing, a jar with vermin is *gu* [*minchong wei gu*]. The flying insects in grain are also *gu*. In the *Book of Changes*, when

the female bewitches the male, and when the wind falls upon the mountain, that is called *gu*. All these things are of the same kind.”<sup>44</sup> Illnesses brought on by excess, known as depletion disorders, are discussed well into the modern period, and are associated with demons, death pollution, and corpse worms.<sup>45</sup>

The physician above refers to the hexagram Gu (one of the sixty-four) in the *Book of Changes*. The character *gu*, with multiple bugs/worms in a container, might here be rendered “ills to be cured,” “blight,” “spell” or perhaps “decay” (*Yijing* 3.57–58). The hexagram consists of the Sun trigram ☱ below and the Gen trigram ☶ above. The Sun trigram is linked to images of a grown woman and the wind, while the Gen trigram is linked to images of a young man and mountains. Thus, the hexagram is comprised of woman bewitching man and wind blowing on the mountain, as the physician in *Zuo Tradition* explains. Its sexually oriented quality, combined with wind, which was widely understood as the primary external cause of most illnesses, may contribute to the deep fear and horror of *gu* throughout Chinese history.<sup>46</sup> The second-century dictionary *Explaining Single Graphs and Analyzing Compound Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi*) describes *gu* as “generated by nocturnal licentiousness,” “demons who have suffered execution with public exposure,” and simply as “worms in the stomach.” It may have been long after the Han dynasty that *gu* came to be seen primarily as poisonous bugs created by patient, deliberate villains, but none of the ancient fears—licentiousness, wind, demons, and bugs—completely vanished from *gu* in the early modern period.

In modern newspapers, fears of vengeful lovers, poison, and people who live in the distant south attend on fears of witchcraft and bugs. A recurring theme in these accounts is that merchants or other travelers who have affairs with women in Guangdong, Yunnan, and Guizhou will be poisoned by them, often with delayed effects. If they do not keep their promises or do not return south at the appointed time, their paramours will activate the poison and kill them. In one case, such a man was detained by his wife, who refused to let him return to visit his mistress. His belly swelled up like a drum, giving him a twisting pain that grew worse daily. Just as he was resigned to death, a traveling doctor happened to pass by, diagnosed the man with *gu* poisoning, and charged twenty ounces of gold as payment. He then burned charms and chanted spells, causing the patient to evacuate “countless tiny snakes” still squirming about. And just like, that his illness disappeared.<sup>47</sup>



FIG. 15. (left) Hexagram 18 *Gu* from the *Book of Changes*

FIG. 16. (right) The Chinese character for *gu*, comprises three bugs (*chong* 蟲) above a container.

Fin-de-siecle newspaper articles link *gu* to licentiousness, returning to one of the oldest associations of *gu*. In one report, a man's son fell ill and became emaciated over the course of a year. One day, his father called at his door to no response. Breaking into his son's room, he found his son on the bed, naked and lifeless, with a book clutched in his hand and the bed wet with semen: "Only now did Mr. Su realize the cause of his son's illness and death. Opening the pillowcase, he saw the pornographic books he had purchased in his own youth but stored away after reading. They had now become murder weapons killing his son! The ancients said good family governance means not keeping *gu* poisons. Is this not their very meaning? Indeed, pornographic books' capacity to harm surpasses even that of *gu* poisons."<sup>48</sup> Apologists for Ming and Qing *xiaoshuo* had for centuries been arguing against similar fears that readers would fall ill of depletion maladies after encountering excess, debauchery, and licentiousness in their pages. A famous apocryphal origin story about the novel *Plum in the Golden Vase* tells that its author soaked its pages in poison to exact revenge on a licentious enemy, who, licking his fingers as he feverishly turned its pages, imbibed the poison and died. Novels, like *gu*, were a complicated threat involving poison and witchcraft, with the potential to cast spells, seduce readers, and subvert social order.<sup>49</sup>

It is not clear when popular consensus decided that *gu* poisons were no longer a real threat. Common knowledge can be slow to evolve. A piece in *Shenbao* from 1924 describes historical features of *gu* and concludes, "Are these not absurd stories and fictions?," implying that many whose minds still needed changing.<sup>50</sup> *Shenbao* was a famously moralizing publication, railing against *gu* and all its associated practices and implications. It told stories warning of all sorts of bad behavior, for which *gu* poisoning was the repercussion. In a report from 1891, a doctor was called in to examine a young man of twenty with a painfully distended belly, his navel protruding an inch. He told

the doctor that the illness had started just twenty days prior, which surprised the doctor, since such extreme cases usually took much longer to develop. The doctor presumed that it was caused by sexual indulgence and that it was incurable. The young man died just five days later. As the grieving father wept by the corpse with his wife, he saw a foot-long worm wriggle out of his son's nose. Enraged, he cut open the worm and found many smaller worms inside. Hearing this, the doctor was surprised, saying that there are countless worms (*chong*) that can harm the body, but he had never heard of one so large and full of smaller worms as this one. Reflecting on the abrupt onset of symptoms after lewd indulgence, the doctor felt that this had to be a case of lust disease. Considering that the son's partners were mostly undesirable types—"brothel prostitutes, wild chickens, and saltwater girls"—he must have contracted the disease from them. The doctor then realized that this was not a disease after all but a case of *gu* poisoning. One of his partners must have intentionally poisoned him with *gu*, which was the only explanation for the speed of the illness. The doctor opines, "The *Book of Changes* says that *gu* is like a woman of ill repute [*fengnü*] seducing a man under a mountain—such sorcery is often found in places filled with miasma and is especially practiced by those in the sex trade. They use this to manipulate customers into returning."<sup>51</sup>

The doctor refers to the belief, described in *Shenbao*, that *gu*, once administered, does not take effect until the poisoner activates it. Some referred to this as "reanimating life *gu*" (*tiaosheng gu*). Because of these practices, clients often refrain from eating anything when visiting a brothel. In response, prostitutes fawn and flirt and insist that the client write promises for future visits. When he moistens the brush in his mouth, he unwittingly ingests the *gu*. These practices were especially prevalent in the southern border regions and had not been reported in Shanghai, according to the doctor:

Today the grand brothels stand lofty as before, but many are now cold and deserted. There are no wide-roaming guests as in former times, and regulars are scarce. Top-class prostitutes can still scrimp by, but the lower-class ones can't even survive. Consequently, they employ all kinds of strategies, including *gu*, to bind the clients. Once the *gu* takes hold of a client, he has no choice but to indulge her until

his money and health are spent. If such trends spread in Shanghai, it will chill any moral person's heart!<sup>52</sup>

Fears of licentiousness and of border or minority practices spreading to the major cities were part of *gu*'s terror. The fear is that licentious women can kill young men not only with *gu* but also with over indulgence in sex, all the while transferring their clients' wealth to their own coffers, just as *gu* demons were thought to do.

With so many properties and associations ascribed to *gu*, it is understandable that people curious to discuss it fixed on certain aspects. Yuan Mei seemed to understand *gu* as a secular creature, a flying insect that brought wealth by excreting precious metals and had to be tended by women:

In Yunnan [far southwestern province], every household raises *gu*. *Gu* can excrete gold and silver, providing profit. . . . Families hide their young children, fearing they may be consumed by the *gu*. Those who raise *gu* keep them in a secret room and order women to feed them. If the *gu* see a man, they will be ruined, as they are masses of pure yin. Those that consume men excrete gold, while those that consume women excrete silver. This was told to me by Hua Feng, the regional commander of Yunnan.<sup>53</sup>

Everyone knew what *gu* was, and yet everyone understood it differently. Yuan Mei's *gu* does not attach itself to a demon or subjugate a *hun*-soul to obtain the victim's wealth. Rather, it turns the victim into wealth through a dark but natural process. Much of what *gu* represents and the fears it provoked implicated women—fears of what women know and what they can do. Since the Song dynasty, “reanimating life” (*tiaosheng*) practices gradually became associated with *gu* poisoning.<sup>54</sup> A sorcerer would cast a spell on a fish or piece of meat or perhaps poison it with *gu* and then once the victim ate the meat, the sorcerer could bring it back to life inside the victim, and it would devour them from the inside. *Tiaosheng*, like *gudu*, was believed to be practiced primarily in the southern border regions. Numerous *biji* and travelogs explain it in similar language.<sup>55</sup> Like *gudu*, the “reanimating of life” was attended by

a *tiaosheng* demon that somehow transferred the victim's possessions to the sorcerer who began the process. Some accounts claim that after death, the victim's soul would be under the secret control of the sorcerer.<sup>56</sup> Li Shizhen writes, "In Lingnan they have a destructive practice of 'reanimating life' in that they mix poison into a guest's beverages and food in a most detestable way."<sup>57</sup> Xie Zhaozhe explains, "Some variants of *gu* include reanimating life *gu* that can change chicken and fish into live forms after they have been eaten."<sup>58</sup> Fears of reanimating life have a natural association with *gu*, since both mechanisms feature a living being inside a person, a parasite that devours them from within. Xie distinguishes between the different methods for raising and using "*gu* insects" (*guchong*) among people in southwestern regions, naming golden silkworm *gu* and reanimating life *gu* alongside the "critters in a jar" definition. A key feature of these practices was, after all, not just taking life but creating it. Whether it brought dead animals back to life inside of the body or created a super venomous, demonic being, "reanimating life" and *gu* poison recalled the power of women to create life.

Yet *gu* was inextricably linked to death and the dead. In the *Systematic Compendium*, *gu* poisoning shares treatments with "corpse attachment-illness" (*shizhu*) and "bug attachment-illness" (*chongzhu*), which fall under the rubric of "corpse transmission" (*chuanshi*) illnesses. These illnesses were seen to have exogenous origins, with wind, depletion, bugs, or corpse *qi* pouring into the body from the outside. Elsewhere, *gu* poison is tied to diseases of sexual excess, since numerous drugs treat it along with "consumptive [i.e., depletion] demons" (*guizhu*) and "demonic seduction-specters" (*guimei*).<sup>59</sup> The *Systematic Compendium* also retains the ancient association of *gu* with wind, since certain drugs are able to "control 'wind-head,' eliminate *gu* poison," or treat "*gu*-poison and 'wind evil' (*fengxie*), illnesses causing dizziness or delirium."<sup>60</sup> As an illness that results from and is related to others caused by a malicious thing entering, pouring into, or attaching to the body, it makes sense that many of the drugs prescribed to treat it are purgatives to literally expel the poison, parasite, or bug, and to also exorcize the attendant malevolence. The *gu* poison of the early modern period is even treated with drugs that "kill all types of ancient spirit beings, calamitous demons . . . and evil *qi*."<sup>61</sup> The fearsomeness of *gu* lay in its embodiment of so many fears—of foreign places and people, bugs and demons, wind and bad *qi*, envy and wealth, licentiousness and excess.

Treating the malevolence of *gu* with the goodness of Confucian virtues only partially tempered its menace. Enter the hedgehog. *Record of the Grand Historian*, composed around 104–91 BCE, reports that six centuries previously, “Duke De of Qin instituted the dog-day sacrifice, tearing the limbs off of dogs at the four gates of the city, to defend against the calamity of *gu*.”<sup>62</sup> Li Shizhen explains that “remedy masters think dogs can suppress all the evils and devils of the Earth, so [this sacrifice] is good for preventing attacks of demons and witchcraft.”<sup>63</sup> The word for hedgehog in Chinese is *wei* 蝟, frequently written with the *chong* radical 虫 on the left side. But it can also be written with a “dog” radical 犬 on that side (*wei* 獯). This linguistic and classificatory liminality enables hedgehogs to be both bug-like, sympathetically curing the bug-poison of *gu*, and dog-like, apotropaically treating its demonological aspects.

Li Shizhen was inclusive of strange and marvelous information, even repeatedly remarking, “This medicine is strange, [so I] include it here,” while excoriating claims that taxed his own credulity.<sup>64</sup> He valorized Confucian ethics throughout his work though, as we will see below (“human flesh is not medicine”) and tells stories that affirm that stance. Yet the matrix of relationships between illnesses and drugs in his vast work is too complex to be explained by one underlying world system. In the case of *gu*, its bug aspect required mundane and sympathetic medicine, its demonological aspects required apotropaic approaches like dog sacrifice, and the licentiousness and greed that was ultimately the cause of *gu* poisoning could be treated by the virtue of earnest Confucian scholars. The root cause of *gu* in its ancient and more modern iterations was, ultimately, selfish others. Many medicines in the *Systematic Compendium* treat *gu*, but those that offer proof of effectiveness are the ones that cause the sufferer to “call out the name of the *gu* master,” after which that wicked person is summoned and made to remove the *gu* and thereby effect a cure.<sup>65</sup>

## Cutting One’s Flesh to Make Medicine

If *gu* poisoning was a symbol of envy, jealousy, and selfishness, another unseen medical practice, *gegu*, epitomized selfless devotion. Yet *gegu* was also problematic. Still, doctors seized on this complicated perception to defend their own problematic Confucian virtue. The phrase “doctors have the spirit

[of those who] cut their thighs [in desperation to make medicinal soup with their own flesh to cure a parent]" recurs again and again in entertainment literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>66</sup> The practice of *gegu* (lit., "cut the thigh") referred to making medicinal soup out of one's own flesh as a final, extreme effort to cure a patient, usually one's parent or parent-in-law.<sup>67</sup> Li Shizhen traces records of this practice back to the *Corrected Materia Medica* (Bencao shiyi), published in 739, which claimed that human flesh could cure diseases. The *New History of the Tang* (Xin Tangshu) of 1060 records early historical accounts of *gegu*, and it was followed by more cases in the Song and Yuan dynastic histories.<sup>68</sup>

By the Ming dynasty, such acts were reported frequently in historical sources and in vernacular entertainments.<sup>69</sup> The widespread circulation of the ideal of *gegu* in popular literature and local histories likely contributed to social pressures on children to perform the act.<sup>70</sup> Both men and women displayed, or were said to display, extreme filial piety to their parents through this dire practice. Many accounts of *gegu* record filial commoners from obscure backgrounds attracting the attention of local officials and literati, who wrote commemorative essays and poems to glorify these deeds and request commendation for their practitioners from the government. Han Yu (768–824) was one of the first to condemn *gegu*, arguing that filial action consisted of securing medicine for the sick parents but should not involve any harm to one's own body. If self-mutilation were permissible, he asked, why then did the former sages and worthies not do it? Moreover, if such acts resulted in death, it could lead to the extinction of the family line, an unforgivable sin.<sup>71</sup> Many others, such as Pi Rixiu (ca. 834–83) echoed this sentiment, going so far as to say, "Cutting off your flesh is like slicing off your parents' flesh."<sup>72</sup> Zhu Xi was more equivocal, endorsing *gegu* with some reserve if practiced in secrecy. Allowing others to know only proved that one was going to extreme measures not for their parents, but for themselves.<sup>73</sup> One should not proclaim their own acts of flesh cutting, but many literati recorded adulatory stories of others who performed *gegu*. The educational commissioner of Huguang (modern day Hubei and Hunan), Zou Diguang, celebrated the practice in his epistemic text aimed at the middlebrow reader, *Illustrated Exhortations and Admonishments* (Quan jie tushuo). He tells the story of Zhen, who came from a family of Confucian doctors (*ruyi*) and was extremely filial to his ill father. Zhen would weep day and night, believing that

medicine could not cure him. He burned incense and prayed to heaven, cutting flesh from his thigh to make soup for his father. His father had not eaten for a long time but was enticed by the aroma of the soup and ate it. His illness was immediately cured. That night, in Zhen's dream, heaven granted him "Shun's filiality herb" to apply on the wound. Upon awaking, he found that the bleeding had stopped and the pain had vanished, as if he had never been cut.<sup>74</sup>

Cutting the flesh to make medicinal soup was often discussed as the practice of young women serving their parents-in-law, or in the case of another story from *Illustrated Exhortations and Admonishments*, a young woman serving her adoptive mother. The practice recurs in MingQing entertainment literature where it is invariably represented as a noble act.<sup>75</sup> Some, such as the poet Wu Jiaji (1618–84), celebrated it, when his niece secretly cut the flesh from her thigh to make medicine for her father.<sup>76</sup> These celebrations may have contributed to increasingly drastic cutting, presumably because the greater the sacrifice, the more potent the medicine. The Ming play *Record of Filial Devotion and Loyalty: The Five Human Relationships Completely Presented* (Wulun quanbei zhongxiao ji), written by the scholar Qiu Jun (1421–95), features Shi Shuqing, a young woman and model wife who plans to slice off a piece of her own liver when her mother-in-law falls ill. On the same night, her sister-in-law plans to cut her own flesh for the same purpose, both without knowledge of what the other is doing. They secretly feed their soups to their mother-in-law, and she is healed almost instantly.<sup>77</sup>

Accounts of those who practiced slicing the liver (*gegan*) rarely, if ever, express disbelief at the physiological possibility of the act. Within the criticisms of slicing the thigh is implicit the possibility of death and thereby terminating the family line to save a dying member of it. Yet slicing the liver, an even more extreme version of filial cutting, rather than highlighting its own fictionality, establishes within the discourse of living sacrifice a hierarchy of courage and devotion. Women, as well as men, were depicted as brave enough to slice their livers, as in the story "Slicing a Liver to Save Mother-in-Law" (Pougan jiu gu) from the popular Ming handbook *Illustrated Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety for Women* (Nü ershi xiao tushuo).<sup>78</sup>

Li Shizhen mentions that human flesh has been used to treat "exhaustion consumption" (*zhaiji*) and then accuses previous physicians of doing harm by recording that human flesh is effective medicine rather than trying to put a



FIG. 17. A woodblock-printed image depicting a filial daughter-in-law slicing her liver to make medicinal soup for a sick parent-in-law. From *Illustrated Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety for Women* (Nü ershisi xiao tushuo). 15b. Harvard University Libraries.

stop to the practice of slicing. He writes, “We receive our hair, skin and body from our parents and do not dare to harm or damage them. Even when the parent is seriously ill, how could they allow their children to injure their bodies, let alone dare to eat their bones and flesh? This is just a perspective held by the ignorant.”<sup>79</sup> But Li seems somewhat disingenuous about discouraging the use of human flesh as medicine, since he goes on to record the medicinal properties of human hair, teeth, urine, bile. Li argues only against the practice, not against the efficacy, of using flesh for treating consumption. It may have been the metaphorical notion that “doctors have the heart to slice their thighs,” that is, doctors should be as devoted to their patients as filial children are to their parents, that drove Li Shizhen to disavow the actual practice of cutting the flesh.<sup>80</sup>

Li cites an admonitory story that was also recorded in the *Dynastic History of the Ming*.<sup>81</sup> Jiang Bo'er sliced flesh from his ribs and offered it his sick mother. When this did not cure her, he prayed to the spirits saying that if his mother recovered, he would sacrifice his son to them. Both events came to pass. When word of this came to the ears of Emperor Taizu, he was enraged by this breach of morality and neglect of reason. Jiang was caned and banished. The ministry of ritual was ordered to examine the case, and Li quotes from its report:

When sons' relatives fall ill, they should send for good doctors. When they call on heaven and pray to spirits, they should do so with utmost sincerity and intense emotion. . . . When it comes to cutting one's thigh, this is something introduced only in later times. The ignorant have gained wide recognition with such weird practices. By perpetrating such shocking offenses, they may have hoped to win public recognition or to evade corvee. They did not stop at cutting thighs—they went on to cut livers. They did not stop at cutting livers—they went so far as to kill sons. This neglect of the Way and harming of life is worse than anything else.<sup>82</sup>

The curative power of flesh inherent in the concept of *gegu* lay in its metaphorical significance as the embodiment of life. But it was the lineal bond that made flesh medicine—it was the child or child-in-law caring for the parent,

retributively nourishing flesh and blood with flesh and blood that affected the cure. Presumably, a stranger's flesh could not be employed in this manner. *Gegu* was an act of living sacrifice, in which both the recipient and the sacrifice survive.<sup>83</sup> These mechanisms were lost on some practitioners, though. In the above case, sacrificing a child threatens the family lineage and results in death.

*Gegu* was widely known and oft discussed. What made the practice supposedly effective, aside from its sympathetic action and filial devotion, was its secrecy. Like *gu* poison, the potency of cutting the thigh or liver derived from the requirement that it must be performed in secret.

