



Riddles in *Jin Ping Mei*

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Abstract *Jin Ping Mei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話 (Plum in the Golden Vase) displays an unprecedented interest in breaking apart and reassembling the components of words. This essay asks where the *Cihua* edition's fascination with character manipulation (a procedure the author refers to as *chaibai daozi* 拆白道字) comes from and how it relates to literary riddles that precede and follow this landmark sixteenth-century novel. *Jin Ping Mei cihua* enlarges the presentation and associations of riddles in fiction through its engagement with contemporaneous theatrical literature and the entertainment culture of the brothel. Later commentators, notably Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡 (1670–1698), reorganize the game sequences within which bouts of character manipulation are embedded for the purposes of narrative prolepsis and character development, advocating an approach to reading enigmas as portents that influenced late imperial novelists. In doing so, however, they efface the *Cihua*'s unruly celebration of contingency, the novel's seductive insinuation that it might be written otherwise.

Keywords *Jin Ping Mei*, riddles, character manipulation, games, Zhang Zhupo, Yuan drama, courtesans

In chapter 56 of *Jin Ping Mei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話 (Plum in the Golden Vase), Ying Bojue 應伯爵, a witty and sycophantic rake, explains the art of “breaking characters down into their component parts” (*chaibai daozi* 拆白道字) to his puzzled patron, Ximen Qing 西門慶.¹ This is a point where the *Cihua* calls attention to its own interest in character manipulation, pausing to name and explain a type of orthography riddle (or logogriph) that resurfaces across the novel's one hundred chapters:²

“Brother, you may not get it,” said Ying Bojue, “but this is an example of the word game of breaking characters down into their component parts, which people often find difficult.”³

伯爵道：哥不知道，這正是拆白道字，尤人所難。⁴

Ying Bojue’s lesson follows his performance from memory of a peculiar song-letter intended for Ximen Qing from Licentiate Shui (Shui xiucai 水秀才), a slippery figure who returns toward the end of the novel as the author of a funeral eulogy in which he compares the recently deceased protagonist to male genitalia. By this midway juncture in the narrative, Ximen Qing’s merchant schemes have expanded, through graft and corruption, to the extent that he can no longer manage his own written communications. The song-letter in chapter 56 was purportedly composed as an advertisement for Licentiate Shui’s skills as a ghostwriter or in-house literary secretary. Ying Bojue’s recitation of the scrivener’s missive, to the tune of “Yellow Oriole” (Huang ying’er 黃鶯兒), is ultimately intended to impress Ximen Qing into hiring Shui’s brush for his own ends.

The most enticing line in Ying Bojue’s cover of Licentiate Shui’s song, one that leaves Ximen Qing speechless, combines the characters *she* 舍 (stay over) and the character *guan* 官 (staff) to make a new character *guan* 館 (live-in secretary):

- | | | |
|---|---|-----------|
| | To the Tune “Yellow Oriole” | 黃鶯兒 |
| | The character <i>she</i> and the character <i>guan</i> combine to mean the post of live-in secretary. | 舍字在邊傍立著官， |
| 2 | If you hear of such an opening, I will, of course, beseech your help. | 有時一定求方便。 |
| | If anyone is desirous of a brush sturdy as a beam, to compose his correspondence, | 羨如椽，往來言疏， |
| 4 | My brush is capable of engendering clouds and mist. | 落筆起雲煙。 |

[*Plum*, 3:56.388;
JPMCH, 56.9a]

Ying Bojue’s praise for this hidden message conveys a sharp sense of irony: he quips, “Brother, look in this lyric, is there a single character that has been wasted” 哥，你看他詞里，有一個字兒是閒話麼？⁵ And yet *she* and *guan* are only present in order to be subsumed into a new word:

“The character *she* and the character *guan* combine to mean the post of live-in secretary.” That is to say, if they are written together, do they not form the character

guan, meaning the post of live-in secretary? If such a post becomes available, he is anxious that I should recommend him for it, which is why he says, “If you hear of such an opening, I will, of course, beseech your help.”⁶

「舍」字在邊旁，立著「官」字，不是個「館」字？若有館時，千萬要舉薦。因此說「有時定要求方便。」⁷

Ying Bojue’s claim that Shui “has, in these few lines, succeeded perfectly in putting the feelings in his mind on paper” 只這幾句，穩穩把心窩裡事都寫在紙上 belies the way the song’s true message is revealed by reassembling its constituent parts: disclosure is predicated, here, on dissimulation.⁸ It is even unclear which characters are using each other or who the real ghostwriter might be: Ying Bojue jests that he and Licentiate Shui are practically interchangeable or “the very same person.”⁹ The notional answer to Shui’s riddle unravels into the more intriguing puzzle of who this mysterious character is, whether or not he even exists, and what Ying Bojue’s recommendation letter actually hopes to obtain.¹⁰

The riddle rests on an underlying contradiction: that while Ying Bojue’s version of the song-letter is presented as an oral performance from memory, it only makes sense when it is written down on paper.¹¹ This is a moment when the artful speech of the novel—and the *Cihua*’s wide-ranging use of song—tacitly concedes that it has been crafted through writing, a point perhaps intimated by Ying Bojue’s fixation on the image of a brush.¹² Licentiate Shui’s parodic eulogy for Ximen Qing in chapter 80, a memorable joke that mocks the dead merchant before his supposedly grieving friends, can be read in Shang Wei’s words as a “non-diegetic insert,” one that punctures any pretense of naturalism, foregrounding a sense of “emptiness” (*kong* 空) beneath the superficial “reality” of human affairs.¹³ Shui’s letter anticipates and serves a similar purpose to his fake eulogy, acknowledging the power of writing to conjure up sensuous illusions or, as Ying’s version of Shui’s riddle says of his brush, its capacity to “engender clouds and mist.”¹⁴ The anonymous novelist presents *chaibai daozi* as an advertisement for ghostwriting, a form of literary expression that is at once seductive and empty, a source of fleeting pleasure and concomitant distrust. And yet, by breaking apart and reorganizing the lines of Licentiate Shui’s “Yellow Oriole” song, the *Cihua* wryly celebrates its own poetics of recombination, evoking in condensed form the novel’s predilection for acts of irreverent citation and bricolage, inviting readers to participate in the transformation of everyday discourse through reassembling words on the page.¹⁵

Character manipulation assumes an unprecedented visibility in *Jin Ping Mei cihua*, as both an inventive mode of wordplay and a subject of discussion within the narrative. If through its genetic relation to the formatting of daily-life

encyclopedias (*riyong leishu* 日用類書), the *Cihua* “creates a multilayered, variegated, nonlinear narrative in its account of the everyday,” cultivating a mode of reading at ease with “inserted genres and borrowed texts,” then *chaibai daozi* might be said to distill these tendencies, staging acts of fragmentation and reinsertion at the level of the word.¹⁶ And yet, Licentiate Shui’s riddle suggests that character manipulation need not be reduced to evidence of contemporaneous trends in commercial publishing but rather informs, inasmuch as it broaches themes of literary composition, authorship, and fictionality, the novel’s incipient and fragmentary reflections on its own status as a written artifact.

As Ying Bojue’s puzzling performance insinuates, *Jin Ping Mei* poses a set of far-reaching questions concerning the place of enigma in narrative, inviting consideration of how the novel’s “cut-and-paste” aesthetic—or the random and nonlinear reading practices identified by Shang Wei—engages, and yet was shaped by, prior understandings of concealment in literary rhetoric: What purposes might encryption or “hidden words” (*yinyu* 隱語) serve in a novel celebrated for its visual spectacle and voyeurism?¹⁷ How might we understand the relationship between the reticence of a riddle and the loquacity or openness of vernacular fiction?¹⁸ Commentator Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡 (1670–1698) and later novelists look to enigmas to uncover traces of foreshadowing and subtle echoes of a character’s fate: they pick apart puzzles in search of meaningful secrets.¹⁹ The *Cihua* offers a different vision of the riddle, one that admits contingency or the absence of necessity, celebrating the dynamics of fragmentation and recombination as ends in and of themselves. The seemingly superfluous tactics that achieve this effect—a carefree approach to lexical substitution, skits built around moments of theatrical misrecognition, dice and domino games that forestall plot development, and a fascination with the brothel’s inscrutable argot—cohere around, and are bodied forth in, the trope of *chaibai daozi*. Readers are left like Ximen Qing standing before Ying Bojue with a work that flaunts its capacity to be broken apart and rewritten.

