

Annotated Translation of Four Early Commentaries on *Jin Ping Mei*

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Introduction

Jin Ping Mei (also known as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* or *The Golden Lotus*), a sixteenth-century Chinese vernacular novel, is known for its explicit description of sexuality and its meticulous portrayals of the daily lives of the characters. This 100-chapter novel focuses on the life-story of Ximen Qing. Ximen Qing has achieved success in business and politics through his cunning use of bribery and political manoeuvres. In his spare time, Ximen amuses himself with multiple lovers. Just at the time when Ximen seems to be at the pinnacle of his career, he dies due to his indulgence in debauchery. His family collapses soon after his death.

Jin Ping Mei has received a great deal of critical attention. A large proportion of the critiques of *Jin Ping Mei* were written before 1911 CE, the year the Qing dynasty—the last dynasty in Chinese history—came to an end. Most of these critiques were written in classical Chinese and in the form of brief commentaries that have either become part of the critical edition of the novel or have been scattered in private letters, sketch-books, diaries, prefaces, and most recently, magazines.¹ In my discussion, I will refer to these critical works as early critiques or early commentaries.

These early critiques examine topics that continue to preoccupy modern scholarship on the novel, and offer valuable insights into those topics. Many recent scholarly publications have quoted the early critiques, and several have used them as the basis for developing their own arguments regarding the novel.² Among these early critiques, Zhang Zhupo's renowned commentary, *How to Read the Jin Ping Mei*, which has become part of a critical edition of the novel, has been translated into English with full annotations (Roy 1990). In addition, a limited

¹ See Rolston 1990 for a thorough examination of the early critiques of Chinese vernacular fiction. See Plaks 1986 and Roy 1977 for discussion of the commentaries on *Jin Ping Mei*.

² For example, see Gu 2004; Plaks 1987: 55–180.

number of translated quotations from this body of critiques have appeared in English-language scholarship.³ However, many of these classical commentaries await full translation or retranslation with annotations to help explain their historical and cultural context.

The four classical commentaries⁴ translated below represent a small fraction of the early critiques. However, they exemplify the relevance of these critiques to modern scholarship on the novel. For example, modern critics have focused attention on issues such as the authorship of *Jin Ping Mei*, social criticism in the novel, the novel's graphic depictions of sexuality, and its representation of lust and desire.⁵ These topics were proposed and discussed long ago in these four commentaries. Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道 and Gu Gongxie 顧公燮 propose two different candidates for the authorship of *Jin Ping Mei*. Yuan blames the novel's depictions of licentiousness for inducing wantonness, while Gu homes in on the novel's portrayal of lust within a particular historical context because he considers this novel to be a pointedly critical portrayal of the corrupt officials of that era. Both Xihu Diaosou 西湖釣叟 and Wu Jianren 吳趸人 share the view that many readers have misread the representations of lust in *Jin Ping Mei*. Both critics express the opinion that *Jin Ping Mei* does not intend to encourage lust, but rather criticises it. However, Wu differs from Xihu Diaosou in pointing out the novelist's responsibility to forestall such misinterpretations.

Early critiques of *Jin Ping Mei* made frequent references to historical figures and events, as well as to other literary works. Understanding these references is the key to grasping the literary meaning and historical significance of these critical pieces. The four commentaries translated here are no exception. Hence, I have used annotations to explain all the references I have found in these commentaries. With my translations, it is my intent to demonstrate that it would be worthwhile for scholars to tackle the larger project of producing comprehensive, fully annotated translations of all of these early critiques.

³ For example, translations of some of these commentaries appear in Ding 2002 and Scott 1989.

⁴ All four commentaries are taken from Hou and Wang 1985. For the convenience of readers who can read both English and Chinese, I have put my English translation alongside its Chinese original. For the sake of convenience, I use *pinyin* romanisation throughout the translation. All Wade-Giles have been converted to *pinyin*.

⁵ For a review of modern scholarship on *Jin Ping Mei*, see Mei and Ge 2003.