These were unseen practices. Stories of cutting flesh from the thigh gave way to stories of cutting flesh from the side, to cutting a hole in the side, pulling out the liver or other entrails and cutting pieces off them. The practice had to be kept secret from the family and the government, but for it to effect a cure, it must also be kept secret from the patient. The patient could not know what kind of medical soup they were consuming, or they would surely not take it, and if they did, it would not be efficacious.<sup>84</sup> The combination of extreme devotion and supposed secrecy led to gossip and anecdote which then received government attention aimed at discouraging it. Yuan, Ming, and Qing courts issued prohibitions against *gegu*, and perhaps it was, as Li claims, a modern practice of the common people, not recorded in the classics, as were the practice of *gu* poison and witchcraft.<sup>85</sup> The edict of 1652 forbade state honors for those who killed themselves with extreme acts of filiality like *gegu* or *gegan*. The Board of Rites refused a memorialist's request for canonization of a woman who committed *gegu*, calling this behavior "the ignorant filiality of common people who take life lightly."<sup>86</sup> Judging from the increasing number of cases mentioned in local gazetteers, popular literature, and collections of miracle tales compiled in the Ming and Qing, to say nothing of the repeated bans on the practice, attempts to discourage *gegu* were apparently not effective. They certainly were not effective in quelling the imagination of those captivated by the idea of cutting the flesh. Emperor Yongzheng's (r. 1722–35) edict of 1728, responding to a memorial requesting honors for a filial son who died after cutting out a piece of his liver to feed his dying mother, is telling in its ambivalence: "We think that although the practice of cutting the liver to cure a parent is uncanonical, it was done out of the urgent desire to save his mother. Truly this is rare behavior and deeply deserving of sym-

pathy.” He granted honors in this one case as an exception, demonstrating his great benevolence.<sup>87</sup> Yongzheng reviewed the uncanonical status of *gegu*, quoting criticisms of the practice, while noting the still significant numbers of “foolish men and women” who “sacrifice their lives to save their parents” because they do not have a proper understanding of virtue and the dynasty’s laws.<sup>88</sup> Although he criticized the ignorance of such suicides and the failure of local officials to educate people in these matters, Yongzheng was moved by the tragedy and sincerity of such acts. More importantly, his comments and edicts reified these stories into historical cases.

But *gegu* has another history. In the Song dynasty, the Buddhist legend of Miaoshan elevated *gegu* as the act of a bodhisattva, and in the Ming and Qing *gegu* was often associated with Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion. The legend goes that Princess Miaoshan, who was born under numerous auspicious signs, grew up to be a very kind, gentle woman who wore simple clothes and ate only once a day. Despite being persecuted and banished by her parents for her devotion to Buddhism, when the king fell ill, she cut out her eyes and cut off her arms and had them made into medicinal soup, which she sent secretly to the king, who, after recovering, discovered that it was his own daughter who had made this sacrifice. Miaoshan was revealed to have been Guanyin in human form and disappeared amid divine music, a shower of flower petals, and auspicious clouds.<sup>89</sup> Hence, characters in entertainment literature, particularly female characters, often pray to Guanyin before they perform *gegu*.<sup>90</sup> The bodhisattva of compassion, Guanyin, was generally represented as handsome and princely young man in Southeast Asia, China, and Tibet until the Tang dynasty. By the Ming dynasty, Guanyin had become completely sinicized.<sup>91</sup> That he was transformed into a woman in later Chinese iterations may have had something to do with the compassion demonstrated by the cutting of flesh to save others. Despite the fact that men engaged in *gegu*, it was often associated with filial female suicide and with beautiful widows who cut off their noses or ears, disfiguring their bodies so that they would be unwanted by suitors.<sup>92</sup> The sacrifice of slicing the flesh was, in the eyes of some, tantamount to suicide, not only because it could end in death but because the disfigurement made these women unable to perform ritual sacrifices due to their “unwhole” bodies.<sup>93</sup> The story of Miaoshan illustrates two points: how *gegu* came to be a site of contestation between the

sexes and how the “Confucianization of Buddhism” took place in Ming and Qing China.<sup>94</sup>

If *gegu* was imagined as partially the purview of women when it was first discussed in the Tang dynasty, men and male healers tried to appropriate that practice in later periods. As for “doctors [who] have the heart to perform *gegu*,” there is little or no evidence that doctors practiced *gegu*, but they claimed that their efforts to heal others were akin to *gegu* in humanness and self-sacrifice.<sup>95</sup> That phrase expresses a trope popularly associated with female sacrifice and reconfigures it as a symbol of masculine virtue.<sup>96</sup> There was a long tradition of marginal literati being fond of identifying with women, who were also marginal figures, but rather than using female figures to project male literati anxieties (a minister who loses favor with the emperor compares himself to a wife losing favor with her husband), male doctors who were decidedly marginal literati figures appropriated *gegu*, originally an act of Buddhist women and devoted daughters-in-law.

Despite imperial ambivalence, *gegu* often found support from local officials, who prized it as a way of showing their own humanity.<sup>97</sup> *Gegu* became increasingly common in the Qing, as evident in the growing number of cases mentioned in local gazetteers, popular literature, and collections of miracle tales compiled in that period.<sup>98</sup> According to many written sources like those quoted by Li Shizhen, *gegu* was a practice of the uneducated masses, of commoners, but accounts of scholars practicing *gegu* also increased throughout the Qing. In one county alone, there were 534 recorded cases of *gegu* during the Qing (up from 86 recorded in the Ming for the same county). Two hundred twenty-nine of these devotees were males, and thirty of those were scholars holding the first degree.<sup>99</sup> Support of *gegu* by local authorities coincided with increased interest in and justification of the practice by the educated class.<sup>100</sup>

By the Qing, *gegu* usually referred to cutting the flesh of the arm rather than the thigh.<sup>101</sup> This shift must have helped men think of this practice as something they could own, recalling as it does the famous scene from the Ming classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, in which the physician Hua Tuo operates (hundreds of years before surgery became commonplace in China) on General Guan Yu’s arm after he is hit with a poison arrow.<sup>102</sup> Guan Yu’s bravery in bearing the surgery, combined with Hua Tuo’s valor



FIG 18. Katsushika Oi (Japanese, ca. 1800–after 1857), *Operating on Guan Yu's Arm*. Guan Yu plays Go while receiving surgery on his arm. Cleveland Museum.

in performing it, became the sublime vision of a filial son acting as a doctor cutting his own arm.

*Shenbao*, the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, and the *Jingbao* (*Peking Gazette*) carried many adulatory news stories of filial slicing, but also of misguided sacrifices and foolish undertakings. In one report, a filial Japanese man wanted to take out his own lungs to feed his mother who was on the verge of going blind from an illness. He worried that once he died, there would be no one left to make the soup and offer it, so he decided to kill his daughter for her lungs. When he told his wife of his plan, she offered herself up in her daughter's place. The husband went through with the act, removing his wife's lungs. As he looked around for a pot to make soup, a suspicious maid reported him, leading to his arrest. The article concludes, "In this world, there are filial sons who foolishly cut their arms or legs to treat their parents' illnesses. But to go so far as to kill one's wife to cure one's mother, this is not just foolishness, but cruelty! Can this still be called filial?"<sup>103</sup> In another account of misguided filiality, a farmer, a devout Buddhist from Hubei surnamed Gan, was desperate for rain, his region having long been plagued by a drought demon (*hanba*). He set up an altar to pray for rain and kneeled under the scorching sun for three days, but the rain did not come. So he cut a piece of flesh from his thigh, placed it in a dish, and offered it up. The next day at noon, thunder roared, and wind blew, followed by a heavy downpour. In an instant, the fields were soaked, and the ditches were full. Despite Gan's success, the author of the piece is dismissive: "There are many ways to pray for rain, but never have I heard of someone slicing their thigh as an offering to heaven. . . . Can this be called 'killing oneself to achieve benevolence'? It is both laughable and pitiable."<sup>104</sup> The author, alluding to the *Analects* (Lunyu) and its misapplication, dismisses this act as one of misreading by the uneducated. Both accounts lampoon the extreme devotion of misguided commoners who do not understand the mechanisms of *gegu*. It is not a traditional sacrifice, should not end in death, is not meant to bring rain, and should not be practiced by the masses.

Among the many *Jingbao* and *Shenbao* accounts of liver slicing from the last two decades of the nineteenth century, about half of the practitioners are reported to have survived. This group often sacrifices with little or no pain and recovers quickly.<sup>105</sup> Some of these pray to Guanyin beforehand, suggesting unseen forces that underlie their healing regime: "As if protected by the

gods, Hu Wenyun seemed unaware of any pain as the wound was treated and naturally healed safely, observed by clan elders and neighbors including Hu Bingzhuan. Former county magistrate Lu Fa personally investigated and verified the facts.<sup>106</sup> Those who die do so gruesomely and painfully, for which they are celebrated with money from the local officials and memorial arches from the court. A typical report starts with a man surnamed Ye from Ningguo County in southern Anhui, whose father had died, leaving them poor. His mother falls ill, and Ye, after hiring a series of unsuccessful healers, engages in “cutting the liver.” After cutting open his chest, taking out his liver, and slicing off a piece, his wife makes soup of the flesh, feeds it to Ye’s mother, and cures her. Ye dies of his wounds. The local governor donates three hundred foreign dollars to provide for coffin and burial and to support the widow and mother. The matter is reported to higher authorities, ultimately resulting in an imperial edict and the erection of a memorial archway honoring Ye and his act of filial piety.<sup>107</sup> Other reports are more complex and mundane—filial children pray, cut into their chests, pull out their livers, slice off a piece of their livers, cook for their sick parent. The child sometimes faints but then recovers. Sometimes their scars are discovered and admired. In one case, “the bowel protruded from the incision in the son’s stomach, but the wound has now healed, leaving a scar to testify to his devotion which calls forth the admiration of all who see it.”<sup>108</sup> Although the practice required secrecy both to avoid controversy and achieve potency, it was widely celebrated in print, illustration, and memorials.

Why the liver, specifically? Often, it is the heart that is identified as the source of warmth and life in the early modern period, though there are only scant references to “slicing the heart” (*gexin*).<sup>109</sup> Chapter 1 of the *Systematic Compendium* states that “the liver stores the blood” and also “the liver stores the *hun*-soul, and it goes through changes and transformations. Hence, when the *hun*-soul roams and is not fixed, and when this is cured with dragon teeth, then this is based on this idea.”<sup>110</sup> Perhaps it was not an attempt to bolster the patient’s life, exactly, but to bolster their *hun*.<sup>111</sup>

The “liver” in these texts may not correlate directly to the organ of modern biomedicine, which is highly vascular and indeed might seem to store the blood. Cutting into it would result in massive bleeding, likely followed by fainting and death. Furthermore, the modern liver is protected by the ribcage, and

accessing it from below those bones would require cutting through considerable quantities of skin, muscle, and other tissue. In a world predating modern antiseptics, avoiding infection would be difficult. Attempting to remove a part of one's own liver would almost certainly be fatal, assuming one could even find it through all the pain and blood.<sup>112</sup>

The practices of *gu* poisoning and cutting the flesh to make medicine secretive, and especially in their extreme versions, must have been imaginary. But creating greedy demons and super poisonous creatures or surviving self-inflicted surgery were perhaps because they were performed in secret, widely held and long-lived practices believed to really happen. They were not only believable but a threat to public morality and imperial stability.

Both practices were secret, and so knowledge of them was transmitted secondhand through narrative—stories, cases, anecdotes, reports, and rumors. These stories encapsulated some of the most trenchant fears—wind, worms, lust, and envy—and some of the diverse threats to male Confucian order—Buddhism, women, professionals, and the marginally literate. They elicited the highest of high-brow responses in the form of codified laws and imperial proclamations.

Although they were concerns of the court and a matter of public record, both were neglected by elite medicine for hundreds of years. Yet they lived on in histories, cases, practical texts, and the public imaginary. *Gu* poison and cutting the flesh resurfaced in every register of discourse in the early modern period as battleground territory for the curious, the devout, and those who wished to reestablish the usefulness of Confucian virtues in the modern world. These secret practices were widely known. The fact of their existence was real to those who discussed them, as were their meanings and implications. They persisted as common knowledge for centuries, without much empirical evidence.

## Animating Forces

The stories the old folks in my village told were mysterious and scary, but quite spellbinding. In those stories there was no clear dividing line between living and dead people, neither was there one between animals and plants; even various objects like a broom, a human hair, or a tooth that had fallen out could, when the time was ripe, acquire supernatural powers.

—Mo Yan, Nobel laureate in literature

This book has considered some of the ways people investigated the unseen, rarely seen, or overlooked. These topics of inquiry—the future and auspiciousness, thunder and wind, secretive medicine and poison, dragons, water—all include human bodies in one way or another. Officials exposed their naked bodies to pray for rain. Physiognomers read the face to determine fate. Dragons and worms infested bodies. How the body related to and functioned within the matrix of forces between the seen and unseen realms, the human and the numinous, was implicated in all of these inquiries. Animating forces are of key concern here. What is the difference between a body that is alive and one that is dead? What transformation takes place in the moment of death? We are always gathering first-hand information about our bodies, and yet, as a natural object, what makes it go is elusive and inscrutable.

Prescriptions that are meant to nourish or extend life, rather than to cure illness, usually occur in certain kinds of texts, not in elite medical discourse.<sup>1</sup> Ingredients tend to employ a sympathetic logic: urine from young boys, fine cream, chrysanthemums, gold and jade, cinnabar and mercury, and so on.

Cutting the flesh to make medicinal soup relied on the power of sympathetic magic to cure the parents of filial children and extend their lives. But this kind of logic, relying as it does on things that are young, beautiful, valuable or which seem to have a life-force of their own, does not explain what, exactly, the medicine is nourishing. At the end of the nineteenth century, newspapers carried stories of the dead returning to life, often brought back by thunder or other heavenly mechanisms.<sup>2</sup> The physical mechanisms that propelled bodies were mysterious, but worthy of scrutiny.

What constitutes life? What are its ingredients? Even now, medical doctors may believe in souls that enjoy eternal life, just as they seek to keep oxygenated blood flowing to the brain. At the end of the Ming dynasty, elite physicians were debating the precise nature and location of the “gate of life” (*mingmen*). Most physicians identified the gate of life as a material structure in the body: one of the kidneys, or both kidneys, or the grease in the kidneys. For Zhao Xianke, the gate of life was formless. Zhang Jiebin (1563–1640) claimed that the gate of life was the womb.<sup>3</sup> Whatever it was or wherever it resided, the gate of life produced *xianghuo* (or *chenhuo*), “minister fire” (as in “adviser to a king”), and this kind of fire in the body was “the very root of life.”<sup>4</sup> Minister fire is an ancient concept in traditional Chinese medicine, and though Li Dongyuan (1180–1251) may have originated the understanding of it as the essence of life, it remained a topic of debate. Li Shizhen says of minister fire, “Without this fire, man himself would not come to life.”<sup>5</sup> Fire may have been paradigmatic as a proxy for life. Often, when a character in entertainment literature seeks to revive someone who drowned or was hanged, they do not check for flowing of qi through conduits of the body told by the six pulses. They check only for heat.

The components of life most discussed in early modern Chinese medical discourse were qi (breath, vital energy) and *jing* (essence, sexual fluids), but also *hun* and *po* (animus and anima; ethereal and material “souls”). These are complicated by other terms, such as *ling* (life principle, spiritual potency, postmortem consciousness), *shen* (actualizing spirit, element that survives rebirth or which can be perfected to shed the bodily frame), and others. But these terms resist neat disciplinary categories as the physical and numinous frequently modify each other, as in *jingshen* (essence spirit), *jingqi* (spirit qi), *hunqi* (soul qi), or overlap, as seen in the previous chapter’s discussion of the

liver being the seat of blood and also the *hun*. It is also true that *hun* and *po* (which I imperfectly refer to as “souls” for the sake of convenience) had a material reality inside and outside of the body and were discussed in detail by medical doctors, just as *qi* and *jing* are the subjects of many religious and philosophical texts. One could, for instance, obtain a human soul by digging the dirt from beneath the body of a person who committed suicide by hanging. It was shaped like a lump of charcoal.<sup>6</sup> Everyone believed that there were multiple forces at work in the processes of life and death, but there was debate about what they were, where they were, and how to control them.<sup>7</sup>

## Death(ish)

Presumably, every culture understands that there is a point beyond the liminal space between life and death at which inanimate bodies cannot be resuscitated, and that is usually what the word “dead” refers to. This distinction is not at all clear in the Ming and Qing usage of the word “dead” (*si*). Readers of every manner of text encounter people who were “returned to life” (*su* or *huisheng*) after being “dead.” Translators tend to be flummoxed by this. The presumption is that unlike, say, “tuberculosis,” “cholera,” or “euphoria,” for which there may not be a one-to-one equivalent in another language, there are certain immutable, universal, human experiences and concepts for which all languages have a simple term. Death (and life) are among them. Thus, many translators render “*si*,” as “dead” or “death” or “die.” But when the patient recovers from this state, translators render the same word as “unconscious,” “appearance of death,” “seemingly dead,” or “syncope.” Those may all be reasonable, but they point to an uneasiness with blurred boundaries between dead and permanently dead that was more comfortable in the early modern period.

One symptom of the liminal death space is termed in medical literature as *buzhiren*, “inability to recognize people,” or *buzhirenshi*, “inability to recognize people and things.” This state of being was a deviation from character, a change from what made the person who they were and an indication that they were in mortal danger. Herbert Giles, the early translator of Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai* stories, writing in 1880, felt the need to comment on the frequency of these trance-like or death-like states in those accounts: “Cataplexy, which is



FIG. 19. A corpse awakens in a selection from *Strange Stories from Liaozhai* (1887 edition). University of Michigan Libraries.

the explanation of many a story in this collection, would appear to be of very common occurrence among the Chinese. Such, however, is not the case.<sup>8</sup> Yet the perception that people can be revived from recent death is not only common in collections of anomalous accounts and other entertainments but pervades medical and historical literature as well.

Li Shizhen, for example, writes that when blood and qi move upward, they can cause “sudden death [*baosi*]. If the qi turns back again, [the patient] will live; if it does not turn back, [he] will die.”<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, he suggests a logical method to revive a patient who has died suddenly from being struck by malevolence (*zhong’e si*): “Use a bamboo tube to blow into his anus. When exhausted, change from one person [blowing] to another. Once the qi passes though again, he will come back to life [*jihuo*].”<sup>10</sup> Li uses at least twenty-nine different terms to describe kinds of death from which one might recover. Sudden death without even first falling ill (*cusi*) is common in the *Systematic*

*Compendium*, and prognosis of all these states includes the possibility of revitalization. Death from being horrified (*jingbusi*) or intimidated (*xiasi*) might be cured by the forced instilling of unmixed wine into the patient. Some of these states were inscrutable: “If someone has not been ill and yet suddenly dies, how can this be understood?” Others were mundane. Li repeatedly discusses death states resulting from different kinds of violence or accident: suicide by hanging, being crushed under a falling wall, drowning, freezing, death from fright or shock, death from nightmare demons, and death while giving birth. Potential healers needed to be ready to encounter the situation in which a patient had already died (*yisizhe*), a situation described again and again in the *Systematic Compendium*. That person can be revived by forced medicine, though sometimes only after breaking their teeth to force the medicine in.

Medical manuscripts contain many recipes to “bring people back to life” or to cure death (*zhisi*). Sometimes, this term simply means “effective” or “potent” but often it is literal.<sup>11</sup> In one of the medical manuscripts in the Berlin collection, for instance, even before the title page, table of contents, or preface, are seventeen emergency recipes, four of which are to revive the dead.<sup>12</sup> Because one must act quickly, recently dead and long dead were different things. A medical manuscript attributed to Pu Songling features many recipes to cure death.<sup>13</sup> The first ten recipes are to treat different kinds of death, with others, presumably less urgent, featured in the body of the manuscript. A term found in these texts and many others is the modifier-modified compound “dead corpse” *sishi*, suggesting that there were other kinds of corpses.<sup>14</sup> Both manuscripts, like many practical handbooks from the end of the nineteenth century, circulated practical knowledge about death that was at least three hundred years old.

Particularly if they have died from one of the “five interruptions” (hanging, drowning, being crushed, freezing, or fright), patients can be revived if quick action is taken.<sup>15</sup> They can be awakened (*su*), or become aware (*jue*), or returned to life (*huo*), or resurrected (*jisu*). Li writes:

If someone has died from being crushed or falling from a height, quickly take them to a safe place. Then cover the victim’s mouth and nose with your sleeve for as long as it takes to eat a meal. When the

eyes open, at once pour hot urine into their mouth. If someone has died from nightmare demons, be careful not to expose the victim to a shining light and do not touch him. Lead a buffalo to stand above him and he will immediately wake. If someone has attempted suicide by hanging themselves, if the region below the victim's heart is still warm, they might be brought back to life.<sup>16</sup>

Li quotes the *Zhou hou beijifang* (Formulas to keep up one's sleeve for emergencies), a recipe book from the Jin era: "For all attempts to rescue someone who has died from hanging, it is of utmost importance to stabilize the [victim's] heart. . . . Then pierce a cock's comb and drip the blood into the victim's mouth to calm his heart and spirit." Li explains that blood from the comb of a three-year-old rooster is the best, as yang qi prevails to its full extent, and moves upward since it is nourished by heaven. Being red, it is "the yang in the yang" and therefore good for treating death, a state of pure yin.<sup>17</sup> Many recent deaths in the *Systematic Compendium* require swallowing blood of one kind or another to stabilize their heart and spirit, suggesting that bodily warmth, and perhaps life itself, was blood based and not just a function of qi. Or this warmth was generated by the *shen* (spirit), which according to the *Huangdi neijing suwen* (Basic questions from the Yellow Emperor's inner canon) and as repeated by Li resided in the heart. The spirit could be stabilized, sympathetically, with blood. Though just as often, sudden death requires an infusion of other strongly yang substances such as dirt, cinnabar, the white parts in chicken droppings, or rhinoceros horn blown up the nose.