“Two under Full Four Words”

The province of either a “seer” or a “jester,” “dissecting characters” (*chaizi* 拆字) was at once a basic philological method, a technique for interpreting oracles (whether through scapulimancy or plastromancy), and a medium of play in classical prose and poetry, in which the procedure might be referred to as “splitting characters” (*xizi* 析字).²⁰ The “art of predicting the future from characters” was typically referred to as *chaizi*, yet could also be termed “fathoming characters” (*cezi* 測字), “breaking characters” (*pozi* 破字), or “the physiognomizing of characters” (*xiangzi* 相字).²¹ Glyphomancy occupied a venerable position in the evolution of Chinese historiography and anecdotal

writing, from *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (Zuo Tradition) through Tang *chuanqi* 傳奇 (tales of the marvelous) like Li Gongzuo's 李公佐 (ca. 778–848) “Xie Xiao’e zhuan” 謝小娥傳 (Biography of Xie Xiao’e).²² Acrostic “diverging and converging poems” (*liheshi* 離合詩) concurrently emerged in late Han and early medieval anthologies as a means for either concealing political messages (and the poet’s signature) or indulging a ludic wit.²³ These riddle-poems or anagrams, some attributed to revered poets of the Southern Dynasties, “separate” (*li* 離) characters so that their parts can be put together again or “combined” (*he* 合) by the reader.²⁴

Chaibai daozi, an enigmatic phrase that first appears in Ming editions of Yuan drama and song, nominally appeals to the operation of *chaizi* yet often entails a fairly basic “diverging and converging” (*lihe* 離合) procedure.²⁵ In the wake of *Jin Ping Mei*, character manipulation reemerges as a prominent divinatory device in vernacular narratives, a skill personified in characters like Kuang Zhong 況鍾 in *Shiwu guan* 十五貫 (Fifteen Strings of Cash) or Kuang Chaoren 匡超人 from *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 (The Scholars).²⁶ Cao Xueqin’s 曹雪芹 (1715–1763) *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber), meanwhile, adapts orthography riddles and related glyphomantic techniques to craft nuanced portents of female fate, using character manipulation to comment on its central dialectic of authenticity (*zhen* 真) and fictionality (*jia* 假).²⁷ *Jin Ping Mei cihua* alludes to established literary riddles and yet enlarges the possibilities and associations of character manipulation through its engagement with contemporaneous plays and the entertainment culture of the brothel, a tendency that further attests to the novel’s unique role in the remediation of different linguistic practices within the broader corpus of late imperial vernacular literature. Following a brief introduction to the place of character manipulation within the fictional world of *Jin Ping Mei*, this essay addresses two issues: first, the interplay between the *Cihua* and Ming editions of Yuan drama and song; and second, the contrasts between the *Cihua* and Zhang Zhupo’s commentary, assessing the extent to which the latter modifies the former’s approach to hidden words for the purposes of narrative prolepsis and character development.

As David Roy has noted, the *Cihua* repeatedly cites variant forms of a well-known “literary riddle” (*wenmi* 文謎) from *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (A New Account of Tales of the World), adapting an esteemed technique of associative combination for the purposes of representing everyday contests of wit. In what became an influential model for character manipulation in Chinese literature, Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) encounters a seemingly nonsensical eight-character enigma incised on the back of a memorial stele for the fourteen-year-old girl Cao E 曹娥 (Cao E bei 曹娥碑), who lost her life in search of her father’s remains:

“Yellow pongee, youthful wife, maternal grandson, ground in a mortar” 黃絹幼婦，外孫瑩白。While Cao Cao’s perceptive companion Yang Xiu 楊修 (178–219) intuitively gets the answer, it takes the Emperor Wu of Wei 魏武 a journey of “thirty *li*” to finally solve the riddle:

After they had traveled on for thirty *li*, Cao Cao finally said, “I’ve got it!” He then had Xiu record separately what he had understood it to mean. Xiu wrote, “Yellow pongee” is *colored silk* (*sesi*), which, combined in one character, is *jue*, “utterly.” “Youthful wife” is young woman (*shaonü*), which, combined in one character, is *miao*, “wonderful.” “Maternal grandson” is a *daughter’s son* (*nüzi*), which, combined in one character, is *hao*, “lovely.” “Ground in a mortar” is to *suffer hardship* (*shouxin*), which, combined in one character, is *ci*, “words.” The whole thing thus means: “Utterly wonderful, lovely words.”

Cao Cao had also recorded it in the same way that Xiu had. Sighing, he said, “My ability is thirty *li* slower than yours!”²⁸

行三十里，魏武乃曰：「吾已得。」令脩別記所知。「黃絹，色絲也，於字為絕。幼婦，少女也，於字為妙。外孫，女子也，於字為好。瑩白，受辛也，於字為辭。所謂『絕妙好辭』也。」魏武亦記之，與脩同，乃歎曰：「我才不及卿，乃覺三十里。」²⁹

This anecdote is the third in a set of tales involving Cao Cao and Yang Xiu in the chapter “Quick Perception” 捷悟 (Jie wu): in each instance, the encounter between the two men revolves around an act of reassembling characters, with Yang—Cao Cao’s “superintendent of records”³⁰—identifying and explaining the solution on behalf of his boss.³¹ The answer to the riddle on the back of the Cao E stele: “utterly wonderful, lovely words” (*juemiao haoci* 絕妙好辭)—at once implicit praise for the memorial and the wording of the eight-character enigma—is ultimately less important than the act of solving the riddle, a performance intended to measure Yang Xiu’s “discrimination and perceptiveness.”³²

Jin Ping Mei cihua recycles a truncated version of “utterly wonderful, lovely words,” placing the phrase in the mouths of Ximen Qing and Song Huilian 宋惠蓮, a former bondservant sacked for colluding in a case of adultery, with whom Ximen subsequently conducts an ill-fated affair:

“And did this filly live up to your expectations?” asked Dame Wang. “Why: *she’s two under full four words!*”—replied Ximen Qing.³³

王婆又道：「這雌兒風月如何？」西門道：「這色系子女不可言！」³⁴

Ying Bojue said: “Brother, what kind of a man are you, that you should have been patronizing Zheng Aiyue without saying a word to me about it? How was I to know?

As far as the breeze and moonlight are concerned, how does she compare to Li Guijie?" Ximen Qing said: "why: *she's two under full four words!*"³⁵

伯爵道：「哥，你是個人。你請他就不對我說聲，我怎的知道了？比李桂兒風月如何？」西門慶道：「通色絲子女不可言。」³⁶

The protagonist's straightforward adaptation of the four-character puzzle is no longer an enigma presented and solved by the novel's characters: indeed, Ximen's interlocutors do not pick up on or hear the nonsensical combination "color, silk, son, woman." Ximen's empty catchphrase serves little purpose other than to complement the sense of scheming that inspires clandestine meetings with his lovers and, at least in chapter 61, hint at his familiarity with the hermetic twisting of language that defines the transactions of the brothel, the territory of Ying Bojue, Zheng Aiyue 鄭愛月 (a courtesan from the Star of Joy Bordello [Lexing tang 樂星堂] in Qinghe 清河), and Li Guijie 李桂姐 (a courtesan from the Verdant Spring Bordello [Lichun yuan 麗春院] on Second Street in the licensed quarter of Qinghe). Ying Bojue's own skill in *chaibai daozi* invokes these associations in his teasing of Ximen Qing: he slyly disassembles the character Li 李 as "Eighteenth Youngster" (*shibazi* 十八子) to confuse Ximen's beloved Li Ping'er with the hired prostitute Li Guijie: "Could it have been one of your mistresses at home, or might it have been that 'Eighteenth Youngster' from in there?" 或者是你家中那娘使了你來？或是裡邊十八子那裡？³⁷ These examples erase the dialogic tenor of Cao Cao's encounter with Yang Xiu (or the expectation that a riddle consists of a question and answer): in the absence of any response within the diegetic world of the narrative, the task of finding a solution is left to the reader.

Of the three occurrences of "color, silk, son, woman," only Song Huilian's appropriation of the phrase retains the seductive veneer of a riddle, naming a secret location for a rendezvous and matching the expression with a "phrase omitting the end" (*xiehouyu* 歇後語).³⁸

[Ximen Qing said] "Don't go out front today, stay in the rear compound and we can have some real fun together tonight." The woman shook her head, saying: "The rear compound reminds me of what happens when: 'The wagons from the Firewood Office block the road: There are too many sticks about.'—We'd better make it the Fifth Lady's place again. *That would be 'Two under full four words.'*"³⁹

西門慶道：「你今日不出去，在後邊晚夕咱好生耍耍。」老婆搖頭說道：「後邊惜薪司擋住路兒柴眾，咱不如還在五娘那裡色絲子女。」⁴⁰

Song Huilian's use of Ximen Qing's preferred catchphrase intimates two central themes in *Jin Ping Mei*'s approach to character manipulation: that the

novel's most challenging enigmas belong exclusively to female characters, notably the courtesans of the Verdant Spring or Joy of Star Bordellos and the former bondservants who mimic their behavior; and that these enigmas often depend on the creative synthesis of multiple modes of wordplay, mixing character manipulation with *xiehouyu* and a range of other puzzles. While Ying Bojue pedantically explains the solutions to his riddles and Ximen Qing reduces "two under full four words" to a pointless exclamation, the novel's courtesans display a comparatively sophisticated grasp of how to invent and manipulate enigmas. If there were a rival to Yang Xiu in *Jin Ping Mei*, it would be Song Huilian, Zheng Aixiang 鄭愛香 (Aiyue's sister), or Li Guijie.