遊居柿錄

袁中道

往晤董太史思白，共說小說之佳者。思白曰：‘近有一小說，名《金瓶梅》，極佳。’予私識之。後從中郎真州，見此書之半，大約模寫兒女情態俱備，乃從《水滸傳》潘金蓮演出一支。所雲金者，即金蓮也；瓶者，李瓶兒也；梅者，春梅婢也。舊時京師，有一西門千戶，延一紹興老儒於家。老儒無事，逐日記其家淫蕩風月之事，以西門慶影其主人，以余影其諸姬。瑣碎中有無限煙波，亦非慧人不能。追憶思白言及此書曰：‘決當焚之。’以今思之，不必焚，不必崇，聽之而已。焚之亦自有存者，非人力所能消除。但《水滸》崇之則誨盜；此書誨淫，有名教之思者，何必務為新奇以驚愚而蠹俗乎？

Melancholy Journal of a Traveler⁶

Yuan Zhongdao⁷

I once visited Hanlin⁸ academic Dong Sibai.⁹ We discussed excellent novels. Sibai said, ‘*Jin Ping Mei*, a recent novel, is truly excellent.’ I kept the title in mind. I later went to Zhenzhou¹⁰ with Zhonglang,¹¹ and had the opportunity to read half of the novel. *Jin Ping Mei* portrayed the emotions and manners of men and women in detail, and its plot is developed out of the story of

⁶ *Melancholy Journal of a Traveler* is a collection of literary sketches written in the form of diary.

⁷ Yuan Zhongdao (1570–1623) was a major scholar and writer of the late Ming dynasty. For a brief biography of him, see Zhang 1974: 7398.

⁸ Hanlin was an academy run by the central government to conduct academic research and perform certain secretarial duties for the emperor. For more information about this title, see Li Konghuai 2006: 136.

⁹ Dong Sibai (1555–1636) is Dong Qichang 董其昌. Sibai is his *hao* 號 (pseudonym). He was a high-ranking official and a well-known calligrapher and painter. For a brief description of Dong, see Zhang 1974: 7395–97.

¹⁰ Zhenzhou is today’s Yizheng 儀征 City, in Jiangsu 江蘇 Province.

¹¹ Zhonglang is Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610). Zhonglang is his *zi* 字 (courtesy name). Yuan was a well-known scholar and writer, brother of Yuan Zhongdao. See Zhang 1974: 7397–98 for a biography of Yuan.

Pan Jinlian in *Shuihu Zhuan*.¹² Jin refers to Pan Jinlian, Ping refers to Li Ping'er, and Mei refers to the maid Chunmei.

There once lived a battalion commander, Ximen, in the capital. He hired a Confucian scholar from Shaoxing¹³ in his house. The scholar lived a relaxed life, and kept a daily record of the licentious and dissipated life he observed in Ximen's household. He used the character Ximen Qing to allude to his master, and the depiction of Ximen Qing's women to allude to his master's concubines. An infinite number of 'mist-covered waves'¹⁴ can be found in the novel's detailed descriptions of trivial matters. Only talented writers can achieve this effect.

I remember what Sibai said about *Jin Ping Mei*: 'We definitely should burn it.' However, I think that we should neither burn it nor praise it. Just let the book be. If we burn the novel, some people will keep copies of it. It is beyond human ability to eliminate all of the copies of this book. But if we praise *Shuihu*, we are actually teaching banditry, and if we praise *Jin Ping Mei*, we are actually encouraging lust. Why do those who care about Confucian ethics have to write something extraordinary which shocks the unenlightened and corrupts the hearts of ordinary people?

¹² *Shuihu Zhuan* (also known as *Water Margin* or *Outlaws of the Marsh*) is a well-known classical Chinese novel completed in the fourteenth century. This novel depicts the life experiences of a group of outlaws led by Song Jiang 宋江. See Shi 1981.

¹³ Shaoxing is a city in today's Zhejiang 浙江 Province.

¹⁴ 'Mist-covered waves' refers to the familial and societal relationships represented in the novel.