## Calling Back the Soul

*Peony Pavilion* (Mudan ting) is the most famous example of romantic reanimation in the Chinese tradition. Tang Xianzu's 1598 southern drama, subtitled *The Soul's Return* (Huanhun ji), features the young woman Du Liniang, who has died of longing, being revived by Liu Mengmei. They have a ghostly romance, and she instructs him to disinter her body. He goes to do so with a gravedigger and nun playing the clowns. They find that her body has not decomposed, even though it has been three years since she died. Once returned to life, Du Liniang lacks strength after being dead for so long. She

vomits a gobbet of mercury, which the gravedigger asks to keep as his payment, thinking it is a lump of silver. Mengmei puts him off saying that the “essence that she has vomited . . . must be treasured as a precious heirloom.”<sup>18</sup> The comedic tendency of the play, and particularly this scene, combined with the sparseness of stage directions and explication, impede an understanding of how exactly Liniang can return to life. What brings Liniang back is not a heavenly or physiological phenomenon but *qing*, love itself. As sinologist Judith Zeitlin puts it, *Peony Pavilion* “was both the culmination of the late Ming glorification of *qing* (sentiment, love, passion, desire) and a primary vehicle for the promotion and dissemination of *qing* as a cardinal virtue for more than two hundred years.”<sup>19</sup> Tang Xianzu defined *qing* in his manifesto-like preface to the play: “*Qing* is of origins unknown, yet it runs deep. The living can die for it, and through it the dead can come back to life. That which the living cannot die for or which cannot resurrect the dead is not love at its most supreme.”<sup>20</sup> *Peony Pavilion* makes it clear that *qing* calls the *hun* back to Liniang’s body, but despite the comedy of the scene, there is also a medical logic to it.

When Liniang revives, she is very weak, and the nun suggests that they make medicine for her by cutting the crotch out of Mengmei’s pants and mixing it with wine. The *Systematic Compendium* suggests this is a particularly good medicine to cure diseases of sexual exhaustion and depletion, and the strongly *yang* aspect of the mixture is consistent with medicines to revive the dead.

Although extreme emotions were serious causes of illness, Liniang’s death and resurrection were more a result of literariness and popular trends than of medical mechanisms. But literary figures can be lost on less sophisticated readers, as in Wu Bing’s *Lady in the Painting* (Huazhong ren). When the servant (played by a clown) prepares to dig up the heroine’s coffin as part of his master’s plan to resurrect her, he complains: “There’s never been such a thing in the world! Where did he come up with this notion? I expect it’s from having misread *The Soul’s Return*, so he thinks there really was a Du Liniang who came back to life. My master is truly an idiot!”<sup>21</sup> Wu Bing may have been satirizing the popularity of *Peony Pavilion* and its many fans who fell in love with its characters. But many, including sophisticated readers, believed that resurrection was possible.

Fin de siècle newspapers ran several articles about *hun*-souls returning by occupying the bodies of corpses not their own. One of them, published in 1888, “The False Soul’s Return” (Jia huanhun ji), explicitly challenges this kind of credence, pointing out that those who believe that Du Liniang actually returned to life are not only incorrect, but dangerously at risk of being duped by swindlers. It then recounts the story of a conman pretending to be a deceased husband who returned to life in another’s body to seduce widows. The argument here seems to hinge as much on Confucian morality—anyone seducing virtuous widows must be peddling lies—as it does on the enduring credulity of *Peony Pavilion*’s naive readers.

It was not uncommon to read stories about grave robbers who, upon discovering a beautiful corpse, sexually violate it, resulting in the deceased female victim returning to life.<sup>22</sup> This notion hinges on two suppositions. The first is that death, a yin state, can be counteracted by yang, and more specifically *jing*, male essence or semen that is the embodiment of yang. The second is that the corpse must not have the key indicator of long-term death—rot. Liniang’s body, though it has been in the ground for three years, had not decomposed. This state, both in entertainment literature and elsewhere, was commonly believed to be the result of the unjust death of a virtuous person.<sup>23</sup> It was also commonly believed, as stated in the *Systematic Compendium*—and as evident in excavated early Chinese burial sites—that jade and gold, if buried with the deceased, prevented the corpse from decomposing. Ji Yun wrote in a letter to his older brother that a case of a missing corpse in his district sounded much like one he had heard about in Tianjin, where a concubine of a wealthy family who had been bullied and abused by her husband’s first wife hanged herself in a mulberry grove. County officials were unavailable to investigate immediately, so a guard was posted at the scene. When the officials finally arrived, there was no guard and no body. Years later, it was discovered that the guard, aroused by the concubine’s beauty, violated her corpse, and “the corpse revived after receiving the essence of a living person, and they agreed to become husband and wife and fled to Shenzhou together. This was a true story that happened at the end of Emperor Kangxi’s reign, and I saw the entire file with my own eyes.” Ji Yun then goes on to surmise that the case in his brother’s district is the same. The only reason someone would steal a corpse would be to prevent litigation of the bereaved family

against those who drove her to suicide. In this case, the deceased was a maidservant in a eunuch's household (Ji Yun writes that it was not yet known if she was beautiful), and therefore presumably there was no sexual abuse, so there would be no reason for a wrongful death lawsuit. It is more reasonable to believe that her corpse was violated, brought back to life, and then fled with whomever brought her back. Further, Ji Yun muses on the ethics of such a case: "Legally, raping a corpse and then fleeing with the corpse constitutes two types of crimes. But from a Buddhist perspective, the maidservant was abused and died with grievances, and the guard managed to bring her back to life, so it should not be a crime."<sup>24</sup>

A common trope in entertainment literature is that a soul returns to its recently deceased body because the original inhabitant has been given an extension of life after review of their worthiness by a judge in the underworld. Sun Wukong crosses his name off Yama's list in *Journey to the West*, and Qin Zhong is allowed to return to his body for one last encounter with Jia Baoyu in *Story of the Stone*. These stories of a *hun* returning to its dead body abound in *biji* and in collections of anomalous accounts. But these are also attested to in accounts written and propagated by officials.<sup>25</sup>

Medical manuscripts in the Unschuld Collection at the Berlin State Library have many methods to call back a wandering *hun*, seen as the ultimate cause of many illnesses, especially of children.<sup>26</sup> One manuscript tells of a female shaman called to a family to make the true *hun* return (*shou zhen-hun*) to their son. She chants an incantation that calls on popular and local gods to return the *hun*. After this, the family offers gold and silver to the door god and puts a talisman under the pillow of the sick child, chanting, "Lost *hun*, lost *hun*, not knowing where it is, by the river or in the wild, in temples or mountain gates, general touring the mountains and the five paths, the local earth god, the ancestral stove lord, please find the lost *hun*, and urgently send it back to the door [god]. I hereby obey the command of the Supreme Elder Lord, quickly and urgently, as if it were a decree."<sup>27</sup> Such a record is rare since shamans tended to transmit their knowledge orally, and in secret.

It was also a tool of the state to propagate the notion that good deeds could lead not only to a longer life but to a return from death. *Illustrated Exhortations and Admonishments*, published in 1594 by Anzheng Tang Bookstore in Jianyang, Fujian was an epistemic text written specifically in simple

language and accompanied by a woodblock print illustrating the plot so that it could reach the widest possible readership. It contained two hundred very short stories, each labelled either “virtuous” or “wicked,” with each titled “The Retribution for [Certain Behavior].” Most frequently, the stories of goodness hinge on a filial act that is rewarded either by the protagonist or their sons passing the imperial examinations and attaining high office, though sometimes immortality. Predictably, the stories of evil deeds provoke much more imaginative responses from the cosmos. It is unknowable if Zou Diguang himself believed all that is contained in his book, much of which aligns with accounts in *zhiguai* and anomalies in entertainment literature, but he believed reifying this gossip—appealing to common knowledge—would help him govern.

The *hun* and *po*, according to medical texts, were unstable, barely tethered to their place in the body. Many medicines in the *Systematic Compendium* pacify (*an*) or stabilize (*ding*) the *hun* and *po* and sometimes the spirit (*shen*). Under the entry for cinnabar, Li Shizhen describes “lost *hun*, a strange disease: when a person believes his own physical appearance to be split into two persons that walk together and lie down to sleep together, and when [that person] is unable to distinguish between the real and the false, this is a disease of’ a *hun*-soul loss.”<sup>28</sup> It is unsurprising, given familiarity with this condition, that entertainment literatures were preoccupied with the dangers of being unable to distinguish between truth and fiction. *The Story of the Stone*, in particular, toys with the liminality or transmutation of real and false not only as a trope but also as a symptom of soul-loss.<sup>29</sup>

In a cosmos that encompassed transformation, reincarnation, and soul-loss, it was not a stretch to imagine that souls could also transfer from one body to another. There were many accounts of the accidental possession of one dead body by the *hun* of another. Ji Yun writes to his wife, “In the letter you sent, you said that the mother of Lan Ji had died and come back to life, with a changed voice and unable to recognize her children. This is not some strange illness, but rather a case of borrowing a body to resurrect the *hun*. The original person has already perished, and the one living is someone else’s *hunpo*, hence she cannot recognize her own children.” He goes on to tell an account he heard from his student about his wet nurse dying and coming back to life the next day. She asked where she was, and everyone assumed

she was babbling in her illness. Her voice and posture were both like a man's, and she didn't recognize her husband when he came to see her. Her family members knew something was wrong and asked her in detail. She finally admitted that she had originally been a man who had died a few days ago and been released by the king of the underworld to return to life, but because of a deficit in yin virtue was returned to the body of a woman. Ji Yun writes, "The resurrection of Lan Ji's mother is like this woman's case. This is also good material for *biji*."<sup>30</sup> Similar accounts do abound in Ming and Qing *biji*—and all manner of entertainment literature.<sup>31</sup> Does this suggest that Ji Yun considers *biji* to be fictionalized accounts of true stories or the best way to propagate investigations into the workings of nature? Either way, the workings of the *hun* transcended bodies, genres, and realms of knowledge.

## The Living Dead

To investigate what animates bodies, we need to consider the movements of the dead. What is the difference between a person who is alive and a "stiff corpse" (*jiangshi*) that can move about and attack people? If a "stiff corpse" can move without a soul, what animates it? Yuan Mei discusses the walking dead at length. In one entry, he writes that a friend of his described Henan: "There were many coffins temporarily placed in fields, and consequently [locals] often suffered from stiff corpses grabbing people." The problem, he said, was that you could break off their arms, but you still couldn't really escape because their claws would dig into the flesh so far. The solution was to nail red date pits into spinal acupuncture points of the dead. Only then would their hands relax.<sup>32</sup> This matter-of-fact account could just as well have come from materia medica. Yuan Mei uses the phrase "has worked repeatedly with immediate effect" (*lūshi zhexiao*), ubiquitous in medical literature, to proclaim the utility of the red dates in treating attacks by stiff corpses.

It seemed to be a given that *jiangshi* were bodies that lacked a *hun*, but some people speculated that *jiangshi* had a kind of evil qi animating them and poisoning the living who breathed it. Yuan Mei and Ji Yun both contemplated reanimation without re-ensoulment. Yuan Mei tells the story of a man who dies of illness far from home, but he returns as a ghost and asks his friend to take care of his wife and mother, to publish his manuscripts, and to pay off his

debts. His friend agrees. He (at this point, the story refers to him as “the dead one”) then makes to leave but is detained by his (living) friend. They reminisce, and after a while, the dead friend’s face “grew ugly and slowly began to decay.”<sup>33</sup> Frightened, the living friend goes to leave, and the dead friend (now referred to as “the corpse”) gives pursuit. The corpse chases his former friend for miles, and the friend eventually jumps over a wall, after which he faints. The friend is revived with ginger broth the next day, and the family of the deceased, who had been out looking for the missing corpse (now inanimate), carries it back home.<sup>34</sup>

Having discharged his posthumous duties, the corporeal ghost’s *hun* departs, leaving the *po* behind. The *po*, alone, animated the body with either resentment (for the living) or a bestial need to kill without regard to former ties. Yuan Mei, or some other “knowledgeable person” (*shizhe*) as he claims, commented on this story:

The *hun* is benevolent and the *po* malevolent, the *hun* is sentient [*ling*] and the *po* is witless [*yu*]. When [the dead] first came to visit, his sentience had not yet dispersed. The *po* followed the *hun*’s lead. They moved together, but once his unfinished business was resolved, his *hun* scattered and his *po* was left behind. When *hun* is in [the body], the person still is, and when *hun* departs, the person is no longer. The moving corpses [*yishi*] and running shadows [*zouying*] of the world are all the doings of *po*. Only a man of the Dao can subdue the *po*.<sup>35</sup>

Ji Yun summarizes this account from Yuan Mei, and at the end of the document, he quotes verbatim Yuan Mei’s “knowledgeable person’s” comment. His account claims:

1. There are two souls, the *hun-soul* and *po-soul*, and they are the same as *ling*, the same term used to describe “numinous” and sentient things.
2. The attachment of *po* to *hun* enables life.
3. The *hun-soul* disperses once one’s worldly concerns are attended to, which then leaves just the *po-soul* behind. This animates the corpse.

4. The *hun* is the seat of personality, but not of agency.
5. Moving corpses and walking shadows are all transformations of the *po*.

Ji Yun says that all these claims “are indisputably reasonable and make good sense”; however, “from my narrow perspective, in the end I suspect there are also other causes.”<sup>36</sup> Twenty-first-century readers might presume, given Ji Yun’s status as one of the empire’s most well-read scholars, that he is skeptical of Yuan Mei’s claims, but he puts forward a theory that builds on Yuan Mei’s. He suggests that the root cause of these *jiangshi* moving while dead, having enough *life* to attack people but not enough *sense* to spare friends and relatives, was that there was some soul-stealing sorcerer, malefic thing, wandering spirit, or perverse *qi* controlling the body, something unseen attached to the corpse.

### Malevolent Qi and Corpse Attachment Illness

There were many kinds of *qi*. In the *Systematic Compendium*, there are as many kinds of *qi* inside the body as there are organs, as well as blood *qi*, hot and cold *qi*, and *hun* *qi*. Pain could be attributed to leg *qi*. Outside of the body, different kinds of *qi* were emitted by all things and categorized according to their origins—trees, forests, rocks, fire, water, silver, and gold, as well as seasonal *qi*, moist *qi*, medication *qi*, varieties of wind *qi*, and on and on. Each species of animal and bug had its own kind of *qi*. Some illnesses are discussed as having or being a kind of *qi* such as “occlusion *qi*,” or retching *qi*. Yin and yang *qi* pervaded bodies and environments in differing proportions. There were even ways of marking time with *qi*—the hours from *zi* (23:00–01:00) to *si* (09:00–11:00) were those of living *qi* (*shengqi zhi shi*); the hours from *wu* (11:00–13:00) to *hai* (21:00–23:00) were those of dead *qi*.<sup>37</sup> Important for understanding Ji Yun’s theory of corpse animation—the “other causes”—is the notion that there are also kinds of malefic (*xieqi*), malign (*e’qi*), ghostly, or demonic *qi* (*guiqi*). One or another kind of *qi* could “attach” itself to things and people and exert control over them.

These attachment illnesses were common in medical texts, suggesting not just that outside forces had entered the body but that death itself had a *qi* that

was contagious. Chao Yuanfang (early seventh century) explained that *zhu* 注, “influx,” also connotes *zhu* 住, “to be attached to.” This means that the illness is chronic. After an attack by a demon is cured, there may be lingering qi that resides in the patient, causing outbreaks of pain until death. After the patient dies, this qi flows over into a bystander. Hence one speaks of “demon influx” *guizhu* 鬼注.<sup>38</sup> At some point, attachment / influx *zhu* 注 became pathologized as attachment-illness *zhu* 疰, which obfuscated its demonological origins. It was used to form compounds such as “overexertion attachment-illness” (*laozhu*), “bug attachment-illness” (*chongzhu*), “poison attachment-illness” (*duzhu*), “heat attachment-illness” (*rezhu*), “food attachment-illness” (*shizhu*), and “corpse attachment illness” (*shizhu*). Distinguishing between these kinds of illnesses caused by malefic external factors (e.g., demon influx, corpse influx, etc.) and their vectors (e.g., corpse transmission, corpse influx, corpse qi) was both difficult and, it seems, unnecessary.

The influx of noxious or malign qi into the body was a major source of illness, and many of these were associated with corpses.<sup>39</sup> It was not just that corpses produced an awful smell and that corpse qi was believed to affect organs negatively. It was that such qi implicated demons. The qi invaded or poured into a body (*zhu* 注), caused illness (*zhu* 疰), but also lingered after it was cured (*zhu* 住), and would be passed on to subsequent generations or passers-by. The passing on of the lingering illness to those proximally or relationally close to the deceased is reminiscent of “marrying the golden silkworm” and is likely why medicines that treated corpse-attachment often also treat *gu* poisoning.

The corpse and corpse qi illnesses (*shibing* and *shiqi*) listed in *Systematic Compendium* are coequal with or interchangeable with “demon-attachment-illness,” “demon influx,” and the “five corpses” (presumably different kinds of corpse qi): flying corpse, fleeing corpse, wind corpse, sunken corpse, and corpse-attachment.<sup>40</sup> These illnesses were marked by a piercing roving pain, often accompanied by absent-mindedness, “jumbled essence spirit,” mental derangement, an inability to recognize people, and illusory visions. These are also symptoms of *hun* soul-loss, suggesting that the syndromes are related, as we will see below.

Family and members of the community often worried that the qi or other forces tied to the physical corpse could contaminate objects, which in turn

could contaminate those who encountered them. People could be infected by a residence, by clothes or bedding, or by food or medicine belonging to the deceased. If a patient died of “corpse pouring” or depletion- consumption, his clothes, utensils, and residence were all likely to retain harmful qi, which could then infect his relatives and neighbors if they could not afford to dispose of them.<sup>41</sup> This kind of transmission or infection, this pollution or stain, shows that death was not inert, not final. It transformed inert things into virulent ones.<sup>42</sup>

The debate about what came out of corpses, and when, was not always gruesome. Souls were thought by some to have a luminescence. The notion that souls glow, and that they transform into fireflies, may draw on the earliest meanings of *po* or its variant *ba*, describing the growing light of the new moon.<sup>43</sup> Glowing souls might refer to the kind of moral luminosity humans can achieve through ritual practice or other methods of cultivation, akin to the inner glow thought to reside in jade and to be revealed when polished.<sup>44</sup> Glowing souls might also draw on the warmth of the body and the inner fire thought to keep it that way. That souls glow is a notion that may have drawn on all these beliefs, bolstered by empirical evidence of the bioluminescence of bacteria that grew in the wounds of corpses that had not yet begun to decay.<sup>45</sup>

The location and mechanisms of the *hun* were still ambiguous. Personality seemed to reside in the *hun* but still interacted with other organs. There are stories in which exchanging one heart for another makes the transplant recipient smarter but does not alter his personality at all.<sup>46</sup> Li Shizhen describes symptoms of *hun*-soul loss as “feeling that there is another self wandering about. The figure is identical to the patient but does not speak.”<sup>47</sup> Some tales describe the physical shape of the soul as a bird, firefly, dragon, or a tiny person.<sup>48</sup> Wandering souls, from the earliest such stories through the imperial period, often take the size and shape of their owners.<sup>49</sup> Yet as much as *hun* were tied to life and personhood, there were many stories of things coming to life without them.

Ji Yun recounts a story of a broom coming to life. It was unremarkable that such an object could cultivate its spiritual energy (*lingqi*) and develop the ability to transform, but this instance was unusual because the broom had adorned itself with stolen flowers, tantamount to bragging about its spiritual attainment, which tipped the family off that it was a demon. They threw it

into the fire where it bled, moaned, and died. Another account tells of a large tree that had never been there, blocking Ji Yun's servant's path on his way home one night. As he tried to go around it, the tree seemed to move and rotate, blocking him at every turn. Suddenly, two woodcutters appeared on the scene and rushed toward the tree with their saws and axes, after which the tree transformed into a whirlwind and disappeared. Ji Yun argues that it was the qi of the woodcutters, rather than their strength, that the tree feared.<sup>50</sup> Ji Yun seems to accept Xunzi's definition of human life. Xunzi had said, "Water and fire have qi but no life [*sheng*], plants have life but no awareness [*zhi*], animals have awareness but no morality, while humans have qi, life, knowledge, and a sense of what is right."<sup>51</sup> The broom and tree both have qi, life, and they both achieve awareness, but lack the ultimate component of humanity, which is why the woodcutters' qi is stronger. Ji's presumption that these things are demonic hinges on his belief that although the forces of the cosmos can be harnessed by anything to attain higher states of being, they should only be accessed by humans.