While Song Huilian matches character manipulation with a single *xiehouyu*, Zheng Aixiang goes further in fusing different modes of punning and wordplay, testing the limits of sense and nonsense. Aixiang's acerbic wit steals the limelight in chapter 32 as she berates Ying Bojue in a "lingo" he cannot understand.⁴¹ She gains the upper hand over Bojue and the other denizens of the bordello by devising two veiled insults, both of which resist straightforward interpretation and demand a consummate skill in reassembling words. Aixiang's first profanity harnesses the strategy of "concealing the head" (*cang tou* 藏頭), where the first characters in four familiar phrases can be combined into a new four-character expression:

He's just a: "Cock" a doodle doo, "Hold" onto your hat; who's: A "dillar," a dollar, a ten o'clock scholar, "Yes," my darling daughter.⁴²

「不要理這望江南巴山虎兒，汗東山斜紋布。」⁴³

Aixiang picks the name of a lyric tune ("Gazing toward the Southland" 望江南 [Wang Jiangnan]), the name of a mountain chair or a type of ivy ("mountain climbing tiger" 巴山虎 [bashan hu]), the name of a song tune ("The Mountains East of the Han River" 汗東山 [Han dong shan]), and the name of a type of twill ("diagonally patterned fabric" 斜紋布 [xiwen bu]). The four first words—*wang* 望, *ba* 巴, *han* 汗, *xie* 斜—fail to provide a clear solution, only offering another nonsensical puzzle nestled within the riddle. By reading *wangba* 望巴 as a pun on *wangba* 王八 (cuckold) and *hanxie* 汗斜 as a pun on *hanxie* 汗邪 (delirious), critics have uncovered a stinging barb directed toward Ying Bojue, a "delirious cuckold."⁴⁴ Aixiang's riddle moves from reassembling the parts of characters (*chaizi ge* 拆字格) to reassembling the components of well-known phrases (*cangtou ge* 藏頭格) while pitting the sounds and visual appearances of words against each other. David Roy's virtuosic translation aspires to achieve the same effect by choosing four familiar English phrases, the first words of which—"cock," "hold," "dillar," "yes"—sound like "delirious cuckold."

Aixiang's censure of Bojue does not conclude with the cuckold slur but continues with another elaborate taunt:

"This Beggar Ying the Second," said Zheng Aixiang, "is worse than ever today. He puts his 'ugly' 'niece' on a pushcart: the better to parade his 'ugliness.' Like the flowers of the wax gourd: he stinks in and out of season. It so happens that, he's really a 'son of a nun.'"⁴⁵

鄭愛香笑道：「這應二花子今日鬼酉上車兒，推醜；東瓜花兒，醜的沒時了。他原來是個王姑來子。」⁴⁶

Aixiang this time reassembles the characters *gui* 鬼 and *you* 酉, the right- and left-hand components of the character *chou* 醜 (meaning "ugly" or "ugliness"), calling for the reader to "put them on a pushcart." The line again artfully combines character manipulation with the logic of a "phrase omitting the end" while adding a final pun: *tui* 推 in Lu 魯 dialect, Fu Zengxiang suggests, becomes *tai* 太, or "very" ugly.⁴⁷ For Aixiang a single riddle—the kind Licentiate Shui offers to Ximen Qing—no longer seems sufficiently pleasurable; instead she breaks apart and combines different strategies of concealment: *chaibai daozi*, *xiehouyu*, punning—crafting enigmas that simultaneously demand multiple methods of resolution. In doing so she perturbs and plays with every aspect of a word: its visual form, its sound, its place within a set phrase. If Ying Bojue articulates the novel's concern with naming and explaining its use of riddles, Zheng Aixiang channels a more raucous energy latent within the narrative, concealing riddles within riddles, offering provisional solutions that contain new puzzles, threatening her reader's claim to mastery over meaning.⁴⁸ The question becomes why male "scholarly" approaches to character manipulation in *Jin Ping Mei cihua* are so trite, pedantic, or uncomplicated, while the courtesan's enigmas remain stubbornly recalcitrant. A possible answer to this conundrum can be intuited by turning to broader representations of *chaibai daozi* in Ming vernacular literature, a search that leads to the space of private performance and its reproductions in print.

Breaking Plaques: Character Manipulation and Domino Games

Zheng Aixiang's virtuosic talent in character manipulation invokes the close association of *chaibai daozi* with courtesan performance in Yuan-Ming drama and song. The formulas deployed to describe character manipulation in Ming editions of Yuan plays, in turn, prompt further consideration of the interplay between riddles and dice or domino games, a dynamic that informs the programming of drinking sessions, gambling scenes, and the brothel's diversions in *Jin Ping Mei cihua*. The novel thus raises the question of how acts of breaking

apart and reassembling the components of words participate in, and are altered by, games of contingency and chance.

The sheer number of allusions to and examples of *chaibai daozi* in the *Cihua* is especially striking when compared to the solitary reference in chivalric saga (and the *Cihua* edition's parent text), *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (The Water Margin).⁴⁹ Ying Bojue's decision to refer to Licentiate Shui's sung riddle as an instance of *chaibai daozi* attests instead to the intimate relationship between the novel and the Northern drama or *zaju* 雜劇 (variety play).⁵⁰ Skill in character manipulation becomes, for instance, a contested prize in the third act (*san zhe* 三折) of the fifth volume of the Hongzhi 弘治 1498 edition of *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (Romance of the Western Chamber).⁵¹ In one of the most memorable occurrences of *chaibai daozi* in late imperial vernacular literature, Crimson (Hongniang 紅娘) and Zheng Heng 鄭恆 argue over their respective talents in posing and solving riddles: Zheng is able to figure out the answer—combining “inch of wood” (「木寸」=村), “horse's door” (「馬戶」=驢), and “corpse's kerchief” (「屍巾」=屌)—only to realize that he has named himself a “boorish donkey's dick” (「村驢屌」).⁵²

References to character manipulation proliferate in mid to late Ming recensions of Yuan plays. Zang Maoxun's 臧懋循 (1550–1620) collated edition of *Chen Jiqing wushang Zhuye zhou* 陳季卿誤上竹葉舟 (Chen Jiqing Mistakenly Boards a Bamboo-Leaf Boat), for instance, adds a “wedge” (*xiezi* 楔子) scene to the earlier Yuan script, foregrounding a comic disjunction between the inability of actors within the drama to hear the answer to outwardly nonsensical lines and the ease with which the reader can identify and solve the puzzle:

(Hui'an *speaks*): This guy's gone mad! Go on back out and get it clear this time.
(Acolyte *speaks*): What's not clear? Ch-en-ji-yi-qi-ying has come just to visit you.
(Hui'an *speaks*): I don't get it. (Acolyte *speaks*): Ask your old lady to come out, she'll know. (Hui'an *speaks*): Pshaw! (Acolyte *speaks*): Alright. I'll tell you. I was having fun playing the word-splitting game. Chen is Chen, Ji-yi is ji, and qi-ying is qing. Hasn't your old friend Chen Jiqing come to see you?⁵³

(惠安云) 這廝敢風魔了，再出去問明白了來說。(行童云) 什麼不明白？是耳東末子即夕特來相訪。(惠安云) 我不省的。(行童云) 你請出師父娘來，他便知道。(惠安云) 口退！(行童云) 我說與你，這個叫做折白道字：耳東是個陳字，末子是個季字，即夕是個卿字，卻不是你的故人陳季卿來了也。⁵⁴

This scene of comic misrecognition, despite the skit's impression of a stuttering orality, centers upon the primarily visual experience of recombining the components of words. Zang's private reader can see through the dissimulation of the stage, apprehending jokes on the page that might remain inaccessible to a vulgar

theatergoing crowd.⁵⁵ Ying Bojue's exclamation in chapter 56—"Brother you may not get it, but this is *chaibai daozi*"—from this perspective echoes the way Crimson or the Acolyte of *Zhuye zhou* emphatically states the name of the game upon outwitting their opponents.

Ming recensions of Yuan drama cast character manipulation as a courtesan's skill.⁵⁶ Editions of Guan Hanqing's 關漢卿 (ca. 1234–ca. 1300) *Zhao Pan'er fengyue jiu fengchen zaju* 趙盼兒風月救風塵雜劇 (*Zhao Pan'er Uses Seductive Wiles to Rescue a Sister Courtesan*)—first in Zhao Qimei's 趙琦美 (1563–1624) *Maiwang guan chao jiao gujin zaju* 脈望館抄校古今雜劇 (Copied and Collated Zaju Plays Past and Present from the Maiwang Studio) and subsequently in Zang's *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選 (Anthology of Yuan Plays)—disclose what became a stock formula:

Our kid is good at all kinds of word games—Splitting the Characters, Stringing the Lines, there's nothing she doesn't know, nothing she can't do.⁵⁷

俺孩兒拆白道字，頂真續麻，無般不曉，無般不會。⁵⁸

This same expression—pairing *chaibai daozi* with the related game of “stringing the line” (*dingzhen xuma*) and the claim “there was nothing [they] did not know”—appears with slight variants in six additional *zaju* in Zang's collection as a set phrase for introducing courtesans.⁵⁹ While the earliest references to a printed edition of the *Cihua* (1610 or 1611) narrowly predate the publication of Zang's anthology in 1615–1616, the novel's numerous references to *Xixiang ji*, earlier Ming editions of Yuan plays, and sixteenth-century collections of Yuan arias like *Yongxi yuefu* 雍熙樂府 (Songs of Harmonious Resplendence) clearly attest to the author's familiarity with the language and conventions of Northern drama.⁶⁰

Zang Maoxun standardized a formula for introducing courtesan characters onstage, yet this refrain was common currency in the Ming editing of Yuan plays. The novelist's decision to pair his references to breaking characters with allusions to skill in “backgammon and elephant chess” (*shuanglu xiangqi* 雙陸象棋) and his carefree attitude toward the fungibility of the characters *bai* 白 and *pai* 牌, for instance, resemble versions of the formula in the mid-Ming *Maiwang guan* collection: “She's good at backgammon, elephant chess, Splitting the Characters, Stringing the Lines, there's nothing she can't do, nothing she doesn't know” 好打雙陸，下象棋，折牌道字，頂真續麻，無所不通，無般不曉。⁶¹ The novelist's frequent use of the “nothing [she] doesn't know” refrain, as with Ying Bojue's choice of the “Yellow Oriole” tune or the resemblances between Zheng Aixiang's and Li Guijie's ribaldry and that of a character like Crimson, bears the imprint of Ming dramatic editing. The *Cihua*, however, effectively brings this

tired formula to life, inviting courtesan characters to demonstrate their mastery in reassembling words while indulging a theatrical synergy between riddles and the brothel's other diversions.

A variant of the stock line “[they] were skilled in the word games played by breaking characters [and there was little they did not know]” appears at several points in the *Cihua* as an introductory template for central characters, notably Ximen Qing, Chen Jingji, and Pan Jinlian. Just as Ximen's catchphrase “two under full four words” passes to his lovers, this stock description of proverbial skill in character manipulation passes to his bedfellow and then to her incestuous lover, Ximen's son-in-law. In contrast to the clear-cut editing of *Yuanqu xuan*, the *Cihua* randomly distends the formula's frame of reference, while flaunting a slapdash approach to its transcription:

[Ximen Qing] also liked to gamble, and there was little he didn't know about backgammon, elephant chess, and the various word games played by breaking characters down into their component parts.⁶²

又會賭博，雙陸象棋，抹牌道字，無不通曉。⁶³

There is little he is not proficient at. With regard to the works of the hundred schools, and the various word games played by breaking characters down into their component parts, [Ximen Qing] has but to be exposed to them in order to demonstrate his mastery.⁶⁴

無所不曉；諸子百家，折白道字，眼見就會。⁶⁵

As for the works of the hundred schools, backgammon, elephant chess, and the various word games played by breaking characters down into their component parts, [Pan Jinlian's] thoroughly versed in them all. She even writes a good hand.⁶⁶

諸子百家，雙陸象棋，拆牌道字皆通，一筆好寫！⁶⁷

When it came to poetry, lyrics, songs, or rhapsodies; backgammon and elephant chess; or the various word games played by breaking characters down into their component parts, there was: Nothing [Chen Jingji] had not mastered, little he did not know.⁶⁸

詩詞歌賦、雙陸象棋，折牌道字，無所不通，無所不曉。⁶⁹

There is, despite lexical repetition and David Roy's recycled translation, a degree of variation in the wording of this formula, leading to the question of whether *chaipai daozi* 拆牌道字, *mopai daozi* 抹牌道字, and *zhapai daozi* 折牌道字 can be said to refer to the same activity.⁷⁰ Critics of the novel have devoted some energy to parsing the differences between the meanings of *bai* and *pai* (near homophones with the same “level-tone” in the *yang* 陽 category in Yuan rhyme

books), trying to ascertain whether or not they designate a single practice: is *chaipai daozi* a faulty transcription or an independent procedure based on discerning hidden meaning in combinations of “plaques” (*pai* [dice or dominoes])?⁷¹ Such efforts, however, overlook what the slippages and semantic drift between *chaibai daozi* and *chaipai daozi* might reveal about the distinctive treatment of riddles—suspended between literary knowledge (“the works of the hundred schools”) and gambling (“backgammon and elephant chess”)—within the *Cihua*. Rather than define *chaipai daozi* or dismiss it as a mistake, I read this phrase as a symptom of the *Cihua*’s carefree approach to lexical substitution and, more specifically, the novel’s attraction to the interplay between riddles and dice or domino games.

In trying to resolve the dilemma of how to distinguish *chaipai daozi* and *chaibai daozi*, Fu Zengxiang has directed attention to one of the novel’s most detailed drinking games, the dice and domino bout in chapter 21. Ximen Qing returns home to find his second wife and first lady, Wu Yueniang 吳月娘, and a “sorority of concubines playing at guess-fingers or gaming at forfeits.”⁷² Yueniang calls for a new game with the scoring based on domino combinations: each player is asked to come up with the name of a song tune, the names of two domino combinations, and a line from *Xixiang ji*, “strung together to make some semblance of sense.”⁷³ He or she is then asked to throw the dice and drink a cup of wine as a forfeit if “any of the numbers thrown correspond to those in the domino combinations he or she has named.”⁷⁴ For Fu this convoluted game literalizes the meaning of *chaipai daozi*: breaking apart (*chai*) a domino combination (*pai*) to create a phrase—the novel, however, does not name or describe the game in this way.⁷⁵ Pan Jinlian, for instance, comes up with the tune name “The Old Crone,” a first domino combination, “Ventures among the Flowers in Her Dotage,” a second domino combination “[Thereby Flouting] The Three Bonds and Five Constants,” and the line “If not arrested for seduction, it will be for robbery” from *Xixiang ji*.⁷⁶ When she rolls the dice, she gets numbers that match the combination “The Three Bonds and Five Constants,” meaning that she has to drink a punishment cup. Jinlian’s domino combinations offer a pretext for those seeking an ironic commentary on her own fate: the “old crone’s” transgressive sexual dalliances (frolicking amid flowers) violate the “three bonds” (father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife).

Zhang Zhupo highlights what he sees as the hidden meaning in this game with great relish, suggesting that Pan’s domino combinations presage her pseudo-incestuous affair with Ximen Qing’s son-in-law Chen Jingji.⁷⁷ That Pan’s roll of the dice fortuitously matches her domino combinations hints that her punishment within the novel has already been decreed. The Chongzhen edition and Zhang Zhupo subsequently cast these female players as unsuspecting witnesses to the proleptic revelation of their deaths.⁷⁸ The game

sequence in chapter 21 of the *Cihua*, nevertheless, divulges an ambivalent approach to fortune and chance: on the one hand, Pan's combination supports a possible reading of her character's future demise; on the other hand, the combinations offered by Pan's fellow players, whether Ximen's "Fourth Lady" Sun Xue'e 孫雪娥 or his "Second Lady" Li Jiao'er 李嬌兒, originally a courtesan from the Verdant Spring Bordello, say little of any clear prophetic significance. Are we to then read Pan's roll of the dice as a portent, or would that be to retroactively impose coherence on what might be a coincidence?⁷⁹ Unlike the Chongzhen edition or Zhang Zhupo's commentary, the *Cihua* withholds a conclusive answer to this question.

While Fu Zengxiang's gloss of the domino game in chapter 21 as an instance of *chaipai daozi* is based on supposition, the novel provides more substantial evidence for the interpenetration of riddles and dice or domino games in chapter 60. This sequence, overlooked by Fu and other critics concerned with the valences of *chaipai daozi*, follows a series of quick shifts between bouts of character manipulation and rolling dice: the game, in effect, restages the stock formula "[when it came to] poetry, lyrics, songs, or rhapsodies; backgammon and elephant chess; or the various word games played by breaking characters down into their component parts, there was [nothing they could not do]."⁸⁰ To begin with, Wu Kai 吳鎧, the elder brother of Wu Yueniang, brother-in-law of Ximen Qing, and battalion commander of the Qinghe Left Guard, proposes a game where he offers a series of riddles based on the numbers one to ten. He then rolls the dice, paying a forfeit if any of the numbers thrown matches the number concealed in his riddle. In this process, Wu Kai reduces character manipulation to an almost meaningless act of counting: presenting his answer or the riddle "base" (*di* 底) in advance, he directs attention to the construction of the riddle's surface or "face" (*mian* 面) rather than any hidden secret to be exposed. Unlike Zheng Aixiang's virtuosic improvisations (seemingly the author's own invention), Wu's formulaic riddles are lifted almost verbatim from the late Ming anthology [*Xinke*] *Shishang Huayan qule tanxiao jiuling* 新刻時尚華筵趣樂談笑酒令 ([Newly Printed]: Currently Fashionable Jokes and Drinking Games to Be Enjoyed at Formal Banquets).⁸¹ Just as Wu Kai dismembers his lines of poetry, the *Cihua* constructs this game sequence by recycling excerpts from other print publications.