### Paper Men, Voodoo Dolls, and Inanimate Objects

Things that looked like people were the most likely to come alive or most susceptible to becoming animated. *Plum in the Golden Vase* records a sort of contest of black magic between two women vying for one man's affection and sexual and material attention. One, a singsong girl who won Ximen Qing's affections, secures a lock of Pan Jinlian's hair to place in her shoe and tread on it, with the intent, presumably, of causing her pain, illness, or simply estrangement from Ximen. Thereupon, Jinlian becomes dispirited, loses her appetite, and has headaches and heart pains to such a degree that her "sister" wives call Madame Liu to attend on her. Jinlian employs Madame Liu's husband because he can affect a "turnabout" (*huibei*) in Ximen's affections. He makes a paper talisman using the eight numbers of Jinlian's birth and doing some unspecified divinatory calculations. Jinlian then burns the talisman (*shenzhi*) and drinks its ashes with water.

Following this, Liu creates a pair of male and female effigies out of willow wood. He inscribes them, again, with Jinlian's "eight characters," binds them together with red thread, fastens a strip of red gauze over the eyes of the male

effigy, stuffs artemisia (*ai*) into its heart cavity, secures its hands with needles, and sticks its feet together with glue. The turnabout produced the desired effect.<sup>52</sup> The efficacy hinges on metaphor with the binding together of lovers and the staying of feet and hands. But there is also a medicinal aspect to the magic—artemisia was believed to avert poisonous qi if shaped into the form of a man and hung above the door.<sup>53</sup> Willow and camphor wood were required to make these simulacra along with paper figures, as we will see.<sup>54</sup>

But there is another system at work here—the stealing or use of something imbued with a kind of life force that could exist independently from the body. This life force was believed to be concentrated in fetuses, inner organs, and hair, rather than in flesh. It could be obtained through various means, such as directly removing these parts of the body and transforming them into medicine (usually in the form of a pill) or indirectly by uncovering an individual's precise date and time of birth, known as the eight characters (*bazi*), which were often kept secret for this very reason.

The reader of *Plum* has already been advised by the narrator to suspect the likes of the Liu spouses in its many “gentle reader” (*kanguan*) passages. Modern readers may be inclined to view the Lius as harmless charlatans, rogues whom the reader is warned to avoid, but silly enough to dismiss as peripheral to the story. But the great variety of readers in the late Ming may have viewed this scene as one of uncanny realism, more ominous than comical—and a sign that Jinlian and her competitors will truly go to any length to achieve their aims. The creation of paper or willow dolls (*zhiren* or *liushen*) and the misuse of the “eight characters” would have been serious business even to savvy readers of *Plum* if they were of a certain age, because of a widespread panic over paper figures that had happened within living memory.

The first extant reference to *Plum* indicates that a manuscript of the first part was already in circulation among a small coterie of intellectuals as early as 1596.<sup>55</sup> These men may have been born too late to have experienced the collective fear of 1557, but it is possible that the author of *Plum* did. The novel's early readers would likely have heard about outbursts of fear of sorcerers and accounts of their imbuing paper objects with life.<sup>56</sup> These accounts were rampant from 1555 to 1558 in the entire coastal region from the Yangzi River down to Guangdong, and in the inland area of Hengzhou in Guangxi. At the same time several religiously tinted incidents took place in and around Huzhou,

Jiaxing, and Hangzhou, which in the historical accounts authored by the literati merged with the fear of paper figures.<sup>57</sup>

From the 1557 outburst onward, these events were described most often as the result of magicians creating and controlling paper objects. This form of magic seems contingent on the belief that inanimate objects could change into living things either naturally, in the course of time, or because of human magic.<sup>58</sup> Ji Yun records many such accounts.<sup>59</sup> In one letter to his wife, Ji Yun urges her to burn all the lifelike human figurines the grandchildren play with, because one day they might come to life: “Toys that resemble humans can often transform after a long time. . . . You must check if there are any toys among the grandchildren’s belongings that resemble humans and throw them all into the fire. Doing this is much more effective [for exorcising evil spirits] than setting up an altar and chanting sutras.”<sup>60</sup> Before she had any sons, Ji Yun’s mother played with and cared for clay figures she got from a local temple. When she died, her father had the figures buried in the backyard because he was afraid they would turn into monsters.<sup>61</sup> Ji Yun takes up his grandfather’s stance here, showing one way in which common knowledge circulates and stays alive—patriarchal wisdom.

The fear of human figures and those who controlled them would likely also have been the lived experience for readers of early Chinese newspapers in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The “collective fear” or “soul stealing” epidemic of 1768 may have influenced the author of *Story of the Stone*, who writes about a jealous mother employing a woman to bewitch, stupefy, and sicken, with paper dolls, the two people keeping her son Jia Huan from thriving, Jia Baoyu and Wang Xifeng. This practice was certainly known to Ji Yun and Yuan Mei, who lived through the collective fear of paper men.<sup>62</sup>

The technique of bringing alive dolls to do one’s bidding consisted of creating a doll out of wood, straw, or (from the Song onward) paper, and imbuing it with the life force of a victim or occasionally a demon. Although the method could also be used for good—for example, in the cases of exorcising disease demons, in which case the demon was made to descend into the image, which could then be burned—but most often, they were used to harm people both by stealing life force and then using a subsequently animated figure to steal from, harm, or menace others. The sorcerers perpetrating these crimes were thought to be Daoist priests, puppeteers, shamans, fortune tellers, and carpenters.<sup>63</sup>

A large 1917 anthology of historiographical essays, unofficial historical sources, stories, and reports from early Chinese newspapers has an entire category of accounts listed under “paper men become evil spirits.”<sup>64</sup> In it, a three-inch paper man is found in a chicken coop with maimed chickens. There are rumors in Wuzhong about sorcerers cutting braids to enliven paper men.

Paper men press down on the chests of sleepers, causing nightmares, illness, and then death. Sorcerers read aloud incantations and write talismans, causing the true spirit to fly off and animate a paper man. Xu Ke records that

during the Dingyou and Wuxu years [1897–98], in the region south of the Yangtze River, it was widely rumored that men’s braids, women’s hair buns, children’s genitals, and chicken wings were being cut off. At midnight when the roosters crowed, people would dump out dirty water [around their homes] revealing small paper figures holding knives, about an inch long. Some believed these acts to be the doings of the White Lotus Sect.<sup>65</sup>

One family, investigating urgent knocking at their door, found a small paper figure wriggling in the gap of the door, which they grabbed and doused in urine, whereupon it stopped moving. Upon inspection, they found the figure to be about five inches tall, holding a pair of paper scissors. Fearing that it would cause harm again, the family burned the paper figure and threw it into the toilet.<sup>66</sup> These fears were predicated on the notion that life was fungible, transmutable, contagious.

All manner of texts in premodern China discussed and debated what animates bodies and what it takes for a body to be permanently still and to decompose, but they expressed little consensus on distinctions and definitions. Even among medical doctors, anecdotes showed profound comfort with ambiguity about delimiting the space between life and death, to an extent that moderns (perhaps especially those raised in the milieu of Abrahamic traditions) cannot abide. Although *qi*, essence, and blood are often discussed as the foundations of life and health in the Chinese tradition, we see a lot of curiosity about the *other* things that animate bodies, *hun* and *po*, fire, spirit, and a variously named life force that was concentrated in parts of the body such as the heart and hair, and which could be transferred from

body to inanimate thing to body. The extensive fear of these practices and the ubiquity of these beliefs, as discussed or implied in practical and entertainment literature, reveal common knowledge about life that was simultaneously widespread and contested.

# Conclusion

In the spirit of looking for information in commentaries, appendices, and supplements, let us consider one last example demonstrating readers' uses of *xiaoshuo* that will aid us in imagining just how great the variety of early modern readers was. A healer, making a manuscript for his own use, transcribed passages from a contemporary novel, *Quell the Bandits* (Dangkou zhi).<sup>1</sup> The author of the manuscript, "Yi of Shanggu" (Shanggu Yi), likely was writing either after the 1871 publication of the novel in Shanghai or after its circulation increased when it was republished by the newspaper publisher Shenbaoguan in 1883. The novel had been published earlier in Suzhou and Guangzhou, but the Taiping general Li Xiucheng (1823–1864) took Suzhou in 1860 and ordered that all copies of *Quell the Bandits* be confiscated and its printing blocks destroyed.<sup>2</sup> The author of the medical manuscript observed taboos against writing the name of the emperor, so he probably wrote before 1911, the end of the Qing dynasty, although there were loyalists after the fall who observed written taboos of a prior era.<sup>3</sup>

*Quell the Bandits* is a complex and fascinating novel, one that is very much of its time and shocking, in a way, for undoing the point and ethos of an earlier work. Like many of the texts discussed in this book, it is a "sequel" to another work that it seeks to supplement, correct, or complete, in this case the foundational Ming novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* (Shuihu zhuan), to which the author Yu Wanchun (1794–1849) added another seventy chapters.<sup>4</sup>

*Outlaws of the Marsh* chronicles 108 Robin Hood–like heroes and heroines who, based in the marshes of Liangshan, fought for their cause of romantic fraternity in defiance of the imperial call for law and order. Among the most popular *xiaoshuo* in early modern China, *Outlaws* was condemned from time to time for spreading treasonous thought. *Quell the Bandits* sought to repudiate the "bandit ideology" of *Outlaws*; its heroes and heroines rise to serve the Song court and succeed in eliminating other rebels and their ethos. Its conservatism aside, *Quell the Bandits* addresses a range of issues that became the

central concerns for politically engaged writers in the twentieth century. In this way, the novel anticipates the rise of the modern Chinese political novel.<sup>5</sup>

In the aftermath of the first Opium War (1839–1842), at a time when world geography, Western scientific information, and military technologies were being introduced to China, *Quell the Bandits* sought to mix recently acquired Western epistemology with ancient Daoist beliefs, historical saga with supernatural fantasy. Through rewriting *Outlaws of the Marsh*, Yu sought to create a space where different political beliefs, timelines, and fantastic modes of narrative were brought into play. For these reasons, some scholars have referred to the *Quell the Bandits* as “science fantasy,” consistent with a major theme of works published by Shenbaoguan.<sup>6</sup> Hindsight offers another irony to Yu’s novel. On the eve of the Boxer Rebellion (1900), it became patriotic to believe that the Boxers possessed a mysterious power that kept them “bayonet and bullet proof,” a power that would help China win back its dignity and glory after the opium wars and the indignities of their aftermath. This was a moment when Chinese conservatives willingly suspended their disbelief that Chinese magic could win out over Western weaponry. They behaved as if they were determined to reenact the fantastic moments of *Quell the Bandits*, although Yu’s novel was already an anachronistic summary of historical fantasy. The disastrous consequences of the Boxer Rebellion were the death knell for the Qing dynasty, as well as for the possibility of fantastic solutions to early modern problems.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, *Quell the Bandits* was popular, influential, and innovative as a novel of social commentary and fantasy, but the author of the medical manuscript leaves no indication that he was aware of or interested in the novel’s literary or social significance.<sup>8</sup> The novel’s fantasy did not impugn the veracity of its useful information, with which he supplemented his medical knowledge about ginseng, a common pharmaceutical ingredient.

Our healer was interested in a passage about capturing a “ginseng spirit” (*shenxian*), with the shape of a man (like the shape of the graph *ren* 人 in the Chinese word for ginseng, *renshen*), who, having matured over a thousand years, is able to run around in the moonlight. The novel details the hunt for the “ginseng spirit,” its capture, and its subsequent escape. Given this flight of fancy, we might be inclined to question the sophistication of our (seemingly, at least partially) self-educated healer, who takes informa-

tion about the ginseng spirit as true, practical information. But that would be ungenerous. Though the “ginseng spirit” seems to be an invention of *Quell the Bandits*, such stuff was attested to in very important, mainstream, authoritative medical texts. The *Systematic Compendium* records, “Digging into the earth, they found a ginseng [root] shaped exactly like a human body, with four complete limbs. Everyone fell silent. Considering this, the name ‘spirit of the soil,’ appears to be more than appropriate. . . . When the root has a human physical appearance, it is endowed with a spirit.”<sup>9</sup> Readers could be forgiven if the “fantasy” they found in entertainment literature sounded reasonable based on their other readings or experience. Excising almost every literary aspect of a story to capture its essential information was not just the purview of the middlebrow reader, however. In hundreds of passages in the *Systematic Compendium*, Li Shizhen mentions information obtained from entertainment literature such as stories, poems, and brush notes, from which he edits out the entertaining parts—figurative language, rhyme, dramatic tension, descriptions, and dialogue.<sup>10</sup> Medical texts such as the highbrow *Systematic Compendium* and the middlebrow manuscript that features *Quell the Bandits* quote accounts that seem strange but edit them to highlight their perceived useful bits, deleting the art but retaining the “matter.” Li Shizhen and the medical manuscript author essentially turn a short story *chuanqi* into a record of anomalous data *zhiguai*. Thus, in early modern China, in practical and entertainment literature, stories codified bits of information, which in turn built on, interrogated, challenged, reified, and evolved common knowledge of the unseen world.

It is not clear if our physician reader is blithely unaware of *Quell the Bandits*’s social and literary critique or if he simply did not record those thoughts in his manuscript, but his account reveals two things. The first is that he did not read this *xiaoshuo* as “fiction.” *Quell the Bandits* was (as many novels were) both banned (by the Taiping Kingdom) and promoted (by the Qing) because of an overwhelming belief that people would imitate what they found there. The affective power of entertainment literature defied its own fictionality—the *xiaoshuo* may have been constructed, but its effects were real. For the author of the medical manuscript, this novel also contained real, useful information. And second, this reading suggests a belief in the supernatural that coexisted with the notion of realism, that prefigured the Boxers—the waning

of “magic” in China—and demonstrates that what we modern scholars often think of as strange was not only not strange but considered preferable to certain kinds of modern technology and science.

Ji Yun was a great reader and scholar, but he also relied on his own experience and eyewitness accounts to evaluate common sense and puzzle out mysteries of the natural world. Writing decades before *Quell the Bandits*, Ji discusses the nature of souls, divination, *gu* poison and witchcraft in a single, remarkable passage:

As for the death of a person, according to Confucian discourse, the *hun* ascends and the *po* descends; even according to Buddhist discourse, ghosts are taken to the underworld and cannot return to the human realm. . . . Common practitioners of the vulgar arts even have a book that can predict the day, hour, and direction of departure [of the soul], which seems the utmost in fabrications. However, I once witnessed [a soul] from a distant window departing like a wisp of white smoke emerging from the chimney, slowly drifting southwest and vanishing. It matched the predicted time and direction exactly. I have also twice carefully observed the place where ashes were spread, the handprints and footprints were exactly as if from a living person, recognizable by the deceased’s relatives. What explanation is there for this? Misfortune and fortune are predestined, life and death are numbered. Even sages and wise men cannot contend with creation. Yet in the world, there is *gu* poison and arts to cause death by witchcraft, clearly recorded in penal codes. I have not seen *gu* poison, but I have seen witchcraft many times. Those who practice such arts are nothing more than blind fortune-tellers and construction workers. Yet they really can affect disaster and fortune, life and death, with verifiable results. Are the powers of heaven, earth, ghosts, and spirits so unguarded as to be manipulated without restraint? What explanation is there? There must be a principle within, but just beyond human comprehension.<sup>11</sup>

The conclusion of this passage echoes that of Li Shizhen discussed in the introduction, that the changes and transformations of the world and of

humanity are limitless and yet at the same time require investigation using multiple approaches. It may have been this attitude that allowed readers to free information from the constraints of genre as much as it was the amorphous and eclectic nature of certain genres that enticed readers to plumb them.

Authors intended their books to be read by particular groups, but who their readers actually were and what readers actually got out of their books was another matter. As much as it pained the literati, books in early modern China were just as likely to be purchased, or even treasured as objects, by merchants and nouveaux riches who were less sophisticated readers.<sup>12</sup> Readers had diverse abilities, and the proliferation of texts on the market—highbrow to lowbrow—reflected awareness of this diversity on the part of publishers. In prefaces to his story collections, Feng Menglong discusses writing even for those who cannot read, “since villagers, children, ordinary women, and peddlers are easily stirred to joy or wrath by what others do rightly or wrongly, take guidance in their actions from stories about the operations of karma, and gain knowledge from hearsay and gossip, popular historical romances can well serve as supplements where the classics and the histories are found lacking.”<sup>13</sup>

I hope *Observing the Unseen* appeals to a great variety of readers, just as *xiaoshuo* did in early modern China. Much of what lies within may seem fantastical, but it was not thought to be just fiction.<sup>14</sup> *Xiaoshuo*, strange tales, miscellanies, and drama were archives of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> The factor that makes *xiaoshuo*, or *biji xiaoshuo* a meaningful category is that it recorded information generally thought to be of lesser importance to serious scholars.<sup>16</sup> A *xiaoshuo* anthology might include a great range of genres and forms: verse, an inventory of Daoist mountains and rivers, recipes, a ranking list of soups, a tea guide, manuals of calligraphy and painting, and so on.<sup>17</sup> Li Shizhen and Zhao Xuemin filled their authoritative texts on natural history with quotations and citations from *xiaoshuo*, *biji*, and other texts created primarily for entertainment. The very long, very complicated, novels of the sixteenth- through nineteenth centuries were created by highly educated, brilliant authors who seem to have written their books largely for their similarly highly educated, brilliant, friends. But once published, these books were fair game for all kinds of readers. At least some, and some very influential, early modern readers

and editors considered *xiaoshuo* and *biji* sources of reliable information. The importance and influence of mainstream twentieth- and twenty-first-century (May Fourth and post-May Fourth) scholarly interpretations of *xiaoshuo* regard the genre as primarily literary, but this need not obfuscate our understanding that among the great variety of readers were those who had other uses for *xiaoshuo* too. They were not primarily interested in constructedness—or even the literary artistry—of *xiaoshuo* and other entertainment literature. Rather, early modern readers mined them for *information*. When it came to investigating things that were unseen or rarely seen, these kinds of texts were sources of information even for authors of the most authoritative texts. They did not see *biji* and *xiaoshuo* purely as fiction. Literary features and artistry did not obfuscate the ways in which *xiaoshuo* and other entertainment literature, part of a large ecosystem of texts, contributed to readers' common understanding of the real world.

## CHINESE CHARACTER GLOSSARY

Proper nouns, including medicines, are capitalized. Texts that are not in the bibliography are listed here and italicized.

- ai 艾  
Ao Shun 敖順
- ba 霸  
bagua 八卦  
bai 稗  
*Baihai* 稗海  
bantian he shui 半天河水  
banxia 半夏  
baolei zhensi 暴雷震死  
*Beimeng suoyan* 北夢瑣言  
*Bencao shiyi* 本草拾遺  
bi gudu shenfang 辟蠱毒神方  
bianhuan wuchang 變幻無常  
biji 筆記  
bixie 辟邪  
bu 部  
budao 不道  
buke 卜課  
buqiuren 不求人  
buzhi shishi 不知事實  
buzhi tuiye biye 不知蛻耶斃耶  
buzhiren 不知人  
buzhirenshi 不知人事
- Cao Cao 曹操  
*Cehou congtan* 測候叢談
- chaizi 拆字  
Changpu 菖蒲  
changshi yu quwei 常識與趣味  
Chen Cangqi 陳藏器  
Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬  
Chen Shou 陳壽  
Chen Tuan 陳搏  
Chen Zhengmin 陳正敏  
Cheng Hua 成化  
Cheng Yi 程頤  
chong (bug) 蟲  
chong (gun/firearm) 銃  
chong (meridian) 衝  
Chongzhen 崇禎  
chongzhu 蟲疰  
chuanqi 傳奇  
chuanxinguan 穿心罐  
cidaozhong 祠道中  
Congshu Jicheng 叢書集成  
Cui Wei gong zhuan 崔魏公傳  
cusi 卒死
- dahuang 大黃  
daliu ren 大六壬  
Dan Minglun 但明倫  
*Dangkou zhi* 蕩寇志  
dansha shuifa 丹砂水法

danshui 膽水  
Dao zang 道藏  
daodi yaocai 道地藥材  
dawen 大瘟  
Deng Zhimo 鄧志謨  
Deyueyi congshu 得月籙叢書  
di 蠟  
dianhuo 電火  
diao 吊  
didong 蟬蛻  
Dili canzan xuanji xianpo ji 地理參贊  
    玄機仙婆集  
dizhen 地震  
Dong Dezhang 董德彰  
Du Guangting 杜光庭  
Duan Chengshi 段成式  
Dunzhai xianlan 遁齋閑覽  
duzhu 毒疰  
  
e'qi 惡氣  
ernügong 兒女宮  
e'rou 惡肉  
  
fabing 法病  
Fan Dan 範單  
Fang Yizhi 方以智  
Fangji gejue fuzhou 方劑歌訣符咒  
fangshi 方士  
fangshu 方書  
feijishi 費雞師  
feishi 飛屍  
feishi guizhu 飛屍鬼疰  
Feng Xisai 馮喜賽  
fengcao 風操  
Fengshan shu 封禪書  
Fengsu tong 風俗通  
Fengsu tongyi 風俗通義

fengxie 風邪  
fudu 服毒  
fuji 附記  
fulu 附錄  
  
“Gai bazi kujin ganlai” 改八字苦盡  
    甘來  
gan 感  
Gan Luo 甘羅  
gantong 感同  
gebi 割臂  
gegan 割肝  
gegong 割肱  
gegu 割股  
geru 割乳  
gexie 割脅  
gexin 割心  
gexiong 割胸  
gu 蠱  
Gu Yanwu 顧炎武  
guai 怪  
guaipi 怪僻  
guan 貫  
Guan Yu 關羽  
Guanchang xianxing ji 官場現行記  
Guanyin 觀音  
gudu 蠱毒  
gudu yujiu 蠱毒遇救  
gui zhen wei tuo 鬼真畏唾  
Gui zhuoyi shouwang 鬼著衣受網  
guigu 鬼蠱  
guigui 鬼歸  
guiguzi zhibing fa 鬼穀子治病法  
guimei 鬼魅  
guiqi 鬼氣  
guisha 歸煞  
guizhu 鬼疰

Gongsun He 公孫賀  
Gongsun Jingsheng 公孫敬聲  
Guo Pu 郭璞  
guqi 蠱汽  
  
haishi shenlou 海市蜃樓  
haishui zhi jing 海水之精  
hamagu 蝦蟆蟲  
hanba 旱魃  
*Hanyuan congji* 翰苑叢記  
haoshizhe 好事者  
He Bang'e 和邦額  
He Mengchun 何孟春  
He Shouqi 何守奇  
hong 虹  
Hong Mai 洪邁  
honghong 蛭蛭  
*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢  
hongni 虹蜺  
*Hou shuihu* 後水滸  
Hua Feng 華封  
Hua Tuo 華佗  
Hua Tuo xiansheng shuifa 華佗先生  
水法  
Hua Tuo xianshi michuan 華佗仙師  
秘傳  
*Hua tuo zhuan* 華佗傳  
huachuang fushi 畫瘡符式  
huachuang zhou mofa 畫瘡咒墨法  
huajia shuogui 花甲說鬼  
Huang Liuhong 黃六鴻  
*Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經  
huanhun 還魂  
*Huanhun ji* 還魂記  
huguanfu 護官符  
huisha 回煞  
huisheng 回生

huisheng zhibao 回生至寶丹  
hun 魂  
Hunan 湖南  
hunpo 魂魄  
husui 胡葵  
Hyakki Yagyō Shūi 百鬼夜行拾遺  
  
Ji Yun 紀昀  
Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉  
*Jia huanhun ji* 假還魂記  
Jia Rong 賈蓉  
Jia Yucun 賈雨村  
Jia Zheng 賈政  
*Jiachuan lingxiao fang* 家傳靈效方  
*Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集  
Jiang Cheng 蔣成  
Jiang Yinghao 蔣應鎬  
Jiang Ziya 薑子牙  
jiao 蛟  
jiaoshen 蛟蜃  
Jidu 計都  
*Jie Shuihu zhuan* 結水滸傳  
Jie'an laoren manbi 戒庵老人漫筆  
*jiechong* 介蟲  
ji'egong 疾厄宮  
Jieqi shui 節氣水  
jieshi huanhun 借屍還魂  
Jifeng chaishi zhibao 急奉差使之報  
jihuo 即活  
jincan 金蠶  
jing 靖 (pacify)  
jing 精 (refined)  
jing 驚 (shock)  
jing shen 精神  
jingbusi 驚怖死  
Jinghuan xiangu 警幻仙姑  
jingmei 精魅

jingqi 精氣  
jingshixin 驚失心  
Jingxin lingfu 靜心靈符  
jinhou 晉侯  
jinjiang 金漿  
jinjilei (cinchona bark) 金雞勒  
jinkao 今考  
Jinshi yuan 金石緣  
jiulongchong 九龍蟲  
jiuman guobei 酒滿過杯  
juna xiemo leipiao 拘拿邪魔雷票

kanguan 看官  
ke qi 可奇  
Kong Yingda 孔穎達  
konglong 恐龍  
Kongming 孔明  
Kou Zongshi 寇宗奭  
koujintuo 口津唾  
Kuaiyuan zhiyi 獮園志異  
kuigu 刮股

langjin 狼筋  
Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng 蘭陵笑笑生  
laomei 老魅  
laozhai 癆瘵  
laozhai huanzhe zhi huishengshu 癆瘵  
患者之回生術  
laozheng 勞蒸  
lei 類  
Lei Pian 類篇  
leifa 雷法  
leigong bei wu 雷公被汙  
leiguo youwu 雷果有物  
leihu shenqi 類乎蜃氣  
leishen 雷神  
leiwán 雷丸

leizhen 雷震  
Leizhen ji 雷震鷄  
Leizhen quan 雷震犬  
leizhiyi 類之義  
Li Bei 劉備  
Li Dongyang 李東陽  
Li Dongyuan 李東垣  
Li Nezha 李哪吒  
Li Ping'er 李瓶兒  
Li Ruzhen 李汝珍  
Li Shanren 李善人  
Li Shizhen 李時珍  
Li Tiegua 李鐵拐  
Li Xiucheng 李秀成  
Li Xu 李詡  
liandu 鍊度  
Liang Xin 梁新  
Liaozhai zhiyi shiyi 聊齋志異拾遺  
Liaozhai zhiyi yigao 聊齋志異遺稿  
lin 麟  
Lin Daiyu 林黛玉  
linchong 鱗蟲  
ling 靈  
Ling Mengchu 凌濛初  
lingchu 靈畜  
linggui 靈龜  
lingwu 靈物  
lingye 靈液  
lipu 曆譜  
liquan 醴泉  
liuhuang 硫磺  
liushen (willow doll) 柳神  
liuren 六壬  
liuren shenke 六壬神課  
long 龍  
Long Bo 龍柏  
long zhi zhong lei 龍之種類

Longjing 龍經  
longma 龍馬  
longsheng jiuzi 龍生九子  
longxian xiang 龍涎香  
longxie 龍泄  
Lu Fengzao 陸鳳藻  
“Lu Pan” 陸判  
Lu Rong 陸容  
luma ding shengsi jue 祿馬定生死訣  
luming 祿命  
luohou 羅睺  
luosha haishi 羅刹海市  
Lügui 呂龜  
lushi zhexiao 屢試輒效  
Lüyuan Conghua 履園叢話  
  
Ma Zhi 馬志  
mafeisan 麻沸散  
maibing 賣病  
maiouren 埋偶人  
Mao Banxian 毛半仙  
maqian ke 馬前課  
mayi xiangfa 麻衣相法  
Mei Nü 梅女  
Meishi fang 梅師方  
meiyu 徽雨 (mold rain)  
meiyu 梅雨 (plum rain)  
mengjie 夢解  
Miaofu xuan 妙復軒  
miaofu 妙趣  
Miaoyu 妙玉  
Miben zhuge shenshu 秘本諸葛神術  
Min Qiji 閔齊伋  
minchong wei gu 皿蟲爲蠱  
mingfan 明簪  
minggong 命宮  
mingmen 命門

miuyan 謬言  
mojie qigu 莫解其故  
mu 目  
Mufu yanxian lu 幕府燕閑錄  
  
“Nanchang shiren” 南昌士人  
Nanzhong zaji 南中雜技  
Nezha 哪吒  
ni 蜆 / 覓  
nielong 孽龍  
Nü ershi xiao tushuo 女二十四孝  
圖說  
nuqi 怒氣  
  
pa shuiqi 怕水氣  
paiban jing 拍板精  
Pang E 龐阿  
Peng Zu 彭祖  
Pi Rixiu 皮日休  
pilei 霹靂  
pilizhen 霹靂砧  
po 魄  
po hua hun gui 魄化魂歸  
po hua ke 魄化課  
pougan jiu gu 剖肝救姑  
Pu Jing 普靜  
Pu Songling 蒲松齡  
pula 蒲牢  
  
qi 氣  
Qian Xiyan 錢希言  
“Qiaoren suanzhang” 橋人算帳  
“Qiji chengyin shuo” 奇疾懲淫說  
qijiao shui 起蛟水  
qimen dunjia 奇門遁甲  
Qin Shubao 秦叔寶  
Qinggen feng 青埂峰

- qiniu 囚牛  
 qise 氣色  
 qishui fa 起水法  
 qishui michuan 起水秘傳  
 Qiu Jun 邱濬  
 qiulong 虯龍  
 quanlong 泉龍  
 qubing 祛病  
  
 rengui 人傀  
 renshen (ginseng) 人參  
 rezhū 熱疰  
 rishu 日書  
 riyong leishu 日用類書  
 Rong Yu 榮譽  
  
 Sanguo zhi 三國志  
 sanming mitan 三命秘談  
 sanshi 三屍  
 “Sanshiliu shuifa” 三十六水法  
 shachong 殺蟲  
 Shanggu Yi 上穀毅  
 Shanggu zhinan 商賈指南  
 Shangshu 尚書  
 shanlongzi 山龍子  
 shashen 煞神  
 shashen beici 煞神被刺  
 shen 蜃  
 Shen Fu 沈復  
 Shen Gua 沈括  
 sheng 箐  
 sheng (life) 生  
 Shenglie zhuan 聖烈傳  
 shengqi zhi shi 生氣之時  
 shenlou 蜃樓  
 shenqilou 蜃氣樓  
 shenshui 神水  
  
 shenwu 神物  
 shenxian 參仙  
 shenzhi (talisman) 神紙  
 shi 事 (affairs)  
 shi 詩 (poetry)  
 Shi Chong 石峴  
 Shi Shengzu 史繩祖  
 Shi Shuqing 施淑清  
 shichong 屍蟲  
 shi'e 十惡  
 shijue 屍厥  
 shilongzi 石龍子  
 shiqi 屍汽  
 Shishang leiyao 士商類要  
 “Shishou yimifa jue (zhou)” 師授醫  
 秘法訣(咒)  
 shiyan 世言  
 shizhu 屍疰/注 (corpse attachment  
 illness)  
 shizhu 屍蛀 (corpse larvae)  
 shizhu 食疰 (food attachment illness)  
 shou zhenhun 收真魂  
 shuigui zhou 水鬼帚  
 shuizu zhi chang 水族之長  
 Shujing 書經  
 Shuli jingyun 數理精蘊  
 Shuofu 說郛  
 Shuyuan zaji 菽園雜記  
 si 死  
 sida mingzhu 四大名著  
 sida qishu 四大奇書  
 Sima Qian 司馬遷  
 Sima Yi 司馬懿  
 Song bencao 宋本草  
 Songyin manlu 淞隱漫錄  
 su 蘇 / 甦  
 Suiyuan biji 隨園筆記

Sun Guangxian 孫光憲  
Sun Wukong 孫悟空  
Sun Fangbo 孫方伯  
sushang haoqi 俗尚好奇

Taiping Xianren 太平閒人  
Taishen 胎神  
Taixu Jing 太虛境  
taiyang zhi jiqi 太陽之激氣  
Tang Shenwei 唐慎微  
Tang Taizong 唐太宗  
Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀  
tian dalei pi 天打雷劈  
tiandao bu yuan 天道不遠  
tiandao zhao zhang 天道昭彰  
tianjing huowen 天經或問  
tianma 天馬  
tianxiang 天象  
tianzhongni 田中泥  
tiaosheng 挑生  
tiaosheng gu 挑生蠱  
tishen 替身  
tonggan 同感  
tongji 童乩  
tongshu 遇書  
Toriyama Sekien 鳥山石燕  
tujing 土精  
tulong 土龍  
tuolong 鼃龍

Wanbao quanshu 萬寶全書  
Wang Shifu 王實甫  
Wang Tao 王韜  
Wang Tingxiang 王廷相  
Wang Xifeng 王熙鳳  
wei 魏  
Wei Zheng 魏徵

Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢  
Weigao 韋臯  
weizhi ran fou 未知然否  
wengui 瘟鬼  
Wenyuange shumu 文淵閣書目  
wu 午 (seventh earthly branch; 11  
a.m.–1 p.m.)  
wu 巫 (shaman)  
wu 物 (thing)  
Wu Jiayi 吳嘉紀  
Wu Shenxian 吳神仙  
Wu Song 武松  
Wu Yueniang 吳月娘  
wubeizi 五倍子  
wugu 巫蠱  
wugu ciji zhuzu 巫蠱祠祭祝詛  
wugu mowei zhi shi 巫蠱魔味之事  
wugu zhi huo 巫蠱之禍  
Wujing zongyao 武經總要  
wuli xiaozhi 物理小識  
wulou shui 屋漏水  
wuxing 五星  
Wuxing zhuan 五行傳  
wuyi er gantong 物異而感同  
  
xiangfa 相法  
xiangya ganlei er wensheng 象牙感雷  
而文生  
xianji 仙機  
xiao shi long 消食籠  
Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛  
Xiepu 蟹浦  
Ximen Qing 西門慶  
xionghuang (realgar) 雄黃  
Xin Tangshu yiwen zhi 新唐書藝文志  
xingshi 行屍  
Xingshi yan 型世言

xinhuo 信活  
xiren zao qiangshui zhi fa 西人造強  
水之法  
Xu Yijian zhi 續夷堅志  
Xu Yingqiu 徐應秋  
Xu Zhen 徐畛  
Xu Ziping 徐子平  
Xu Zuanzeng 許纘曾  
xuancheng jiehun 玄承接魂  
xuanfeng 旋風  
Xuanzang 玄奘  
Xue Baochai 薛寶釵  
Xue Pan 薛蟠  
xueshan zhou 雪山咒  
xuezhai zhanbi 學齋占畢

Yan Hui 顏回  
Yan Junping 嚴君平  
Yan Zhitui 顏之推  
Yang Chouma 楊抽馬  
Yang Shen 楊慎  
Yang Wangcai 楊望才  
Yang Xiong 揚雄  
Yang Yunsong 楊筠松  
Yangchong miaofang 洋蟲妙方  
Yangchong puxu 洋蟲譜序  
“Yanggu hairen zhi fangfan” 養蟲害  
人之防範  
Yangshi 陽石  
Yanlong 鹽龍  
yanyi 演義  
yao 妖  
Yaofang chaoben 藥方抄本  
yaofu xieshu 妖符邪術  
“Yaosui shu” 藥崇書  
Yaoping kao 藥性考  
Ye Mengde 葉夢得

Ye Qianshao 葉遷韶  
yeci 夜祠  
yeshi 野史  
Yetan conglu 夜談叢錄  
Yetan suilu 夜談隨錄  
yi 醫 (medicine)  
yi 噫 (wow)  
“Yifang jichao” 醫方集抄  
Yijianzhi 夷堅志  
Yijing 易經  
ying 應  
yinglong 應龍  
yingsheng chong 應聲蟲  
yinli gudu zhi bao 陰埋蟲毒之報  
Yinshu Shazi zhihaiwen 淫書殺子之  
駭聞  
yinchui zhi fa 飲水之法  
yishi 異事 (anomalous account)  
Yishi 異史 (Historian of the Strange)  
yishi 移屍 (moving corpse)  
yishu 醫術  
Yishuo 醫說  
yisizhe 已死者  
You Yi 遊藝  
youxing zhiwu 有形之物  
Yu 禹  
Yu Wanchun 俞萬春  
Yu Xiangdou 餘象鬥  
Yuan Haowen 元好問  
Yuan Mei 袁枚  
Yuan Shoucheng 袁守成  
Yuan Tiangang 袁天罡  
Yuan Xuansi 袁宣四 (formal name  
Yuan Fan 袁藩)  
Yuanling (County) 沅陵  
Yuchi Gong 尉遲公  
Yudong xulu 餘冬續錄

*Yujing xintan* 玉鏡新譚  
*Yunzhong Zi* 雲中子

*zaiyi* 災異  
*Zaofan* 皂礬  
*Zaoxu gudu* 造畜蟲毒  
*zeri* 擇日  
*zhai [ji]* 瘵[疾]  
*Zhang Congzheng* 張從正  
*Zhang Fei* 張飛  
*Zhang Tianshi* 張天師  
*Zhang Xinzhi* 張新之  
*zhanke* 占課  
*zhanwu* 占巫  
*Zhao Wenshan* 趙文山  
*Zhao Xuemin* 趙學敏  
*zhe* 螫  
*Zhenglei bencao* 證類本草  
*zhenrou* 震肉  
*Zhenru Fudi* 真如福地  
*zhi* 擲  
*zhi (awareness)* 知  
*zhiguai* 志怪  
*zhiren* 紙人

*zhiren wei sui* 紙人爲祟  
*zhisi* 治死  
*Zhou Zuoren* 周作人  
*zhu* 注  
*zhu* 疰  
*zhu* 住  
*Zhu Changzuo* 朱長祚  
*Zhu Xi* 朱熹  
*zhuan* 轉  
*Zhuangzi* 莊子  
*Zhuge bingfa* 諸葛兵法  
*Zhuge Liang* 諸葛亮  
*Zhuge Liang ji* 諸葛亮集  
*Zhuge Liang quanshu* 諸葛亮全書  
*zhuji* 竹雞  
*zhuyou* 祝由  
*Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類  
*zhuzu* 祝詛  
*Zichai ji* 紫釵記  
*Zixing* 自省  
*Zong Dingbo* 宗定伯  
*Zou Diguang* 鄒迪光  
*Zou Lang* 鄒閔  
*Zuozhuan* 左傳



## NOTES

When quoting from the *Bencao gangmu*, I follow the original Chinese and cite chapter and entry (e.g., 14.28). My translations follow Paul Unschuld's with emendations where possible, though much of this manuscript was written before his translations were published. The reader can find Unschuld's translations of the passages I cite by looking up the same chapter and entry in his complete translation: Li Shizhen, *Ben Cao Gang Mu*, the complete Chinese text translated and annotated by Paul U. Unschuld, 9 vols., University of California Press (2021–24).

### Introduction

Epigraph: *Bencao gangmu* (*Systematic compendium*), chapter 41, entry 18 (hereafter, citations to chapter and entry number for this work will be set as chapter.entry, for example, as 41.18).

1. This is true also of the classics. Li quotes the *Book of Songs* over a hundred times, but also the *Mencius*, *Book of Changes*, and others.
2. Unschuld, introduction to Li Shizhen, *A Catalog of Benevolent Items*, 8.
3. There is some debate about the meaning of the title, since it is like that of Duan Chengshi's (d. 863) miscellany titled *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang* (Youyang zazu). Xie explains in his preface that he is discussing weaving together of information from different genres like making ribbons woven from five colored threads.
4. Xie, *Wuzazu*, juan 1, "Heaven."
5. *Shenbao* 申報 (newspaper). "Lun leiji longjian ershi 論雷擊龍見二事 [On thunderbolts and dragons: two accounts]. July 16, 1877.
6. Lam, "Premodern Fiction and Fiction Collections," 249.
7. *Shenbao* 申報 (newspaper). "Jinghua yuan chushou" 鏡花緣出售 [*Flowers in the Mirror* goes on sale]. December 29, 1880.
8. West and Idema, introduction to Wang Shifu, *The Story of the Western Wing*, 3.
9. Rolston, review of *The Story of the Western Wing*.
10. For translation and commentary of "Yingying's Story," see Yu, Bol, Owen, and Peterson, eds. *Ways with Words*, 173–201.
11. This summary is adapted from Lanselle, "This Fearful Object of Desire," 206.
12. For a book-length discussion of paintings with these kinds of multilayered meanings, see Wu Hung, *The Double Screen*.
13. Again, this is mostly Lanselle's summary; see "This Fearful Object of Desire," 207.
14. Guidebooks specifically for merchants included titles such as *Guide for Merchants and Traders* (Shanggu zhinan) and *A Reference Book for Merchants and Traders* (Shanggu painlan). One was titled *Categories of Essential Concern for*

- Literati and Merchants* (Shishang leiyao), speaking to an awareness of publishers of their highbrow and middlebrow audiences.
15. For thorough investigations of the *Bencao gangmu*, see Nappi, *The Monkey and the Inkpot*; Métailié and Hsu, “The *Bencao gangmu* of Li Shizhen”; and the introduction to Li Shizhen, *Ben cao gang mu* (translated by Paul Unschuld).
  16. See Zheng Jinsheng et al., *Dictionary of the Ben Cao Gang Mu*; and Zhang Zhibin, *Bencao gangmu yinwen suyuan*.
  17. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 48.08, “rou.”
  18. See the entry in Zheng Jinsheng et al., *Dictionary of the Ben Cao Gang Mu*, 3:662.
  19. Searching the LoGaRT (Local Gazetteers Research Tool) produced over twenty-one thousand hits for titles collected in the *Complete Song Biji*. Some titles are cited hundreds of times each.
  20. Shang Wei, “The Making of the Everyday World”; and Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*.
  21. Son, *Writing for Print*; He, *Home and the World*.
  22. Atwood, “The Textual History of Tao Zongyi’s *Shuofu*,” 1.
  23. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 67.
  24. Although Pu’s collection was composed over a thirty- or forty-year period in the last decades of the seventeenth century and beginning years of the eighteenth, it wasn’t published until 1766. From that date until the *Dianshizhai* pictorial, at least ten collections of anomalous accounts often mentioned by modern scholars as literary heirs to *Liaozhai* were published; see Wang, “Foreign Devils, Chinese Sorcerers,” 2.
  25. He Bian, “An Ever-Expanding Pharmacy,” 157. She discusses the prefaces to many *bencao* texts in her book *Know Your Remedies*.
  26. *Bibliographic Treatise in the New History of the Tang, Xin Tangshu yiwén zhī* (1060). The generic term *xiaoshuo* is not as broad in scope as the general term “narrative” but it is a catch-all term in the Chinese tradition (Gu, *Chinese Theories of Fiction*, 17). See Plaks “Toward a Theory of Chinese Narrative.”
  27. In Yuanling County in Hunan.
  28. Zhiyan zhai commentary to *Honglou meng*. See Yu, *Rereading*, 8.
  29. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei* (Plum in the golden vase), chapters 43 and 44.
  30. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 51.31.
  31. Zeitlin, *Phantom Heroine*, 28; Furth, *A Flourishing Yin*, 54.
  32. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 52.37.
  33. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 52.34.
  34. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai*, “dizhen,” 170.
  35. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 39.17.
  36. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 40.02.
  37. Li Shizhen is speaking specifically about bugs here.
  38. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 5.10.
  39. For ease of reading, I translate *chong* as “bug” or sometimes “worm.” Although

it can mean more generally any small animal that creeps or flies, is hairy or naked, and has a shell or scales, the texts in which I find that term—often medical ones—are discussing specific small critters that we would usually classify as insects or insects in their larval stage. Perhaps “insect” would be a better translation, since the term can be used metaphorically to refer to people or people who behave badly. Historically, *chong* could mean “creature,” but it was invariably modified when it had that use. I define *chong* as Li Shizhen does, as worm/bugs, in contradistinction from animals with scales 鱗, animals with shells 介, fowl 禽, four-legged animals 獸, and people 人. See chapter 3 for more discussion of *chong*.