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Amid the <i>hundred</i> myriads of men, the <i>white</i>
flag is furled. | 百萬軍中卷白旗
Answer: 百 - 白 = 一 (1) |
| 2 As for the heroes under <i>Heaven</i> , few <i>men</i>
recognize them. | 天下豪傑少人知
Answer: 天 - 人 = 二 (2) |
| The Prince of <i>Qin</i> has executed
Generalissimo <i>Yu</i> . | 秦王斬了余元帥
Answer: 秦 - 余 = 三 (3) |

- 4 Having *cursed* him for not providing a *horse* 罵得將軍無馬騎
for him to ride. Answer: 罵 - 馬 = 四 (4)
This so frightened me that *I* lack the *mouth* 誠得吾今無口應
to respond. Answer: 吾 - 口 = 五 (5)
- 6 The *seething* crowds on the street remove his 袞袞街頭脫去衣
clothes. Answer: 袞 - 衣 = 六 (6)
The black-clad *lictors* haven't any *white* hair 皂人頭上無白髮
on their heads. Answer: 皂 - 白 = 七 (7)
- 8 After *splitting* up the corpse, they leave their 分尸不得帶刀歸
knives behind. Answer: 分 - 刀 = 八 (8)
There is a *bolus* of good medicine, but no one 一丸好藥無人點
wants a *dab* of it. Answer: 丸 - 點 = 九 (9)
- 10 A *thousand* years of accomplishment is 千載終須一撇離。
negated with a single *stroke*. Answer: 千 - 一 = 十 (10)
[Plum, 3:60.497-98;
JPMCH, 60.5a]

The reader later learns that two of Wu's rolls match the numbers concealed in his riddles, yet this information is removed from, and deemed extraneous to, the representation of the ten-step game. The novelist refuses to tamper with the progression of the riddles by mentioning either Wu Kai's luck or the forfeits he accrues, instead presenting the sequence as it might appear on the pages of a drinking miscellany, as a script waiting to be picked up, passed around, and put to use by players at a private banquet. This interactive riddle sequence, one that forestalls the narrative's development, effectively invites its reader to play along, as if asking them to pause from the plot, to find their own dice, and to see if their rolls match any of the ten combinations. The novelist in chapter 60 sets up a game without intruding to narrate the way it was played by a particular person on a particular occasion: in doing so the novel creates a space where a sense of play as purposeless activity, as a diversion open to unpredictability and chance, might be momentarily entertained.

Wu Kai's riddles set in motion a string of amusements in chapter 60, all based upon and linked through the passage of the dice box between the assembled players. Following Wu, Brother-in-Law Shen (Shen yifu 沈姨夫) and Licentiate Wen (Wen xiucui 溫秀才; a double for Licentiate Shui) each take up the dice to play with matching literary phrases and numbers—whereas Wu finds numbers hidden in words, Wen extracts new phrases from numerical combinations. Shen offers four lines that conceal numbers and then throws a pair of dice six times to see if he obtains a number that corresponds. Licentiate Wen, meanwhile, names a flower for the numbers one through six, then finds a line from the *Four Books*

that begins with the last character of the flower named above. Of the six quotations cited by Licentiate Wen, only two are from the *Four Books*: the second and third lines, as Roy has shown, involve a phonological error and a nonsensical substitution:

2. Double-headed Lotus. "Amid the ripples, mandarin ducks play."⁸²

二擲並頭蓮，蓮漪戲彩鴛。⁸³

3. Willow of the Three Springs. "Under the willow one does not adjust one's hat."⁸⁴

三擲三春柳，柳下不整冠。⁸⁵

The second line is from an aria in *Pipa ji* 琵琶記 (The Lute), not from one of the *Four Books*. Wen adds to the confusion by pairing "ripple" with "lotus," picking a homophonic equivalent, yet one with no related meaning, thus violating the rules of his own game. The third line, meanwhile, is a misquotation from a Music Bureau ballad: "Under the plum tree one does not adjust one's hat" 李下不整冠. Wen's mistake is nonsensical: one should not adjust one's hat under a plum tree to avoid giving an impression that one is stealing plums; the willow bears no fruit, so the maxim is meaningless. It remains unclear whether Wen's misquotations are designed to ironically highlight his cluelessness or whether they are simply mistakes (like the phrase *chaipai daozi*) generated by the *Cihua*'s anarchic reprocessing of other sources—evidence of what Yuming He elsewhere terms a "poetics of error" or "iterative hucksterism" (*zhanzhuan baifan* 輾轉稗販).⁸⁶ "Hawking" faulty wares, the *Cihua* blurs the lines between "corruption and creation, and between citation and parody"—in doing so the novel's games mock efforts to establish legitimate textual authority.⁸⁷ Wen's carefree approach to mixing and matching phrases, confusing an aria from *Pipa ji* with a Confucian classic, speaks to the *Cihua*'s predilection for acts of ironic appropriation and irreverent replacement.

In chapter 60 of the *Cihua*, the players quickly move on from the six flowers to other amusements (Ying Bojue and Xie Xida 謝希大 reciting tongue twisters), yet the Chongzhen edition and Zhang Zhupo felt compelled to tidy up the mess. To begin with, both editions excise Wu Kai's riddles, removing this extended yet superfluous act of character manipulation as counting from the game sequence. Zhang then corrects Licentiate Wen's mistakes, rewriting the six lines as coherent portents of female fate: Zhang amends Wen's fake classical allusion, switching "willow" back to "plum," a move that allows him to read the line as an implicit comment on Li (or plum) Ping'er.⁸⁸ Following this same logic, he rereads the preceding lines of Wen's game, "Double-headed Lotus: 'Amid the ripples, mandarin ducks play,'" as a comment on Pan the "Golden Lotus" and

“Spot of Red: ‘The red plum blossom confronts the white plum blossom,’” as a comment on Chunmei (or Spring Blossom).⁸⁹ The game is no longer a string of inconsequential combinations but a carefully calibrated set of portents. To reaffirm this point, the Chongzhen edition and Zhang Zhupo completely rewrite the sixth, final, throw of the dice: in the *Cihua* Wu Kai lists the flower “Sky Full of Stars” (*man tianxing* 滿天星), a variety of chrysanthemum, and a line from Mencius: “The stars and other heavenly bodies are so distant” 星辰之遠也.⁹⁰ The editor of the Chongzhen text and Zhang Zhupo interrupt Wu Kai’s game after the third roll of the dice and segue to Ying Bojue’s tongue twisters. They then return to the sixth roll, but this time pass the dice to Ximen Qing. Ximen declares: “Sixth throw, the heavens are full of stars” then matches this phrase with a new line, “Stars fall in the dark emerald pool” 星辰冷落碧潭水.⁹¹ Ximen subsequently rolls the dice and obtains a six. The repeated emphasis on the number six in the Chongzhen edition and in Zhang Zhupo’s commentary is significant given that this game is being played on the eve of Li Ping’er’s death (Li is Ximen’s sixth wife).⁹² Zhang Zhupo reads the line as an omen, one that simultaneously refers to Yueniang (the moon in the night sky) and augurs the event of Ximen Qing’s own death. That Ximen’s roll of a six matches his turn as the sixth player confirms, for Zhang, that his fate has been sealed—a point ironically underscored by Ying Bojue’s remark that Ximen will be especially fortunate this winter.⁹³ It is in such moments that Zhang Zhupo’s search for a poetics of *Jin Ping Mei* takes shape: for Zhang the novel is a “complex network of correspondences, contrasts, echoes, and foreshadowing,” a vision that animates his rereading of the games in chapter 60.⁹⁴ Seemingly irrelevant combinations now constitute hidden omens, foreshadowing death or staging the proleptic revelation of fate.

The variant *chaipai daozi*, whether a repeated mistake or a neologism, reflects the overlay between literary riddles and dice or domino games as a technique of partition and recombination within *Jin Ping Mei cihua*, the way largely meaningless lines of character manipulation might become part of games based on chance. These same moments, nevertheless, attract the attention of a commentator like Zhang Zhupo, who tries to discern hidden messages within combinations of plaques, a focus that anticipates the representation of “riddle parties” as tragic portents in later novels. When in chapter 62 of *Honglou meng*, for instance, Baoyu recites the line “a broken jade hairpin, the red candle is cold” 敲斷玉釵紅燭冷 in response to the prompt “jade hairpin” (*yuchai* 玉釵), his unwitting forecast of a broken union with Baochai 寶釵 (one that affirms her own portentous lantern riddle in chapter 22) bears the imprint of Zhang’s prophetic combinations.⁹⁵ As Baoyu and his respectable *guixiu* 閨秀 friends lose themselves in noisy bouts of finger guessing and drinking challenges, their

behavior ironically recalls the ribaldry of *Jin Ping Mei*'s less salubrious courtesans and rakes. Zhang Zhupo's answers were nevertheless predicated on a need to delete riddles like those rehearsed by Wu Kai or correct nonsensical combinations like "under the willow one does not adjust one's hat," restraining the *Cihua*'s attraction to the dynamics of fragmentation and displacement. The search for tragic prophecies within riddle parties was made possible by and yet rests on a negation of the *Cihua*'s celebration of contingency. Through an openness to errors, substitutions, and accidents, however, the *Cihua* reminds readers that it is precisely those attempts that seek to impose coherence or unity on the messiness of experience that are in the end makeshift, conditional, or (as Zhang's peculiar obsession with the character "plum" proves) improbable.⁹⁶

"Fake Crystal": Resistant Riddles

Despite Ying Bojue's efforts to explain *chaibai daozi* for Ximen Qing and Zhang Zhupo's attempts to tidy up Wu Kai's games, the argot of the Verdant Springs Bordello remains a powerful subcurrent within the *Cihua*, testing the limits of sense and in some cases calling into question the very promise of a solution. While the *Cihua*'s riddles defer or displace the revelation of hidden meaning, the novel elsewhere reflects upon this putative absence, commenting on the inaccessibility of secret answers in the presentation of its most recalcitrant enigmas. One of the few truly perplexing lines of character manipulation in *Jin Ping Mei*, delivered by the courtesan Li Guijie, appears in chapter 32:

Mother told him, "If you were to stick to our place, we might be willing to lay out a little something to entertain you; what would it matter? But if you insist on carrying on with someone else, we're not stupid enough to countenance you any further." Truly: "If you put on fake crystals to contemplate that southern exposure; it'll only look more repulsive."⁹⁷

媽說：「你只在俺家，俺倒買些什麼看看你不打緊。你和別人家打熱，俺傻的不勻了。」真是「硝子石望著南兒丁口心！」⁹⁸

This almost nonsensical line—built around an image of fake crystal, ironically a material for the production of spectacles—outwardly suggests that it is concealing something, yet it is unclear what precisely the secret might be. As if to underscore the sense of bewilderment Guijie's line elicits for the reader, the narrator comments: "Everyone laughed at what was being said, but Yueniang, sitting on her *kang* listening to the conversation, protested, 'You've been talking all this while, and I haven't understood a word of it. I don't know what sort of lingo you're talking.'"⁹⁹ The laughter here underscores how true riddles afford inclusion within a closed circle. The scene resonates with both Ying Bojue's

pedantic explanation that *chaibai daozi* is “difficult” and Zheng Aixiang’s profanity yet purposefully draws attention to the absence of any answer. In doing so the novelist redirects attention from the secret as the solution to a puzzle, to the effects of secrecy in creating and protecting a clandestine in-group.