40. Xie Zhaozhe, *Wuzazu*, juan 9.
41. Barnes, *Intimate Communities*, 101–2.
42. Publisher’s note in the 1624 edition of Feng Menglong, *Stories to Caution the World* (Jingshi tongyan).
43. *Wanbao quanshu* (Complete book of myriad treasures) Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. Thanks to Richard Smith for this reference.

## 1. Fortune Telling, Storytelling

1. Yang and Hu, “Mapping Chinese Folk Religion,” 514.
2. Lackner and Zhao, *Handbook of Divination*.
3. Durrant et al. in *Zuo Tradition/Zuozhuan* records more than 130 accounts of divination, to name one example.
4. Besio, “Zhuge Liang and Zhang Fei,” 75.
5. Luo Guanzhong, *Sanguo yanyi*, 1:434. Jian Yong does this also in chapter 41.
6. Ho, *Chinese Mathematical Astrology*, 116–17.
7. Ho notes that “Chinese novels abound with mentions of ‘xiu zhong yi ke’ (a divination done under the sleeves), that Li Ruzhen in his *Jinghua yuan* regards as being how immortals get news of happenings in distant places and seek foreknowledge of coming events.” Ho, *Chinese Mathematical Astrology*, 137.
8. Among the most famous of these temples and shrines are the Temple of the Marquis of Wu in Chengdu, Sichuan, and the Temple of the Marquis of Wu in Baidicheng, Chongqing. Zhuge Liang’s function as a door god is usually performed in partnership with Sima Yi of Wei.
9. Cao Xueqin, *Honglou meng*, chapter 47, page 538. Quotations from *Honglou meng*, unless otherwise noted, are from Cao Xueqin, *Bajia pingpi Honglou meng*.
10. Cao Xueqin, *Honglou meng*, chapter. 4. Yucun may be somewhat more sympathetic than my brief summary implies, since he declines to fake the planchette reading, though this is really because it would not “stop people from talking.” This episode also facetiously invokes mantic arts when Yucun originally learns that Xue Pan is a member of a powerful house by consulting a handbook for local officials entitled “Amulet for Protecting Officials” (Huguanfu).
11. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, 102, 69.
12. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, chapter 102, page 74, I follow Hawkes, with

- emendations. Ho Peng Yoke has some theories as to why the *liuren* method was superior to the *Yijing* in the prediction of mundane affairs in his *Chinese Mathematical Astronomy*, 32.
13. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, chapter 102, 5:74.
  14. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, chapter 101, 2328.
  15. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*.
  16. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, chapter 101, 5:43.
  17. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, chapter 94, 4:337–39. Brigid Vance discusses this kind of glyptomancy as a key to dream interpretation in “Deciphering Dreams.” See also Kelly, “Riddles in *Jin Ping Mei*.”
  18. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, chapter 116, 5:295.
  19. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, chapter 95, 5:305. The titular Stone begins and ends his story at the base of Greensickness Peak (*Qinggen Feng*).
  20. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, chapter 5, 1:130. The novel’s insistence on good reading is repeated throughout, as well as in prefaces and commentary. See Schonebaum, introduction to *Approaches to Teaching the Story of the Stone*. See also Yu, *Rereading the Stone*.
  21. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, chapter 114, 5:1524.
  22. *Miaofu xuan* (a.k.a. *Taiping xianren*) commentary.
  23. In Rolston, *How to Read*, 336.
  24. Yehe, “*Du Honglou meng zhaji*,” 286. This is a late-Qing work. Rolston, *How to Read*, 322.
  25. The wives do this on three separate occasions: chapters 24, 44, and 45.
  26. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei Cihua*, 1:13, 272.
  27. Found in manuscripts. See, for example, “Xiao’er gezhong jingtu”; “Yaoshu fang”; and “Zhuyou chaoben.” These sources are discussed in Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 1:162–64.
  28. Roel Sterckx gives an account of the history of the heavenly horse and its affiliation with dragons in *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China*, 184.
  29. Also known as *Yang Dexian fu shagou quan fu*.
  30. Ling Mengchu’s (1580–1644) 1628 collection *Slapping the Table in Amazement* (*Erke pai’an jingqi*) contains a story that mentions the *Luma* method.
  31. See Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*.
  32. Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 2:1780.
  33. Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 1:174.
  34. For the sake of consistency with the Egerton and Roy translations, I do not disambiguate between Ximen Qing’s primary wife and his concubines.
  35. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei Cihua*, 4:40; Xiaoxiao sheng, *Jin ping mei Cihua*, 61.25a.
  36. The method of fortune telling based on the “eight characters” of one’s horoscope, traditionally attributed to a shadowy tenth-century figure named Xu Ziping.
  37. The *Dragon Canon* is an abbreviated reference to several works on geomancy

- that contain this term in their titles and that are doubtfully attributed to Yang Yunsong (late ninth century).
38. *Wuxing* is a term used by physiognomists who correlate the five planets—Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, Venus, and Mercury—with the five phases—fire, earth, wood, metal, and water—and with the forehead, nose, right ear, left ear, and mouth.
  39. *Sanming mitan* refers to the Han dynasty concept that divided human fate into three categories: allotted fate, deserved fate, and contingent fate.
  40. Chen Duan (895–989) played a significant role in Chinese philosophy but has also become a magus figure in popular lore, associated with numerology, physiognomy, and other mantic arts. For his biography, see *Song shi* (History of the Song [dynasty]), vol. 38, *juan* 457.
  41. I follow Roy, *Plum*, with emendations. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei Cihua*, 29.4b. Yan Junping (fl. first century BCE) made his living by fortune telling in the market of Chengdu but was also a devoted Daoist teacher, reputed to have instructed the famous Confucian scholar Yang Xiong (53 BCE–18 CE). For his biography, see Ban Gu, *Han shu*, vol. 7, *juan* 72.
  42. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei Cihua*, 2:172.
  43. Paul Varo Martinson considers this issue in his dissertation “Pao Order and Redemption.”
  44. Daily-use encyclopedias usually contained chapters devoted to medicine, culture, practical arts like agriculture or carpentry, and to divination. Many included all, and all included some of the following chapters that provided guidance on how to perform different methods of divination: “Choosing days” (*zeri*), “Fate Calculation” (*zhanwu, buke, buyuan, zhanke*), “Interpretation of dreams” (*mengjie*), “Fate calculation from the stars” (*xingming*), “Physiognomy” (*xiangfa*), “Statutory diseases” (*fabing, qubing*).
  45. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei Cihua*, 122, with emendations.
  46. Tang Xianzu, *Tang Yireng xiansheng zichai ji*, 346–48; 2554.
  47. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei Cihua*, 3:147.
  48. See my discussion of Li Pinger’s death in *Novel Medicine*, chapter 5.
  49. Jidu (Sanskrit: Ketu) is the name of one of two imaginary “dark stars,” or invisible planets (the other being *luohou*, Sanskrit: Rahu), introduced into China during the Tang dynasty through the translation of works on Indian astronomy as part of a theory to account for lunar eclipses. In China, it was regarded as a baleful influence presaging disaster.
  50. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei Cihua*, 3:127, with emendations.
  51. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei Cihua*, chapter 29, 10b.
  52. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei Cihua*, 2:213. These words are traditionally attributed to Chen Tuan.
  53. “Hsun-Tzu’s Philosophy as a Key to the Novel.” Roy, “Introduction,” xxiv–xxvii.
  54. Roy, “Introduction,” xxv.
  55. Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 7, *juan* 74, 2348. Translation adapted from Sima Qian, *Records of the Historian*, 74.

56. Xunzi, *Xunzi*, book 17, 179.
57. Xunzi, *Xunzi*, book 9, 78.
58. See the introduction in Schonebaum, *Approaches to Teaching the Plum in the Golden Vase*.
59. See Yu, *Rereading the Stone*, chapter 1.
60. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, 4:298.

## 2. Thunder, Writing, and Justice

Epigraph: *Dianshizhai huabao* (1890), “Xiezi beiji,” *daketang* edition, 13:114. The article also reports that “people from Jiangbei have been specifically collecting old notebooks, newspapers like Xin Wen, Shen, and Hu, paying ten times the price, and transporting them to Tianjin for sale to shoe shops as insoles. They can earn about 50 wen per jin. This pursuit of private gain in defiance of principle is extreme.”

1. Another account of reverence for lettered paper from *Dianshizhai huabao* (henceforth, *DSZ*) 134 (1890). See also the entry showing a parade to dispose of the ashes of lettered paper in the ocean. It was held on the twentieth day of the third month and included people dressed in costumes from traditional drama. The banner at the front of the procession reads: “Respectfully Escorting Sacred Remains.” *Daketang* edition, 7:102.
2. It became more and more difficult to sustain this custom in late-nineteenth-century Shanghai. Printed reading materials, including newspapers, were increasingly common, and paperwork generated by firms and factories made lettered paper virtually ubiquitous. Nonetheless, Shanghai gentry and other upholders of traditional values frequently published articles in *Shenbao* exhorting people to continue showing proper reverence.
3. See, for instance “Fenglei shi jing” in *Shenbao*, May 17, 1887.
4. *Shenbao* “Leiji buxi zigu,” March 14, 1873; *Dianshizhai huabao*, “Leimai nifu,” *DSZ* 4600.
5. *Shenbao*, “Zhenji kou er,” August 10, 1886.
6. Huntington, “The Weird in the Newspaper,” 364–65.
7. I follow Pollard in translating *Yuewei caotang biji* “Perceptions” since *Yuewei caotang* is simply the name of Ji’s study and so has no direct bearing on the contents, but *yuewei* suggests the notion of small inklings or perceptions, xii. Ji Yun, *luanyang xiaoxia lu*, 11, 26, 152, 66, 138.
8. This is the case with “accounts of the strange” by Pu Songling, Yuan Mei, and Ji Yun.
9. See accounts from *Systematic Compendium* and *Illustrated Admonishments*, below.
10. Cao Xueqin, *Honglou meng*, 60.188. The concept of “heaven” (*tian*) traditionally encompassed the phenomenological reality of the sky, a principle that governs the universe, the natural order of things or the laws of nature, and a supreme cosmic force that is also a moral authority and ultimate arbiter of right and wrong.
11. *Taishang ganying pian*, in *Daozang*, 1159.1.1a–21a.

12. Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture*, 37.
13. Yuan Mei, *Zibuyu*, “The Thunder God Becomes Polluted” (Leigong bei wu), 23:455. Santangelo, “Introduction,” 1126.
14. Zou Diguang, styled Yangu, also known as Yugou, was a native of Wuxi in Zhejiang Province during the Ming dynasty (now Wuxi, Jiangsu). He became a *jinsi* (imperial scholar) in the second year of Wanli (1574) and held the position of *xuezheng* (educational administrator) in Huguang. He was skilled in poetry and prose and excelled in painting landscapes. Zou initially published *Quan jie tushuo* privately, but it was reprinted widely by Anzheng Tang.
15. Anzheng Tang was associated with at least five printers and produced some eighty imprints from the beginning of the sixteenth century through the second decade of the seventeenth century. The variety and quality of the Anzheng Tang printshop was typical of Jianyang in the late Ming, producing a wide variety of texts, including the classics, histories, household encyclopedias, medical works, and illustrated works of fiction. Chia, *Printing for Profit*, 52.
16. Chia, *Printing for Profit*, 164–66.
17. Zou Diguang, *Quan jie tushuo*, 2:18b–19a.
18. Zou Diguang, *Quan jie tushuo*, 3:6b–7a.
19. Wang Tonggui, *Ertan* (1603), *juan* 6.
20. See Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare*, for a brilliant and extensive discussion of this novel.
21. Cited from the *Essentials of Martial Classics* (Wujing zhongyao), which contains the *Transmission of the Five Elements* (Wuxing zhuan), a text that had been lost by the late Ming.
22. Zhao Zhiwu, *Xinke simin binlan Wanshu cuijin*, 1.9a.
23. Shen Gua, *Mengxi bitan quanbuan*, 21.
24. Huang Liuhang, *A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence*, *juan* 16.
25. Ji Yun, *Yuewei caotang biji*, 229.
26. *Luanyang xiaoxia lu*, 138.
27. I follow Pollard, with emendations. See Ji Yun, *Real Life*, 148–49.
28. Wang Tonggui, *Ertan leizeng*, “Leizhen,” *juan* 49. See chapter 6 for another instance of this life-restoring measure. Thanks to Mark Meulenbeld for this reference.
29. Huang Liuhong, *Complete Book of Happiness and Benevolence*, *juan* 4.
30. Hong Mai, *Yijian zhi*, “Leizhen quan,” 600; and “Leizhen ji,” 1116.
31. Cheng Yi (1033–1107), quoted in Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*,” 327; *Yishu*, 18.237 in Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, *Er Cheng ji*.
32. One of the earliest sources that attests to this ending is Zhu Changzuo, pages 123–24, 126, 143ff. *Shenglie zhuan* also has Wei Zhongxian see spirits of the murdered officials coming back to haunt him just before his suicide.
33. Ji Yun is most likely referring to *Yetan suilu* by He Bang’e, which was published in 1791, the same year as this account (100).
34. Ji Yun, *Yuewei caotang biji*, *rushi wo wen*, 4.

35. Ji Yun, *Yuewei caotang biji, luanyang xiaoxia lu*, 120.
36. *Shenbao* subscribers received the *Dianshizhai* pictorial every ten days, but it was also available as a standalone publication and in bound volumes of twelve issues.
37. *Dianshizhai huabao*, “*Leiji wugong*,” DSZ 0422.
38. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, chapter 5.
39. Versions of lost texts cited in the *Systematic Compendium* frequently tally with versions recorded in the *Shuofu*. Zheng et. al., *Dictionary of the Ben Cao Gang Mu*, 3:487.
40. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, chapter 37, abbreviated from *Shuofu*, chapter 25. Thanks to Paul Unschuld for this observation.
41. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium* 37.05. Thunderbolt mushroom is one of the things that results from “transformations of the qi of items struck by thunderbolt. . . . It has neither a seedling nor leaves but is able to kill worms/bugs and repel evil qi.”
42. Li Ruzhen, *Jinghua yuan*, chapter 30.
43. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 51.05. The word for elephant, *xiang*, also refers to the images from which the first Chinese characters were derived.
44. Wang Chong, *Lunheng*, *juan* 6, 16a–b.
45. Wang Chong, *Lunheng*, *juan* 6, 293.
46. Wang Chong, *Lunheng*, *juan* 6, 17b.
47. Wang Chong, *Lunheng*, *juan* 6, 18a.
48. Wang Chong, *Lunheng*, *juan* 6, 23, “on thunder and the void.” Wang gives the example of Lady Zhong, wife of Duke Hui of Lu, who was born with “Wife of Lu” clearly written on her palm and hence married into Lu.
49. Anonymous, *Huang Ming zhaoling* 皇明詔令 1.27– 28b.
50. *Huang Ming zhaoling*, 1.33ab.
51. Qian Xiyan, *Kuaiyuan*, 683.
52. Edward Davis writes that the four thunder deities, or the four names for a single thunder deity from at least the third century BCE—Leizi, Leishi, and Leigong—and the triad of other divinities—Tianmu, Fengbo, and Yushi—with whom he is linked, all retain their importance in the thunder magic texts of the Song. See *Society and the Supernatural in Song China*, 250.
53. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China*, 250.
54. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China*, 25.
55. *Ming Shi* 明史, 7654, quoted in Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare*, 154.
56. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi* “The Thunder God (*Leigong*)”; Yuan Mei, “The Thunder God Becomes Soiled” (*Leigong beiwu*), in *Zi buyu*. Paolo Santangelo argues the thunder god is a particular target of sarcasm in Yuan Mei, *Zibuyu*, “Introduction” 30–31.
57. In addition to character talismans in the Berlin medical manuscripts that had “rain” on top or “thunder” on the side, many have the character *shang* 尙, “prefer,” on the top, as in the *chazi* divination from *Stone*, above.

58. Medical Manuscript “Zhuyou ke daquan” 祝由科大全. BUC 8388.
59. Unschuld and Zheng think this manuscript might be from the south since some incantations that attend the talismans use terms (like “skin cold” *pihan* for malaria *yaozi*) common there, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 1650.
60. Incantations and spells bear titles such as “Thunder Bill to Arrest Demons,” “Spell to Dispel Spirits,” “Spell to Lock Away Spirits,” and “Spell to Close the Demon Gate.” Some of this wording agrees with contemporary search warrants for criminals issued by secular authorities.
61. Li seems to be referencing the myth that when Cang Jie was inventing/discovering Chinese characters, wheat fell from the sky. Told in the *Huainanzi*.
62. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 10.39 “Pilizhen.”
63. As the Cheng brothers argued in the late Song. See Hammond, “The Interpretation of Thunder,” 487–503.
64. Qiong Zhang makes this point in “From ‘Dragonology’ to Meteorology,” 348.
65. Wang Tingxiang, *Yashu*, 881. I follow Qiong Zhang, “From ‘Dragonology,’” 348, with emendations.
66. Wang Tingxiang, *Yashu*, 226.
67. Li Ruzhen, *Jinghua yuan*, chapter 79.
68. Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 278.
69. *Shenbao*, “Lun leidian,” April 13, 1877.

### 3. Dragons and Blood

1. Xie, *Wuzazu*, juan 9.
2. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 43.01.
3. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 39, preface.
4. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 43.01.
5. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 48.01.
6. Zhao Erxun, “Disasters” (*zaiyi*). The fraught history of this text, the period it recounts and the period in which it was written all complicate its relationship to dragons, however. See Chen Hsi-yuan.
7. *Peking Gazette* (*Jingbao*).
8. In 1900, instructors at the Chengzhong Primary School in Shanghai compiled their own teaching materials under the leadership of principal Liu Shuping. They published *Illustrated Character Lessons from Chengzhong Elementary* (*Chengzhong mengxuetang zike tushuo*) the following year. The book presented over three thousand characters, each with a pronunciation guide, a brief definition for students under the age of ten, and more detailed definitions for older students.
9. The term *biji xiaoshuo*, for instance, occurs as early as the Southern Song dynasty in *Xuezhai zhanbi* by Shi Shengzu in the phrase “the predecessors’ notes and novels (*bijixiaoshuo*) indeed have character errors,” but these are two related categories, not a single genre. “The term *bijixiaoshuo* was not used as a generic category until the 20th century” (Tao Min and Liu Zaihua, “*Biji*

- xiaoshuo*” *yu biji yanjiu*, 109). That *xiaoshuo* does not map directly unto fiction, see Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*, chapter 1; Idema, “Review”; Owen, “Post-face”; Mair, “Narrative Revolution.”
10. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 43.01.
  11. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 43.01, 43.03, and 43.04, respectively.
  12. Lu Rong, *Shuyuan zaji* [Miscellaneous records from the bean garden].
  13. Lu Rong, *Shuyuan zaji*.
  14. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 43.01.
  15. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 43.01.
  16. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 43.01, “dragon bone” (*longgu*).
  17. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 43.01, “dragon bone.”
  18. Shen Gua, *Mengxi bitan quanbian*, “transformation to stone in Zezhou” (*Zezhou hua shi*).
  19. Yuan Mei, *Zibuyu* (1788), mentions dragons mostly as things seen fighting in the sky during storms or as metaphors. Yuan Mei also mentions accounts of people who attained dragon artifacts—a horn, a claw, and so on—that had powers.
  20. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, “dragon” (*long*).
  21. Zhang Youhe, *Liaozhai zhiyi huijiao*, 285.
  22. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 143, “eyeless dragon” (*long wuyan*), originally in *Liaozhai zhiyi shiyi*, possibly not written by Pu Songling, but later incorporated into *Liaozhai* texts. See Barr, “The Textual Transmission of *Liaozhai*,” 518–19. About half of the dragon records from *Liaozhai* are from the *shiyi*.
  23. Feng Xisai (the Yutang commentary), in Pu Songling 蒲松齡. *Liaozhai zhiyi huijiao huizhu huiping ben* 聊齋志異會校會注會評本 [Accounts of anomalies from *Liaozhai*, collated, annotated, and critiqued edition]. Shanghai Guji, 2011: 454–56. Wang Ji, quoted in *Systematic Compendium* entry on dragon saliva, says that it has a strong fishy smell. Official Qing history records a dragon hanging in the sky that stank terribly of fish. Zhao Erxun, *Qing shigao* “on calamities” (*zaiyi* 1). Yuan Haowen also mentions a dragon that stank of rotting fish in *Xu Yijian zhi* [Continued records of the listener]: “dragon sighting at Sangu Temple” 3.53.
  24. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, “eyeless dragon,” 143.
  25. This term (*nielong*) seems to be rather rare, occurring notably and repeatedly in *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*). Perhaps our commentator was influenced by those represented dragons.
  26. Timothy Brook discusses this chapter in his book *The Troubled Empire*, 18–20.
  27. Xie Zhaozhe, *Wuzazu*, *juan* 9, 2b, 1616.
  28. Ji Yun, *Luanyang Xiaoxia*, 228.
  29. Chen Jiru, *Taiping qinghua*, *juan* 2.
  30. Snyder-Reinke, *Dry Spells*, 44.
  31. Ji Yun, *Ji Xiaolan jiaxu*, 276.
  32. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, “Long: sanze,” Library of Congress, 1832.
  33. Yuan Xuansi, a.k.a. Yuan Songli, was a writer during the Kangxi reign, from modern Shandong’s Zibo.

34. Qu Qianqiao, a native of Changshan in Shandong, *jinshi* 1577.
35. Adapted from Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*.
36. Library of Congress copy, *juan* 4, 10a. Originally in *Liaozhai siyi yishi*.
37. Xie Zhaozhe, *Wuzazu*, *juan* 4.
38. Other animals do too. In the histories and the *Liaozhai*, among other works, we see elephants rewarding the hunter who protects them from the lion, dogs caring for their elders, and so on.
39. Brook, too, discusses Xie's entry; see *The Troubled Empire*.
40. The dragon-horse (*longma*) is a (mythological) creature with the head of a dragon and the body of a horse. It is mentioned in a number of standard histories such as the *Zhouli* (Rites of Zhou), and *Hanshu* (Dynastic history of the former Han).
41. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, "Giving Birth to a Dragon" (Chanlong) 948.
42. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, "A Strange Matter Concerning Pigeons" (Geyi), 1625.
43. In the "calamities and anomalies" section following dragons.
44. *Shenbao*, "Lun leiji long jian ershi," July 16, 1877.
45. For more on these, see Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*, introduction and chapter 1.
46. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 43.01, 43.03.
47. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, quoting Sun Simiao's *Qianjinfang*, chapter 17.
48. It seems that this was the insect now known as *Martianus dermestoides Chevr.*, which produces quinones as defensive compounds, that have anti-inflammatory properties.
49. Medical records include *Yangchong miaofang* (Wondrous recipes of the foreign bug), dating from the early Republican period; *Yangchong puxu* (Register of [recipes with] the foreign bug), from the late Qing; and *Yaofang chaoben* (hand-copied book of pharmaceutical recipes), from 1930.
50. Zhao Xuemin, *Bencao gangmu shiyi*, "Jiulongchong," 143.
51. Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 332.
52. Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 2443; See also Lu Xun, "Fuqin de bing"
53. He Bian first made this observation in her dissertation *Assembling the Cure*, 264.
54. Transforming realgar into a watery liquid with nitrokalite is cited in *Systematic Compendium* (9.07) and the *Baopu zi*.
55. Quoted in Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 9.07, 10.15. This case is reminiscent of those in Hua Tuo's biography in which he "saw" that a large *chong* was inside a patient, prescribed medicine, and caused the *chong* to be vomited out. He then pushed his cart around, with the various *chong* dangling from it. See Hsu, *Innovation in Chinese Medicine*.
56. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 9.07.
57. The Feng Menglong version of the story does not mention realgar, but many later versions of the story do. See Idema, (2009, 3, 28–29. Thanks to my anonymous reader for pointing this out to me.

58. *Supplement to the Systematic Compendium* was not published until 1871. On the text, see Needham and Gwei-djen Lu, *Science and Civilization in China*, 325–28; and Unschuld, *Medicine in China*, 164–68. The other significant commentary to the *Bencao*, first published about 1652, was Cai Liexian's *Bencao wanfang zhenxian* (Needle and thread for the ten thousand prescriptions in the *Bencao*). This work was intended to make the *Bencao* more usable by acting as an index to its contents, arranged by illness rather than object.
59. Dragon saliva is now known as *Longxian xiang*. Ambergris is a solid, waxy, flammable substance of a dull gray or blackish color produced in the digestive system of sperm whales.
60. Though he can be forgiven for missing a short entry in the enormous *Taiping guangji*, 197:1476.
61. Nappi, *The Monkey and the Inkpot*, 142.
62. Zhao Xuemin, *Bencao gangmu shiyi*, “Longxie,” in *lin bu*, 388.
63. Translation modified from Needham and Lu, *Science and Civilisation in China*.
64. See Liu Shubing, *Chengzhong mengxuetang zike tushuo*.
65. *Dianshizhai huabao*, “Xiren jianlong” 西人見龍 [Westerners see a dragon], DSZ 0646.
66. Some believe that the *shenqilou* refers to the real phenomenon known in the west as *fata morgana* (mirage), which were historically believed to be fairy castles in the air or false land created by witchcraft to lure sailors to their doom.
67. Shen Gua, *Mengxi bitan*, *juan 21*, “yishi.”
68. Xie, *Wuzazu*, *juan 9*, 3a.
69. Ji Yun, *Yuewei caotang biji*, 275.
70. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 43.03. I follow Unschuld's translations in Li Shizhen, *Ben cao gang mu*, 3:537–38, with emendations.
71. Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, 373–75.
72. The Historian of the Strange (Yishi) comments on 197 of the almost five hundred entries in *Liaozhai*.
73. *Dianshizhai huabao*, “Shenlou miaojing” 蜃樓妙景 [Miraculous sight of the mirage], DSZ 1968.

#### 4. Water, Connoisseurship, and Curiosity

Epigraph: Wu Cheng'en, *Journey to the West*, chapter 69. I follow Anthony Yu's translation, with emendations, 3:477.

1. Snyder-Reinke, *Dry Spells*, 15–16, 41–46, 103–9.
2. Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, chapter 41. I follow David Hawke's translation, vol. 2, 313–15, with modifications.
3. Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*; Philip Ball, *The Water Kingdom*; and Andrew Mertha, *China's Water Warriors* all discuss this notion.
4. Wu Yueniang gathers snow to brew tea in chapter 21 of *Jin ping mei*, where she and Ximen reconcile, which seems to be a symbol of caring.
5. The Cheng Hua cup in *Stone* was likely a forgery, but it is not clear if Cao

- Xueqin was aware of their extreme rarity. See Schonebaum and Lu, *Approaches to Teaching the Story of the Stone*, 241.
6. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi* “Yishu” (The healing arts), 2020.
  7. Lu Yu et al., *Chajing*, chapter 5.
  8. Lu Yu et al., *Chajing*, juan 5, “boiling.”
  9. Li Yuhang, *The Promise and Peril of Things*, 85.
  10. Yuan Mei is partial to tea and water from near his hometown.
  11. Wai-yee Li discusses Yuan Mei and water connoisseurship in *The Promise and Peril of Things*, 85–87.
  12. Likely a teapot with a chimney that boils water quickly due to increased surface area.
  13. Yuan Mei, *The Way of Eating*, juan 4, 17a–b. I follow S. J. Chen’s translation, 381–83.
  14. “Drinking Tea at Pop Min’s” in Ye, *Vignettes from the Late Ming*, 88–90.
  15. Ji Yun, *Yuwei caotang biji*, juan 1, 5.
  16. See Jiang Yuanxin, “More Than Just a Drink,” chapter 3.
  17. Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 171.
  18. Manuscripts in the Berlin collection frequently require sourceless water with their medicine or talismans.
  19. Wu Cheng’en, *Xiyou ji*, chapter 69.
  20. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 623.
  21. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 5.14.
  22. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 5.14.
  23. Li Yuhang, *The Promise and Peril of Things*, 83–92.
  24. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 5.15.
  25. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 5.15, 5.28.
  26. Zhao Xuemin, *Bencao gangmu shiyi*, “shuibu.”
  27. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 5.01.
  28. Zhao Xuemin makes the same claim when he discusses, for instance “chicken spirit water,” gathered on the seventh of the seventh month, noticeably heavier than other water.
  29. In the late-Qing Berlin medical manuscript *Zhouyue foweiben*, BUC 8238; Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 1305.
  30. This manuscript records about ten such tricks.
  31. Medical manuscript *Yishu zachao*. The contents of this part are known from other manuscripts in this collection such as Unschuld 8453 and 48022. Examples include how to make “characters fly onto a wall” and to “fill more wine into a cup than it can hold.”
  32. Zhang Yingyu, *More Swindles from the Late Ming*, xv.
  33. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, “Plum Girl” (Mei nü), 1756.
  34. Santangelo, “Introduction,” 130.
  35. Yuan Mei, *Zibuyu*, “The Ghost Is Netted When It Puts on Clothes” (Gui zhuoyi shouwang), 192.

36. Yuan Mei, *Zibuyu*, “The Immortal Who Could Be Folded Up” (Ziedie xian), 309.
37. Yuan Mei, *Zibuyu*, “Sun the Commissioner” (Sun Fangbo), 810.
38. Yuan Mei, *Zibuyu*, “Water Ghost Broom” (Shuigui zhou), 253.
39. Yuan Mei, *Zibuyu*, “Water Ghost Afraid of the Word ‘Clamor’” (Shuigui wei xiaozi), 522.
40. For example, *Fangji gejie fuzhou*.
41. Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 2275–76.
42. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, “Spitting Water” (Penshui), 16.
43. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 3.05; Tianzhongni (Mud from the fields), 07:38; Changpu (Japanese sweet flag), 19:06.
44. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, “River City” (Jiangcheng), *juan* 6.
45. Li Shizhen, *Bencao gangmu* 52.19: “Such fluids irrigate the viscera and bowels and nourish and moisten the extremities. Therefore, people practicing life-prolongation exercises swallow their saliva and inhale the qi, saying that this is to irrigate the sacred root of life with lucid water.”
46. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 52.19.
47. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 50.23.
48. *Liji* (Book of rites), “Yueling” (Proceedings of government in the different months), 290.
49. There was also a lingering association of rainbows and bugs in materia medica texts in which the *ni* 蜺, often translated as “secondary rainbow,” was a colorful cicada. Li Shizhen, *Bencao gangmu*, 41.16.
50. Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape*, 91.
51. Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape*, 92n42.
52. Reading *honghong* for “rainbows.”
53. Some of these other rainbows were thought to be paired with *hong*: “The *hong* and *ni* are the essence of yin and yang, the *hong* is called male, and the *ni* is called female” (Guo Pu, *Erya yintu* 爾雅音圖).
54. Kong Yingda (581–618), for instance, writes, “If the clouds are thin and leak sun, the sunshine and the raindrops will give birth to rainbows” (“*Commentary on the Book of Rites*” [Liji zhushu]).
55. Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary*, 1.
56. Shen Gua, *Mengxi bitan quanbian*, *juan* 21. Leah Ya Zuo also discusses this passage in *Shen Gua’s Empiricism*, 182.
57. Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei*, 3.4a2. I follow Gardner, “Zhu Xi on Spirit Beings,” 110, with emendations.
58. Such as those in *Inquiries into the Classics of Heaven* (Tianjing huowen) likely posed by You Yi.
59. Quoted in Hongjun Liu, “Scholarly Study of Hong (Rainbow),” 93.
60. Zhu Xi is generally ranked as second only to Confucius (551–479 BCE) in influence in the Chinese philosophical tradition.
61. Xie Zhaozhe, *Wuzazu* 2001:12.
62. See “Feijishi,” or “Weigao” in Fang Li, *Taiping guangji*.

63. Liu An, *Huainanzi*: “Children did not become orphans / Wives did not become widows / Rainbows did not appear” (1b.10–17).
64. Fan Yizhi, *Wuli xiaozhi*, *juan 2*, “hongni.”
65. Liu Xiang, *Shuoyuan*; *Xin Xu*; Wang Chong, *Lunheng*; Sima Qian, *Shiji*; *Zhanguo ce*, all discuss rainbows as portents of assassination and use this phrase.
66. Miao Wenyuan, *Zhanguo ce*, book 25; Sima Qian, *Shiji*, chapter 86.
67. Hayakawa et al., “Unusual Rainbow and White Rainbow,” 33.
68. Wang Chong, *Lunheng*, *juan 43*, “Biandong” (Change and movement).
69. Wang Chong’s statement is attributed to Dong Zhongshu in his biography by Ban Gu. Wang Chong did in fact rail against the omenology of his day. It was not that he disbelieved in omens and divination but that the practitioners of both were overly reliant on set systems to interpret those signs and therefore were often incorrect. See Puett, “Listening to Sages,” 275.
70. Wu Zhen, *Xin Tangshu*, 950.
71. Li Fang, *Taiping yulan*, *juan*, 878, reiterates what is in the official histories of the Han, later Han, Jin, and Sui, as well as more popular texts, specifically collecting instances in which rainbows and white rainbows were evil omens of assassination, rebellion, and “divergence.”
72. Zhang Mingshi, “Jingyan fang,” chapter on heavenly phenomena, 3.
73. Luo Guanzhong, *Sanguo yanyi*, 1. I follow Roberts, with emendations.
74. In Yuan Hong, *Hou Han ji*; Fan Ye, *Hou Han shu*; and Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian* (Comprehensive mirror for aid in government). George A. Hayden points out that omens recorded in *Hou Han ji*, *Hou Han shu*, and *Zizhi tongjian*, are not included in the novel (p. 45).
75. That rainbows as omens pointing to improper sex, or to inversion of sexual roles, dates to Zheng Xuan’s commentary on the (*Book of Songs*). The passage reads, “There is a rainbow in the east, no one dares point at it,” (Mao 51). Zheng Xuan explains this, “The rainbow is a taboo for people so that nobody dares to point at it, the situation is quite similar to that of a woman of easy virtue eloping with fancy man no one is emboldened to look at.” Liu Hongjun discusses this interpretation in “Scholarly Study of Hong (Rainbow),” 87–99.
76. Luo Guanzhong, *Sanguo yanyi*, chapter 108.
77. Xie Zhaozhe, *Wuzazu*, *juan 1.5a*.
78. “When earth qi rises, it becomes clouds, when sky qi descends, it becomes rain,” Li Shizhen, 5.01 “Rain water” 雨水. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 839.
79. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 842.11, *qiuyin*.
80. Ji Yun, *Yuwei caotang biji*, 1800; “Gu wang ting” 32a, 1452–53; Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei*; Li Fang, *Taiping guangji*.
81. Medical manuscript *Jingxin lingfu*.
82. Medical manuscript *Shiquan yao’an*.
83. Medical manuscript *Wuxing hecan*.
84. A Buddhist-type figure, since it seems that many healing methods were given

- names that aligned them with bodhisattvas during the second half of the Qing dynasty. There is a focus on the Daoist Taishang Laojun, Guanyin Bodhisattva, Guanyin Pusa, Amitabha, and Amitufo (Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 1703).
85. *Mafeisan* is the subject of a fair amount of debate, with some thinking it really was used as an early general anesthetic and comprising some properties of cannabis or opium. See, for instance, Zhao et al., “Was Mafeisan an Anesthetic in Ancient China?” One way of translating *mafeisan* is “powdered, boiling water.”
  86. Luo, *Sanguo yanyi*, *juan* 29. I follow Mair, “The Biography of Hua-t’o,” with emendations.
  87. Mair, “The Biography of Hua-t’o,” 697, with emendations.
  88. For a detailed discussion of non-elite medical practices, see Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*.
  89. BUC 8041.
  90. Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 2121.
  91. *Wuxing hecan*. Another manuscript also has long incantations addressed to spirits from the realms of Buddhism (Shakyamuni and Guanyin), Daoism (Yuhuang Dadi), Confucianism (Kongfuzi), and medicine (*hua tuo*). Other spirits include the “immortal teacher who generates flesh” (*shengrou xianshi*) and the “immortal teacher who mends sinews and sets bones” (*duanjin jiegu xianshi*). BUC 8564. “Instructions on secret medical patterns obtained from a teacher (oral and written spells)” *Shishou yimifa jue* (*zhou*).
  92. Historical figures from the Three Kingdoms period, mentioned here together to invoke their (fictional) Oath of the Peach Garden as depicted in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, chapter 1. Guan Yu is miswritten Guan Ye, suggesting the author’s literacy level was pedestrian.
  93. Zhao Xuemin, *Chuanya*, 7.
  94. About 47 of the 881 Berlin healing manuscripts are devoted primarily to *zhuyou* 祝由—the “invocation of the origins” or apotropaic healing with written amulets and oral spells—but many others include these methods as part of a comprehensive practice including pharmaceuticals and sometimes acupuncture and moxibustion.
  95. Quoted in Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 80.
  96. Archimedes’s screw is a machine used for transferring water from a low-lying body of water into irrigation ditches. Water is pumped by turning a screw-shaped surface inside a pipe.
  97. Yi Lantai, *Xiyang lou toushi tu tongbanhua*.
  98. “Filling a cup with more wine than it can hold” *jiuman guobei*, in “Wondrously effective recipes transmitted at home.” BUC 48022, described in Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 2741.
  99. He, *Home and the World*, discusses how later collections came to view many Ming dynasty texts as “hucksterish” (*baifan*), 3–9; Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*, 102–5.

100. Wu Cheng'en, *Juanxiang guben Xiyou zhengdao shu*, 30.6a.
101. During the Qing era, the term Western Ocean (Xiyang) expanded from referring to maritime routes mostly in the Indian Ocean to a more expansive concept of the Western World, or European countries generally.
102. Juan 1. The same goes for “nose flushing water” and “daily essence oil.”
103. The latter is preserved in the *Dao zang* (Daoist canon).
104. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 8.29.
105. Since the Song, vitriol water (*danshui*, lit. “gall water”), an aqueous copper sulfate solution naturally occurring around weathered copper ore deposits, was used to produce solid copper. See Jost, “The Secret Method and the State.”
106. “This is a secret of the immortals: one pound of cinnabar, two ounces of sulfate of copper, four ounces of saltpeter, place in a small-mouthed porcelain jar, and use lacquer to seal its mouth. Bury it in the ground for forty- nine days, when you take it out, look to see if it has become water, then the medicine is complete. If the transformation is incomplete, put [the pot] back in [the ground].”
107. *Leiwan*, “thunderbolt fungus,” *Polyporus mylittae*, is a medicine used traditionally for removing parasites. *Feijin* occurs only once in the *Bencao gangmu*, where it is an unidentifiable substance; Santangelo believes it to be a kind of paper. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 3.20: “For [patients] who have already died of cholera with contorted sinews, if there is still a little warmth below the heart, mix two *liang* [of *zhusha*] with three *liang* of beeswax [39–02], burn this and fumigate [the patient].”
108. Yuan Mei, *Zibuyu*, 430–31. I follow Santangelo’s translation, with emendations.
109. For more on these epidemics, see Li Zimo.
110. Hanson, *Speaking of Epidemics*, 115–21.

## 5. Unseen Practices

1. Unschuld, Tessenow, and Jinsheng, *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen*, 180–83.
2. Unschuld and Zheng, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 10.
3. See Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 152–53.
4. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 42.23.
5. The six domestic animals in China are pigs, cows, sheep, horses, dogs, and chickens.
6. A *Liaozhai* story (“*Shuimangcao*” 水莽草) describes ghosts who cannot reincarnate until they poison a new victim with the same poison that killed them as “*shuimangcao*.” Thanks to Eric Bennett for this reference. Li Shizhen is clear that *mangcao* is very poisonous. *Systematic Compendium*, 17.31.
7. Selling the sickness is discussed in Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*, 58–59 and 134–36.
8. Zhou Zuoren, *Bingzhu houtan*, 89–96.
9. Zhou Zuoren, “Tan Guolai,” in *Bingzhu houtan*, 89–96.
10. Zhou Zuoren, *Bingzhu houtan*, 96.
11. Paul Unschuld suggests this in *Medicine in China*, 48.
12. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 12.08, quoting *Zhubing yuanhou lun*.

13. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 12.08.
14. See Hinrichs, *Shamans*, chapter 7.
15. “Extraordinary recipes for convenient use,” *Jianbian qifang*.
16. Xu Feng, “Zhenzhi xuefa” 針治穴法 (Needling techniques for acupoint therapy), BUC 8493 *juan* 2.
17. “Divine Method for Expelling Gu Poison” (Bi gudu shenfang).
18. The *Washing away of Wrongs* (Xiyuan lu), a manual for coroners and magistrates investigating death, records that a body can be tested for *gu* poison by touching it with a silver hairpin which would then turn permanently yellow. *Juan* 28, “On Poison” (Fudu).
19. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 42.23.
20. Lu Fengzao, *Xiaozhi lu*, *juan* 10.
21. Xie Zhauzhe, *Wuzazu*, *juan* 11.
22. See Cai, *Witchcraft*.
23. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 42.23.
24. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 51.50.
25. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 42.23.
26. Thanks to Nalini Kirk for these thoughts.
27. In the Qing novel *Yesou puyan* (Humble words of an old rustic), the protagonist, Wen Suchen, a virtual Confucian superman, is poisoned with *gu*. His convalescence takes one thousand days with a steady diet of cohosh and turmeric, a recipe he may have received from Fan Chengda (1126–93), who records it, claiming a judge, Li Shouwen, discovered these prescriptions during some judicial hearings. *Fan Chengda biji liuzhong*, 132; Fan Chengda, *Treatises of the Supervisor*, 147.
28. Unschuld, *Medicine in China*, 47.
29. *Shenbao* “Yanggu hairan zhi fangfan,” November 7, 1923.
30. Feng and Shyrock, “The Black Magic in China Known as Ku,” 23.
31. *Nanzhong zaji* (Miscellaneous anecdotes about Southern China), quoted in Feng and Shyrock, “The Black Magic in China Known as Ku,” 16.
32. See Cai, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire*.
33. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict*, 81–90.
34. Cai, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire*, 230n98: “The witchcraft scare at the end of Emperor Wu’s reign was probably the most striking tragedy of the Western Han; it caused a sensation and immediately attracted the attention of historians. . . . In *The History of Former Han* the term *wugu* became virtually synonymous with the events surrounding this massacre.”
35. Wang Xianqian, *Hou Han shu jijie*, 66.1a–b.
36. Wang Xianqian, *Hou Han shu jijie*, 6.36b–37a.
37. Cai, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire*, 6.
38. There are cases in *Qingshi gao* and *Zhaoyuan Xianzhi*, among others. Shih-Pei Chen et al., *LoGaRt*, has 350 gazetteers that discuss *gudu* in the Qing dynasty alone.

39. See Yonglin Jiang, *Great Ming Code*, 18; *Da Ming lü*, article 312; *Da Qing lüli*, 289.
40. The Qing code specifies for wives and concubines who attempt or successfully kill their husbands with *gu* or other conjured demons, death by slicing article 315. [http://lsc.chineselegalculture.org/eC/DQLL\\_1740/5.6.6.315](http://lsc.chineselegalculture.org/eC/DQLL_1740/5.6.6.315).
41. Cited by Zheng Xuan in his annotations to Zhou li. Liang Cai, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire*, 229n80.
42. Translation from Durrant et al., *The Zuo Tradition*, 1329–31.
43. Translation from Durrant et al., *The Zuo Tradition*, 1331.
44. Translation from Durrant et al., *The Zuo Tradition*, with emendations.
45. Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*, chapters 5 and 6.
46. Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China*, 100.
47. *Dianshizhai huabao*, “Gudu yujiu,” DSZ 2443.
48. *Shenbao*, “Yinshu Shazi zhihaiwen,” April 3, 1926.
49. Schonebaum, *Approaches to Teaching Plum in the Golden Vase*, introduction.
50. *Shenbao* “Dulu yutan,” June 13, 1924.
51. *Shenbao* “Dulu yutan,” June 13, 1924.
52. *Shenbao*, “Qiji chengyin shuo,” September 15, 1891.
53. Yuan Mei, *Zibuyi*, 14–9, pages 726–27.
54. The *Systematic Compendium* disambiguates between “reanimating life *gu*” and “*gu* poison,” for instance, though without going into detail, 10.13 “Shi dan” 石膽 (Stone bile).
55. Zhou Qufei, *Vicarious Replies from beyond the Ranges, Collated with Commentary* (Lingwai daida jiaozhu) and Lang Ying, *Qixiu leigao* (Seven categories of notes), have similar wording, for instance.
56. Chen Hsiu-fen, *Shiwu, yaoshu yu gudu*, 13.
57. Some scholars see *tiaosheng* as another practice meant to assist a *gu* demon to enter a living body. The *gu* demon then pays for this assistance by transferring the belongings of the victim to the person who helped it.
58. Xie Zhaozhe, *Wuzazu*, juan 11.
59. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 18.21, 23.21.
60. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 39.3, 34.10.
61. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 13.11, quoted from *Shennong bencao jing*.
62. Sima Qian, “*Fengshan shu*” in *Shiji*. Also, Duke De of Qing suppressed *gu* by means of dogs. *Shiji*, ch. 5, I. 9.
63. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 50.02. Citing *Fengsu tong* (Descriptions of habits and customs).
64. For example, Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 17.36.
65. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 50.23.
66. It occurs, for instance, in the *Three Sui Quash the Demon’s Revolt* (Sansui pingyao zhuan, preface, 1620), chapter 4; *The Scholars* (Rulin waishi, 1750), chapter 34; *Humble Words of an Old Rustic* (Yesou puyan, ca. 1780, published 1882); *Exposure of Officialdom* (Guanchang xianxing ji 1903–5); *The Romance of Gold and Stone* (Jinshi yuan, mid-eighteenth century); *Precious Mirror for Appreciating Flowers*

- (Pinhua baojian, ca. 1848); and *A Collection to Amuse the Eyes and Awaken the Heart* (Yumu xingxin bian, 1792).
67. Qiu Zhonglin “Buxiao zhi xiao,” 49–92.
  68. See T’ien, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity*; Yü, *Kuan-yin*.
  69. See Maram Epstein’s discussion in chapter three of *Orthodox Passions*, which includes a survey of *gegu* in Qing gazetteers.
  70. Yu, *Sanctity and Self-Inflected Violence*, 79.
  71. Wu Zhen, *Xin Tangshu jiumu*, 195:2a–b.
  72. Quoted in Wu, “Moral Ambivalence in the Portrayals of *Gegu*,” 249.
  73. Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei*, “*daxue*.”
  74. Zou Diguang, *Quan jie tushuo*, 37a.
  75. See Lu, *Accidental Incest*, 147–53; Wu, “Moral Ambivalence,” 253–63; Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 134, 246.
  76. See Jimmy Yu, *Sanctity and Self-Inflected Violence*, 75–78.
  77. Quoted in Yenna Wu, “Moral Ambivalence in the Portrayals of *Gegu*,” 252–53. The novel *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* has a scene very similar to this one, except that both daughters-in-law act in concert, and both cut their thighs rather than their livers. Chapter 52.
  78. 15b. Maram Epstein does find that men cut their flesh to cure their mothers twice as frequently as their fathers in Qing gazetteers. See *Orthodox Passions*, 93.
  79. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 52.34.
  80. The earliest textual use of this phrase I’ve found is Feng Menglong, *Quelling the Demon’s Revolt* (Pingyao zhuan, preface, 1620), but it may have entered common parlance by that time and been known to Li Shizhen.
  81. Li cites from *Records Taken during My Winter Days* (Yudong xulu, 1528), a miscellany by He Mengchun (1474–1536) later recorded in Zhang Tingyu et al., *Ming shi*, juan 137, case 25.
  82. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 52.34.
  83. That this act was ultimately un-filial because it made cannibals out of parents and that respect for lineage entitled one to eat one’s children was not lost on authors of the twentieth century, notably Lu Xun in “Diary of a Madman,” and “Medicine.”
  84. Many treatments in *Systematic Compendium* require that the healer “not let the patient know [what they are eating or drinking].” This is usually because the medicine is from a disagreeable source, such as straw from a pigsty (50.01) or spider web (40.10).
  85. Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 539n26.
  86. *Da Qing huidian shili*, juan 403, quoted in Theiss 2004, 54.
  87. *Da Qing huidian shili* [Collected statutes of the Qing, with statutes based on precedent], 1899, juan 403.
  88. *Da Qing huidian shili* [Collected statutes of the Qing, with statutes based on precedent], 1899, juan 403.
  89. Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan*.
  90. Stories of wives practicing *gegu* in the hope of rescuing their in-laws’ lives are

recorded in such books as *Record of Bodhisattva Guanyin's Efficacious Response*. See Yuhang Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 128.

91. Chun-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*.
92. Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters*, 48–49.
93. Fong, “Signifying Bodies,” 107.
94. Chun-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 538n21. Women who practiced *gegu* became notable only after the Song. Yü notes that Chen Menglei’s *Gujin tushu jicheng* contains short biographical sketches culled from local gazetteers. Only 4 out of 61 women in pre-Song times are recorded as having practiced *gegu*, 14 out of 51 (about one fourth) women in the Song, 306 out of 632 Ming women (about one-half), and 226 out of 340 Qing women (about two-thirds).
95. *Liaozhai zhiyi* (Strange tales from Liaozhai), has several stories about *gegu*, enhancing its reputation as an unorthodox or even magical practice. See, for instance, *xiaozi* 孝子, “filial son,” and *lian Cheng* 連城 “Liancheng [heroine of the story].”
96. Yi-li Wu has pointed out to me that this is also reminiscent of male scholar-officials of this time who likened themselves to abandoned, yet ever faithful, women.
97. T’ien, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity*, 1988.
98. Chun-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 340.
99. T’ien, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity*, 161. The 1771 *Shexian* gazetteer lists nineteen filial sons who cut their thighs to cure parental illness in the Ming and fifty-one cases in the early Qing. Huizhou had been noted for *gegu* in the Ming.
100. Qiu Zhonglin, “Buxiao zhi xiao,” 93.
101. Chun-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*.
102. Guan Yu refuses any anesthetic, instead playing a game of *go* to take his mind off the pain.
103. “Killing a wife to cure a mother” (*shaqi liaomu*), *Dianshizhai huabao* 2725 9/219.
104. “Slicing the thigh to pray for rain” (*gegu qiyu*), *Dianshizhai huabao* 3384 11/230.
105. *Shenbao*, “Gegan liaobing,” December 9, 1882.
106. “*Jingbao* quanlu” as reported in *Shenbao*, March 2, 1880.
107. *Shenbao*, “Gegan qiumu,” November 9, 1880.
108. *Jingbao*, April 26, 1878.
109. I have found a few scant references to slicing the heart (*gexin*) but no narratives.
110. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 1.19, 43.01.
111. The liver was not the only organ with physical and metaphysical life functions however; the heart stored spirit (*shen*), the spleen stores knowledge, the lung stores the soul (*po*), kidneys store intention/memory (*zhi*).
112. Maria Sibau discusses the story “A Slice of Liver for Grandma” from Lu Renlong’s collection *Exemplary Words for the World* (*Xingshi yan*), in which a young woman practices *gegan* but is unable to locate her liver, even though there was no pain or blood. Heaven intervenes and makes her liver pop out. *Reading for the Moral*, 78.

## 6. Animating Forces

Epigraph: “Reading with My Ears: Lecture at National Taiwan University, July 2008,” in Xu Shiyao, *Mo Yan Speaks*, 228.

1. Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*, chapter 2, “Reading Medically.”
2. For example, in *Dianshizhai huabao*: “The way of heaven is not far” (Tiandao bu yuan), 7:259; and “The way of heaven is clear and evident” (Tiandao zhao zhang), 12:93.
3. Yi-Li Wu, *Reproducing Women*, 74.
4. de Vries, “The Dangers of ‘Warming and Replenishing.’”
5. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, juan 6, introduction.
6. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 5.24.
7. For a survey of one man’s struggle with these concepts, see Lu Miaow-fen, “The Question of Life and Death.”
8. Giles must also have taken these accounts as generally true records of real events since he feels the need to point out that these are false. Giles, “The ‘Hsi Yüan Lu’ or ‘Instructions to Coroners,’” 4n5.
9. Zhang and Unschuld, *Dictionary of the Ben Cao Gang Mu*, 1:54.
10. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 47.12.
11. “Effective,” as in *huisheng zhibao dan*, “most treasured elixir to make life return” (BUC 8224, BUC 8475, BUC 8815). “Potent,” as in *laozhai huanzhe zhi huisheng-shu*, “technique of restoring to life patients suffering from consumption” (BUC 8033).
12. *Yifang jichao* BUC 8051: “emergency rescue from violent death, emergency rescue from hanging death, emergency rescue from drowning death, emergency rescue from nightmare death.”
13. “Book of Drugs and Demons” (Yaosui shu).
14. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium* uses this term at times, and so does the novel *Jin ping mei*.
15. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 4.27.
16. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 4.27.
17. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 48.01.
18. Scene 35. Mercury was believed by and about Daoists to be able to preserve bodies indefinitely. But this may also be a bawdy reference to semen, which is both *shuiyin* and pure essence. See the effect of cinnabar and mercury on stabilizing the *hun* and *po*, below.
19. Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine*, 136.
20. Tang Xianzu, *Xiuxiang Mudan ting*.
21. Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine*, 137.
22. Examples include “The Fan Tower Restaurant as Witness to the Love of Zhou Shengxian” (Nao Fanlou duoqing Zhou Shengxian), published around 1627 in Feng Menglong’s *Constant Words to Awaken the World* (Xingshi hengyan). For a discussion of these and other sexual cures, see Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*, chapter 4.

23. See, for example, Feng Menglong's "For One Penny, A Small Grudge Ends in Stark Tragedies," in *Stories to Awaken the World*.
24. "Ji congxiang tanju" in Ji Yun, *Ji Xiaolan jiashu*, 110–12.
25. *Quan jie tushuo*, "Retribution for a teacher misleading others."
26. For instance, *juhun zhoyu fa*, "oral incantation method to recall one's hun-soul."
27. *Daofa jizhong*.
28. *Dansha* (cinnabar) in Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 9.1.
29. Schonebaum, *Approaches to Teaching the Story of the Stone*, introduction.
30. It is hard to imagine that these letters are authentic, but they are authoritative. They circulated in print since at least 1935, contributing to the sense not only that Ji Yun believed all these mechanisms really were at work in the world, but also that his *biji* really were all based on true accounts. Ji Yun, *Jiashu*, 220.
31. I count at least one hundred accounts of wandering, separated, or returning *hun* in Ben She, *Mingdai biji xiaoshuo daguan*, and Ben She, *Qingdai biji xiaoshuo daguan*.
32. "Xu xinqixie" in Yuan Mei, *What the Master Would Not Discuss* (Zi buyu). The *Systematic Compendium* also states that red date pits treat *gudu*, other invading bad qi, and the germination of worms.
33. Yuan Mei, *Zi buyu*, 168.
34. "Two Scholars of Nanchang" (Nanchang shiren), in Yuan Mei, *Zi buyu*, 1.3.
35. Yuan Mei, *Zi buyu*, 1.3, Yuan Mei, *Yuan Mei quanji*, 4:3.
36. Ji Yun, *Yuewei caotang biji*, 10:246.
37. Experts in cultivating longevity inhale deeply during the period of living qi.
38. Zhang and Unschuld, *Chinese Traditional Healing*, 1:24.
39. See Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*, chapter 6.
40. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 18.61.
41. For more on *laozhai*, depletion illnesses, and contagion, see Schonebaum, *Novel Medicine*, chapter 6.
42. Another example of this effect is the *tujun* "soil-mushroom." The *Systematic Compendium* (28.285) notes, "In Nanyi they fatally poison people with *gelsemium* [herb] and hang the corpse [of the victim] in a tree. Where its juice drips on the ground a *jun*-mushroom grows. They store it and call it 'mushroom medication.' It is an extremely violent poison for humans. All this must be known. Therefore, these things are recorded here."
43. Fujino, "On Chinese Soul-Inviting and Firefly-Catching Songs," 40–57.
44. The *Analects*, book 1.15, alludes to the inner luminosity of jade revealed by "cutting and polishing."
45. Such as *Photorhabdus luminescens*, suspected to be the cause of "angel's glow" in the wounds of civil war soldiers.
46. See "Lu Pan" in *Liaozhai zhiyi*.
47. Li Zhizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 12.03: Li cites Xia Ziyi, *Guaizheng qi fang* 怪症奇方 [Extraordinary Prescriptions for Strange Diseases].
48. Zhenjun Zhang, "On the Origins of Detached Soul Motif," 167–84.

49. “Pang E” in *Records of the Hidden and the Visible World* (Youming lu) is believed to be the earliest detached soul story in Chinese literature (early fifth century).
50. Ji Yun, *Yuewei caotang biji*, juan 5, 241.
51. Xunzi, *Xunzi*, juan 5.
52. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, volume 1, chapter 12, page 432.
53. Li Shizhen, *Systematic Compendium*, 15.05.
54. Xie Zhaozhe states that “ghosts are thought to dwell in the roots of camphor and willow trees,” so perhaps that is how they derive their power. *Wuzazu*, juan 10.
55. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, “Introduction,” 20.
56. ter Haar, *White Lotus Teachings*, 263.
57. ter Haar, *White Lotus Teachings*, 172.
58. Objects that can come alive are discussed by Schipper, “Chiens de paille et tigres en papier,” 83–94; de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, 6:1103; Hong Mai, *Yijian zhi*, juan 7, and *Systematic Compendium*, to name just a few.
59. Such as “clapper spirit” (*paiban jing*) and “pole spirit” (*gaojing*) from *Kuaiyuan zhiyi*. Thanks to Rania Huntington for this reference.
60. Ji Yun, *Ji Xiaolan jiashu*, 175.
61. Ji Yun, “Luanyang xiaoxia lu” 223 in *Yuewei caotang biji*.
62. Kuhn, *Soulstealers*, discusses some of these on page 4.
63. Puppeteers appear in *Qiwen louji zhaichao*, 213:2b–3a (quoting a mid-Ming source). An example of shamans is found in Hong Zhou, *Yijian zhi*, 3:30:532. Ter Haar discusses fortune tellers in *Telling Stories*, 92–106.
64. Xu Ke, “Zhiren wei sui” 紙人爲祟 means “A Paper Effigy Causes Harm”; it’s an entry from juan 83 of *Qingbai leichao*.
65. Xu Ke, “Zhiren wei sui,” in *Qingbai leichao*.
66. Ji Yun, *Ji Xiaolan jiashu*, 146–47.

## Conclusion

1. Held in the Unschuld collection in the Berlin State Library (BUC 8503).
2. David Der-wei Wang, “Foreign Devils,” 97.
3. It was taboo to write in full a character in the emperor’s given name, so the author writes Kangxi’s name with one stroke missing.
4. Known also by the titles *Supplement to Outlaws of the Marsh* (Hou shuihu zhuan) and *Conclusion to Outlaws of the Marsh* (Jie shuihu zhuan).
5. David Der-wei Wang, “Foreign Devils,” 97.
6. Catherine Vance Yeh, “Recasting the Chinese Novel.”
7. David Der-wei Wang, “Foreign Devils,” 102.
8. See also Shuhui Yang, “Growing from the Waist.”
9. Li Shizhen, *Bencao gangmu*, 12.03.
10. Li seems to quote from the *Yi shuo*, chapter 7, “strange illnesses” (*qiji* 奇疾).
11. Ji Yun, *Ji Xiaolan jiashu*, 257–58.

12. Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture*; Chia, *Printing for Profit*; McDermott, *A Social History of the Chinese Book*; Son, *Writing for Print*; He, *Home and the World*.
13. Preface to Feng Menglong, *Jingshi tongyan* (Stories to caution the world).
14. Idema, "Review of *Chinese Theories of Fiction*," 397.
15. See, for example, the June 2022 workshop "Premodern Chinese Literature as an Archive of Vernacular Knowledge and Everyday Life Culture," hosted by Roland Altenburger and Rainier Lanselle at the Institute of East and South Asian Cultural Studies, Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg, <https://www.crcao.fr/2022/05/25/premodern-chinese-literature-as-an-archive-of-vernacular-knowledge-and-everyday-life-culture/?lang=en>.
16. Allen, "Narrative Genres," 283.
17. Lam, "Premodern Fiction and Fiction Collections," 251.



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- DSZ: *Dianshizhai huabao* articles are included in Ye Hanming, 葉漢明, Jiang Yinghao 蔣英豪, and Huang Yongsong 黃永松, eds., 點石齋畫報全文校點 [The Dianshizhai Pictorial, complete text, checked and punctuated], Hong Kong, Commercial Press, 2014. Figures accompanying those articles correspond to DSZ catalog numbers.
- Plum: Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, *Jin ping mei* [Plum in the golden vase]
- Stone: Cao Xueqin, *Shitou ji*
- Systematic Compendium: Li Shizhen, *Bencao gangmu*
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**ANDREW SCHONEBAUM** is associate professor of Chinese literary and cultural studies at the University of Maryland. He is author of *Novel Medicine: Healing, Literature, and Popular Knowledge in Early Modern China*.

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