Critics have, subsequently, struggled to make sense of the “fake crystal” riddle, coming up with wildly divergent solutions.¹⁰⁰ David Roy, for instance, effectively rewrites the line to make it support a tentative yet fairly tenuous interpretation. Roy suspects a pun on “facing south” as a slur for “homosexual propensity” (*nanfeng* 男風); he then suggests that the line is in fact missing the character for *ya* 亞, which would allow him to combine *ding* 丁 and *kou* 口 to form *ke* 可, and *ya* 亞 and *xin* 心 to form *wu* 惡, revealing the phrase “repulsive” or “very detestable” (*kewu* 可惡): so the riddle can be read to insinuate that “a homosexual propensity is very detestable.”¹⁰¹ In a telling omission, Roy refrains from glossing the “fake crystal” itself, leaving the central enigmatic image of the line intact. Qiu Shengwei provides a more intriguing solution yet is still forced to rewrite the line (this time transcribing the character for *ding* 丁 as *shi* 十).¹⁰² Like Roy, Qiu reads several characters as homophonic puns: *shao* 硝 becomes *shao* 少, *nan* 南 becomes *nan* 難, and the three graphs for *shi* 十, *kou* 口, and *xin* 心 combine to form the character for *si* 思 (to think, to ponder; thought): “Search less for it is difficult to ponder” 少望難思.¹⁰³ Qiu’s vague solution to the line suggests that there is no secret, only a caution to avoid the difficult thoughts involved in solving an enigma: for Qiu this becomes a riddle about the difficulties of unriddling.

There remains no clear-cut answer to the interpretative challenges posed by the “fake crystal” line—the only way to solve the riddle is to rewrite it. This appears to be a moment when the argot of the brothel, with its seductive yet hermetic twisting of language, resists full incorporation into the discourse of the novel, retaining a residual illegibility. Such a moment might be read not as a failure of meaning but as what Daniel Tiffany calls a “spectacle of obscurity,” a scene where the “figurative absence characterizing secrecy, privacy, or obscurity presents itself as a *spectacle* to be consumed, deciphered, judged.”¹⁰⁴ The riddle, by “displaying its obscurity, turning secrecy into an event and making a spectacle of incomprehension,” casts the brothel as a site of verbal and social hermeticism, generating yet frustrating a desire for possession—Wu Yueniang, as a figure naively seeking transparency, is mocked and left isolated.¹⁰⁵ Zhang Zhupo, who is elsewhere so keen to display his skill in resolving puzzles, also seems outwitted by the “fake crystal” line, focusing instead on how Gujie’s laughter leads “[their] concealed thoughts to come out,” with the courtesans scorning Yueniang.¹⁰⁶ Zhang tacitly concedes that the novelist is concerned with the social effects of the riddle, with how a true enigma seduces by resisting decipherment, generating forms of agency and defiance through obscurity. The novelist’s focus on

the courtesan's taunts insinuates their own roguish desire that character manipulation—a basis of the brothel's argot yet also, as this essay has suggested, a synecdoche for the *Cihua's* poetics of substitution and recombination—refuses to be “explained away” for the staid moralizing mindset of a character like Yueniang. The knowing laughter in chapter 32 in this sense registers the *Cihua's* own negative sociability, caught between the transparency, disclosure, and publicity of print and the book's origins as an open secret, hidden away or surreptitiously passed between an in-group of aficionados at ease with the inexplicit codes of the demimonde.¹⁰⁷

Toward the end of *Jin Ping Mei*, the narrator takes up the practice of character manipulation, as if mimicking the dialogue of a character like Li Guijie.¹⁰⁸ In chapters 83 and 98, the narrator deploys the same logograph—“The eye alongside the wood, and the heart beneath the field” 木邊之目，田下之心—to divulge the inner thoughts of two female characters, first Pan Jinlian and then Han Aijie 韓愛姐:

[Pan Jinlian] couldn't help feeling affected by: *The eye alongside the wood, and the heart beneath the field*. She became too indolent to rearrange her makeup; her intake of tea and food diminished; the belt around her waist grew loose; and she started listlessly to wither away.¹⁰⁹

未免害些木邊之目，田下之心，脂粉懶勻，茶飯頓減，帶圍寬腿，懨懨瘦損。¹¹⁰

[Han Aijie] couldn't help feeling affected by: *The eye alongside the wood, and the heart beneath the field*.¹¹¹

未免害「木邊之目，田下之心。」¹¹²

This line both resembles a citation from a middle-period vernacular story and resonates with a poetic practice of using character manipulation to reveal an underlying mood or feeling: the concealed answer in both cases is the word for “longing” (*xiangsi* 相思).¹¹³ Both examples frame moments of introspection: in the first case, as Zhang Zhupo notes, the phrase limns the motivating emotion behind Pan's fraught interior monologue, her frustration at not being able to sleep with Chen Jingji.¹¹⁴ In the second case, the same line evokes Han Aijie's remorse over Chen Jingji's absence—as Zhang Zhupo wryly comments: Aijie's second riddle is “Jinlian's old draft.”¹¹⁵ Character manipulation, here, hints at an attempt to insinuate depth, even if only to show that depth in this novel is just another type of surface or that a character's hidden thoughts might be a mere effect of citation. The very structure of the anagram, moving from separation (*li*) to recombination (*he*), manifests both the aim and frustration of desire. And yet this borrowed attraction, one that stands in for a description of interiority, only serves to displace or defer the secret of what these women might want. The

narrator's concealed answer to the puzzle of what Pan Jinlian and Han Aijie feel is thus both obvious and yet oddly inscrutable: the enigma of longing as such.

Conclusion

Jin Ping Mei cihua's concern with character manipulation is not a mere reflection of contemporaneous trends in commercial publishing or a transparent effort to mimetically represent sixteenth-century argot but a strategy that impinges upon how the novel conceives of its own status as a written artifact. The presentation of *chaibai daozi* draws together heterogeneous and seemingly superfluous features of the *Cihua* edition—from the novel's carefree approach to lexical substitution and skits of quasi-theatrical farce to its unruly dice and domino bouts or predilection for courtesan slang—promoting the artificial twisting of language as an end in and of itself. The seductive power of a riddle to disturb naive conceptions of surface and depth nevertheless attains its most sophisticated expression not in the self-indulgent performances of Ying Bojue (or his puppet Licentiate Shui) and Wu Kai but in the intractable taunts of Zheng Aixiang and Li Guijie—courtesans deemed marginal to the novel's plot who find in character manipulation a subversive means with which to test the limits of intelligibility. Zheng and Li, to the extent that they embody the affordances of *chaibai daozi*, uncover a measure of empowerment through dismembered words. Flouting the constraints of narrative prolepsis or character development, they demand readers contend with a work that might be written otherwise.



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Notes

1. On the different editions of *Jin Ping Mei*, see Hanan, "Text of the *Chin P'ing Mei*." There are three major recensions of the novel: the *Jin Ping Mei cihua*, the Chongzhen 崇禎本 or *xiuxiang* 繡像本 text, and Zhang Zhupo's *diyi qishu* 第一奇書. For a reappraisal of the Chongzhen text, see Tian, "Preliminary Comparison of the Two Recensions of *Jinpingmei*."

2. For preliminary overviews of *chaibai daozi* in *Jin Ping Mei*, see Qiu, *Xiaoxiao sheng hua Jin Ping Mei*, 230–35, and Fu, *Jin Ping Mei yinyu jiemi*, 18–19, 258–59. I take the term “character manipulation” from Schmiedl, *Chinese Character Manipulation in Literature and Divination*, 2–3. For “orthography riddle,” see Mark, “Orthography Riddles, Divination, and Word Magic.” See also Schmiedl, *Chinese Character Manipulation in Literature and Divination*, 299–307.
3. *Plum*, 3: 56.389. To facilitate cross-referencing, my translations follow David Roy unless otherwise noted.
4. All references to the *Cihua* in this article are based on the photolithric reprint of the Beijing Library edition discovered in Shanxi in 1932: *JPMCH*, 56.9b.
5. Translation modified from Roy; see *Plum*, 3:56.389; *JPMCH*, 56.9b.
6. *Plum*, 3:56.389.
7. *JPMCH*, 56.9b.
8. *Ibid.*
9. “Consequently, the two of us are almost like one person and are fond brothers to each other. For this reason, ignoring convention, he felt free to express his ideas to me in the form of a song” 因此是一個人一般，極好兄弟。故此不拘形跡，便隨意寫個曲。 *Plum*, 3:56.388; *JPMCH*, 56.9a.
10. See also Ge, *Xueyin lusi*, 331. The significance of the Licentiate Shui scene can be inferred from the title of the chapter: “Ximen Qing Assists Chang Shijie; Ying Bojue Recommends Licentiate Shui” (Ximen Qing zhouji Chang Shijie; Ying Bojue jujian Shui xiucai 西門慶周濟常時節；應伯爵舉荐水秀才). The phrasing suggests that the recommendation scene constitutes the central event in the second half of the chapter. The Chongzhen edition and the Zhang Zhupo edition change the title to downplay the Licentiate Shui scene. These two editions considerably abridge the *Cihua*’s presentation of Ying Bojue’s efforts to advertise Shui to Ximen Qing.
11. Shang Wei makes the claim that such word games largely resist comprehension in oral delivery; see Shang, “Fushi xiaoshuo de goucheng,” 50.
12. Patrick Hanan introduced the historical significance of *Jin Ping Mei cihua* by claiming that the author, for the first time, “exploits the fact that his novel is destined for a reading public and not a listening public.” Hanan, “Sources of the *Chin P’ing Mei*,” 66. Hanan does not discuss word games like *chaibai daozi*, yet they support his larger claim.
13. Shang, “Fushi xiaoshuo de goucheng,” 50. On the theme of “emptiness” in this particular scene, see Ge, *Xueyin lusi*, 332–33.
14. *Plum*, 3:56.389; *JPMCH*, 56.9b.
15. Shang, “Fushi xiaoshuo de goucheng,” 58. C. T. Hsia famously criticizes the novelist for his eagerness to “impress a special audience who will applaud his cleverness in offering other kinds of borrowed attractions.” For Hsia these “borrowed attractions” tamper with the author’s “manifest talent for realist fiction.” Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, 157.
16. Shang, “*Jin Ping Mei*” and Late Ming Print Culture,” 218–19. See also Shang, “Making of the Everyday World.”
17. For a brief introduction to “Chinese riddling,” see Plaks, “Riddle and Enigma in Chinese Civilization.”
18. For a consideration of the “rhetoric of hiddenness” in short vernacular fiction, see Volpp, “Vernacular Story and the Hiddenness of Value.”

19. For an introduction to Zhang Zhupo's commentary, see Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary*, 63–73, 196–251. See also Zhu Yixuan et al., "*Jin Ping Mei*" *ziliao huibian*, 198–354.
20. Führer, "Seers and Jesters." For a comprehensive introduction to character manipulation in Chinese literature and divination, see Schmiedl, *Chinese Character Manipulation*. See also de Groot, "On Chinese Divination by Dissecting Written Characters"; Bauer, "Chinese Glyphomancy (*ch'ai-tzu*)."
21. Führer, "Seers and Jesters," 49; Schmiedl, *Chinese Character Manipulation*, 2.
22. On riddles in early China, see Li, "Riddles, Concealment, and Rhetoric in Early China"; on Tang tales, see Wang P., *Tangren xiaoshuo*, 93–97.
23. Birrell, *Games Poets Play*, 13; Behr, "In the Interstices of Representation."
24. Wu and Liu, "Jiyu Hanzi tese de liheshi."
25. See Johnson, *Glossary of Words and Phrases*, 29. There has been some confusion over the etymology and precise meaning of *chaibai daozi*. The character *bai* 白 (blank, empty, purposeless, superfluous) has been taken to refer to the extraneous parts of the words that need to be "broken apart" to reveal the "riddle base" (*midi* 謎底). For a recent survey of definitions, see Zheng, "'Chaibai daozi' tanyuan."
26. Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary*, 81n110. On rumors of a "horizontal" message embedded in *Xu Jin Ping Mei* 續金瓶梅, see Sun Y., "Ding Yaokang, qiren qishi," 312–13.
27. On the uses of glyphomancy in *Honglou meng*, see Strassberg, "Glyphomantic Dream Anecdotes," 186–88. In chapter 5 of *Honglou meng*, Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 journeys to the Land of Illusion (*Taixu huanjing* 太虛幻境), where he is presented with glyphomantic omens of the fates of the women in his family. Baoyu's inability to decode these portents becomes a central theme in the novel. See also the episode in chapter 94, where the fortune-teller Liu Tiezui 劉鐵嘴 (Iron Mouth Liu) mistakenly interprets a character in trying to find Baoyu's lost jade. It is left to Xue Baochai 薛寶釵 to reveal that the character contained other concealed characters that disclose the truth. Cao and Gao, *Honglou meng*, 5.51–66, 94.1217–18.
28. Liu, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 314. For a study of the riddle and its influence on later approaches to character manipulation, see Chan, "New Reading of an Early Medieval Riddle." This technique was later named the "Cao E Type" (Cao E ge 曹娥格), a category of "associative compound" (*huiyi ti* 會意體); see *ibid.*, 65. As David Roy notes (*Plum*, 1:483n6), an expanded version of this anecdote can be found in Luo, *Sanguo zhi tongsu yanyi* (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms), 15.681–82.
29. Xu Z., *Shishuo xinyu*, 11.318.
30. The close association between reassembling characters and Yang Xiu's skill as a literary secretary ironically resonates with Ying Bojue's advertisement on behalf of Licentiate Shui.
31. The two preceding anecdotes also involve inscriptions (perhaps emphasizing the writerly status of these riddles): in the first case, Cao Cao orders someone to inscribe the character "alive" (*huo* 活) on the gate of the chancellery, only for Yang Xiu to recognize that the gate is too large (*kuo* 闊)—a word formed through adding *huo* to the character for "gate" (*men* 門). Liu, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 313. In the second case, Cao Cao writes the character "together" (*he* 合) on the lid of a cup of curds. Yang Xiu reads this as a request for "people" (*ren* 人) to taste "one" (*yi* 一) "mouthful" (*kou* 口). *Ibid.*, 314.

32. Liu, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 315. Indeed, other writers extend and elaborate Cao Cao's struggle to solve the riddle: in the *Yiyuan* 異苑, the riddle is attributed to Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133–192) fleeing the troubles of the Yellow Turban Revolt. A woman washing clothes on the banks of the Fen River, supposedly the ghost of Cao E herself, directs Cao Cao to Mi Heng 彌衡 (171–196), who explains the meaning of separating and combining the parts of characters. Ibid.
33. *Plum*, 1:4.86. Emphasis added.
34. *JPMCH*, 4.3a. In this case, the *Cihua* swaps *xi* 系 for *si* 絲.
35. Translation modified from Roy; see *Plum*, 4:61.24. Emphasis added.
36. *JPMCH*, 61.14a. The text reverts back from *xi* to *si*.
37. Translation modified from Roy; see *Plum*, 1:16.331; *JPMCH*, 16.9b.
38. On *xiehouyu* in *Jin Ping Mei*, see Fu, *Jin Ping Mei yinyu jiemi*, 259–60.
39. *Plum*, 2:23.49. Emphasis added. See note 5 on 484.
40. *JPMCH*, 23.5a.
41. “You little whore!” said Ying Bojue. “You may abuse me all you want with that highfalutin lingo of yours.” *Plum*, 2:32.256; *JPMCH*, 32.9b. Unlike Ximen Qing’s catchphrase, the courtesan’s riddles can now be heard by confounded characters within the diegesis.
42. *Plum*, 2:32.256.
43. *JPMCH*, 32.9b.
44. Fu, *Jin Ping Mei yinyu jiemi*, 148.
45. *Plum*, 2:32.256. See note 30 on 540.
46. *JPMCH*, 32.10a.
47. For this reading of *tui*, see Fu, *Jin Ping Mei yinyu jiemi*, 70, 227–28.
48. Zheng Aixiang’s obscure profanities find an intriguing correlate in her sister Zheng Aiyue’s inscrutable silence in chapter 58. The two Zheng sisters nevertheless retain a similarly elusive presence in the novel. See Ge, *Xueyin lusi*, 334–37.
49. Shi and Luo, *Shuihu zhuan*, 61.849. There are, by contrast, no references to *chaibai daozi* in short vernacular stories (*huaben* 話本).
50. Hanan, “Sources of the *Chin Ping Mei*,” 49–63.
51. On the novel’s engagement with drama and *Xixiang ji*, see Rolston, “Oral Performing Literature in Traditional Chinese Fiction,” 26, 28, 31. For an introduction to the uses of drama in *Jin Ping Mei*, see Xu F., “*Jin Ping Mei* yu Mingdai xiqu,” and Sun, “*Jin Ping Mei* xiju shiliao jishuo.” Northern styles of singing predominate throughout the novel—there are, for instance, no references to *kunqu* 崑曲.
52. Wang, *Story of the Western Wing*, 272; Wang, *Xixiang ji*, 5.190–91.
53. My translation follows West and Idema, *Orphan of Zhao*, 238.
54. Zang, *Yuanqu xuan*, 3.1041–42.
55. Zang Maoxun’s editorial intervention indulges a distinctively late Ming pleasure in reading, rather than publicly listening to, theatrical writing. There are, for instance, no examples of character manipulation in the earliest printed *zaju*. On Zang’s role in moving Yuan drama “from the stage to the study,” see Idema, “From Stage Scripts to Closet Drama.”
56. Indeed, the close association of *chaibai daozi* with courtesans perhaps accentuates the humor of Hui’an’s inability to understand the acolyte’s wordplay in *Bamboo Leaf Boat*.
57. On the Maiwang guan edition of this play, see Hsia, Li, and Kao, *Columbia Anthology of Yuan Drama*, 273.

58. Zang, *Yuanqu xuan*, 1.193. Compare Qiu, *Xiaoxiao sheng hua Jin Ping Mei*, 230.
59. See Yang Jingxian's 楊景賢 *Liu Xingshou* 劉行首: "Splitting the Characters, Stringing the Lines, she knows everything" 拆白道字, 頂真續麻, 件件通曉, in Zang, *Yuanqu xuan*, 4.1324; or Zhang Guobin's 張國賓 *Luo Li lang* 羅李朗: "Splitting the Characters, Stringing the Lines, there is nothing she doesn't know" 拆白道字, 頂真續麻, 無般不曉, Zang, *Yuanqu xuan*, 4.1576. The variant *zhebai daozi* appears in Wu Changling's 吳昌齡 *Dongpo meng* 東坡夢 and in Li Shouqing's 李壽卿 *Du Liucui* 度柳翠: "Don't mention Stringing the Lines, Splitting the Characters, there's nothing she doesn't know, nothing she can't do" 莫說頂真續麻, 拆白道字……無般不曉, 無般不會, Zang, *Yuanqu xuan*, 3.1234, 4.1335. See also Zang, *Yuanqu xuan*, 3.1260; and Zang, *Yuanqu xuan*, 4.1432.
60. On connections between the *Cihua* and *Yongxi yuefu*, see Hanan, "Sources of the *Chin P'ing Mei*," 56. For references to *chaibai daozi* in *Yongxi yuefu*, see Xie, *Quan Ming sanqu*, 5.5219.
61. Sui, *Yuanqu xuan waibian*, 3.883.
62. *Plum*, 1:2.53.
63. *JPMCH*, 2.6b.
64. *Plum*, 4:69.248.
65. *JPMCH*, 69.4a.
66. *Plum*, 1:3.79.
67. *JPMCH*, 3.11b.
68. *Plum*, 1:18.367.
69. *JPMCH*, 18.8a.
70. Beyond the interchangeability of *zhe* and *chai* that we have already observed in examples from *Yuanqu xuan*, there is a high degree of variation in transcriptions of *chaibai daozi* in other masterpieces of late Ming literature: see for instance the reference to *chaizi daobai* 拆字道白 in the twenty-third scene of *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (Peony Pavilion). Tang, *Mudan ting*, 23.123. In this case, *chaizi daobai* has the sense of breaking characters apart for the sake of prognostication. There is also a single reference to *chaipai daozi* in a long poem from chapter 10 of the Ming novel *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West), where the phrase is understood to have the same meaning as *chaibai daozi*. Wu, *Xiyou ji*, 10.122.
71. On *bai* and *pai*, see Zheng, "Chaibai daozi" tanyuan," 29. For a tentative distinction between *chaibai daozi* and *chaipai daozi*, see Fu, *Jin Ping Mei yinyu jiemi*, 18.
72. *Plum*, 2:21.26; *JPMCH*, 21.15b.
73. *Plum*, 2:21.26; *JPMCH*, 21.15b.
74. *Plum*, 2:21.26; *JPMCH*, 21.15b.
75. Fu, *Jin Ping Mei yinyu jiemi*, 19, 268.
76. "Then came Jinlian, who said, "The Old Crone' 'Ventures among the Flowers in Her Dotage,' thereby flouting 'The Three Bonds and Five Constants.' 'If not arrested for seduction, it will be for robbery.'" Sure enough, when she threw the dice she got the combination called 'The Three Bonds and Five Constants' and had to drink a cup of wine as a penalty." *Plum*, 2:21.27. 次該金蓮擲, 說道:「鮑老兒臨老入花叢, 壞了三綱五常, 問他個非奸做賊拿。」果然是個三綱五常, 吃了一杯酒. *JPMCH*, 21.15b.
77. *HPHJB*, 21.310.
78. Ibid.
79. We might contrast the *Cihua*'s approach to the revelation of fate in a game with the way it playfully undermines prognostication techniques elsewhere, both through the invention

- of impossible horoscopes (see the fake *bazi* 八字 for Pan Jinlian in chapter 12 and Ximen Qing in chapter 29) and through Pan Jinlian's mockery of the fortune-telling scene in chapter 46. See *Plum*, 1:12.249, 2:29.173, 3:46.122.
80. "[The outcome could be determined by] throwing dice, by playing at guess-fingers, by playing dominos; or it could be by reciting poems, lyrics, songs, or rhapsodies, or stringing the line or reciting tongue twisters" 或擲骰, 或猜枚, 或看牌, 不拘詩詞歌賦, 頂真續麻急口令. *Plum*, 3:60.497; *JPMCH*, 60.4b–5a.
 81. [*Xinke*] *Shishang Huayan*, 3.10a–10b, 1.3. See also note 15 in *Plum*, 3:636. For an introduction to this publication, see He, "Productive Space," 289–94.
 82. *Plum*, 3:60.498.
 83. *JPMCH*, 60.5b.
 84. *Plum*, 3:60.498.
 85. *JPMCH*, 60.5b.
 86. He, *Home and the World*, 141.
 87. *Ibid.*
 88. *HPHJB*, 60.808.
 89. *Ibid.*
 90. *JPMCH*, 60.5b.
 91. *HPHJB*, 60.809.
 92. On the significance of "six" in the Chongzhen edition of chapter 60, see Tian, *Qiu shui tang lun Jin Ping Mei*, 178.
 93. *HPHJB*, 60.809.
 94. Shang, "'Jin Ping Mei' and Late Ming Print Culture," 195.
 95. Cao, *Honglou meng*, 62.853. For a reading of the lantern riddles in chapter 22 and related enigmas, see Eber, "Riddles in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*," 243–46.
 96. "To put the matter another way: the background of infinite complexity, or noise, against which structures are profiled renders those structures *contingent* with regard to their existence and *imperiled* with regard to their maintenance. Whatever is, is in part attributable to the selection and institutionalization or replication of chance occurrences." Wellbery, "Contingency," 255.
 97. *Plum*, 2:32.249. Emphasis added.
 98. *JPMCH*, 32.5b.
 99. 說著, 都一齊笑了。月娘坐在炕上聽著他, 說:「你每說了這一日, 我不懂。不知說的是那家話!」 *JPMCH*, 32.5b. Yuming He also discusses Wu Yueniang's response in He, "Productive Space," 103.
 100. See Fu, *Jin Ping Mei yinyu jiemi*, 153.
 101. See *Plum*, 2:539.
 102. Qiu, *Xiaoxiao sheng hua Jin Ping Mei*, 236.
 103. *Ibid.*
 104. Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics*, 15.
 105. *Ibid.*, 16.
 106. *HPHJB*, 32.445. It is striking to compare Zhang's reticence to either solve or excise the "fake crystal" line with his proud display of answers for Zheng Aixiang's riddles in the same chapter; see *HPHJB*, 32.449.
 107. On the *Cihua*'s circulation as a manuscript, see Son, *Writing for Print*, 17–20.
 108. We can see similar evidence of the narrator incorporating other textual forms in their own mode of narration in the final twenty chapters: see, for instance, the narrator's inventive

- use of a chantefable technique (*shuochang* 說唱) to describe the beating administered to Chen Jingji by Yueniang and her maids in chapter 86.
109. *Plum*, 5:83.43. See note 10 on 429. Emphasis added.
 110. *JPMCH*, 83.5b.
 111. *Plum*, 5:98.365. Emphasis added.
 112. *JPMCH*, 98.10b.
 113. Tan, *Qingping shantang huaben*, 1.8:163. For the resonance with poetry, see Qiu Shengwei's discussion of Huang Tingjian's 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) poem "Two Hearts Together (Liangxin tong 兩心同) in Qiu, *Xiaoxiao sheng hua Jin Ping Mei*, 233.
 114. *HPHJB*, 83.1238.
 115. *HPHJB*, 98.1434.

Abbreviations

HPHJB: Xiaoxiao sheng 笑笑生. *Huiping huijiao ben Jin Ping Mei* 會評會校本金瓶梅 (Collated *Plum in the Golden Vase* with Collected Commentaries). Edited by Qin Xiurong 秦修容. 3 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998.

JPMCH: Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng 蘭陵笑笑生. *Quanben Jin Ping Mei cihua* 全本金瓶梅詞話 (Complete Edition of *The Prosimetric Plum in the Golden Vase*). Hong Kong: Taiping shuju, 1982.

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