續金瓶梅集序

西湖釣叟

小說始於唐宋，廣於元，其體不一。田夫野老能與經史並傳者，大抵皆情之所留也。情生則文附焉，不論其藻與俚也。《金瓶梅》舊本言情之書也。情至則易流於敗檢而蕩性。今人觀其顯不只其隱，見其放不知其止，喜其誇不知其所刺。蛾油自溺，鴆酒自斃，袁石公先敘之矣。作者之難於述者之晦也。今天下小說如林，惟推三大奇書曰《水滸》、《西遊》、《金瓶梅》者，何以稱乎？《西遊》闡心而證道於魔，《水滸》戒俠而崇義於盜，《金瓶梅》懲淫而炫情於色，此皆顯言之，誇言之，放言之，而其旨則在以隱，以刺，以止之間。唯不知者曰怪，曰暴，曰淫，以為非聖而畔道焉。烏知夫稗官野史足以翼聖而贊經者，正如雲門韶濩，不遺夫擊壤鼓缶也。夫得道之精者糟粕已具神理，得道之粗者金石亦等瓦礫，顧人之眼力淺深耳。

Preface to *The Sequel to Jin Ping Mei*¹⁵

Xihu Diaosou¹⁶

The genre of fiction began during the Tang and Song dynasties, and became popular during the Yuan dynasty. The formalistic characteristics vary from one novel to another. This genre of popular literature has been passed down together with the Confucian canons and histories, because the feelings that the novel awakens persist. Once the feelings become awakened, the texts will not be forgotten, regardless of whether or not the style is elegant.

Jin Ping Mei is a novel whose intention is the expression of feelings. These feelings, when they come to extremes, tend to make people lose control of themselves and become loose in character. When they read *Jin Ping Mei*, people today look at the overt instead of the hidden,

¹⁵ *The Sequel to Jin Ping Mei* 續金瓶梅 is a novel written by Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢 (1599–1671). The novel emphasises the role that the Buddhist Dharma plays in the lives of the characters in *Jin Ping Mei*. For more information about the novel and author, see Lu and Xing 1988, 1: 1–18.

¹⁶ The identity of Xihu Diaosou ('The Old Fisherman on the West Lake') has not been established.

they see the excesses instead of the inhibitions, and they prefer lustful exaggeration to the disapproval of excesses. The moth drowns itself in the oil of the lamp, and people kill themselves by drinking poisonous wine¹⁷—Yuan Shigong¹⁸ has already talked about it. It is difficult for an author to hide his intentions from critics.

We have numerous novels today. Why do we regard *Shuihu*, *Xiyou*,¹⁹ and *Jin Ping Mei* as three masterpieces? *Xiyou* expounds the inner self by putting the Way to the test among demons, *Shuihu* warns against chivalrous yet unruly behaviour by praising the brotherhood of bandits, and *Jin Ping Mei* reprimands licentiousness by highlighting the passion of the dissolute. These overt, exaggerated and unconstrained depictions are intended to reveal what is hidden, to criticise, and to give warnings. Those who are uninformed call these descriptions supernatural, violent and licentious, and regard them as deviations from the golden path prescribed by the Confucian teachings.

Romances and fictitious histories can be used to glorify the Confucian teachings, just as elegant music can be played using very crude instruments. Those who properly understand the Way will be able to find divine truth in dross, whereas those who barely know the Way will identify gold and precious gems as gravel. This is due to the differing abilities of individuals to make good judgments.

¹⁷ This sentence comes from the Chinese set phrase *yinzhen zhike* 飲鴆止渴 (‘drink poison to quench thirst’).

¹⁸ Yuan Shigong is Yuan Hongdao (see n. 11). Shigong is his *hao* (pseudonym).

¹⁹ *Xiyou Ji* (also known as *Journey to the West* or *Monkey*) is a sixteenth-century Chinese novel. The storyline of the novel is based on the historically verifiable travels of Xuan Zhang 玄奘, a Buddhist monk, to India in the seventh century. The novel centres on how Xuan Zhang and his three disciples fight demons throughout their journey to India. See Wu 1968.

銷夏閑記

顧公燮

太倉王忬家藏《清明上河圖》，化工之筆也。嚴世蕃強索之；忬不忍舍，乃覓名手摹膺者以獻。先是，忬巡撫兩浙，遇裱工湯姓，流落不偶，攜之歸，裝演書畫，旋薦於世蕃。當獻畫時，湯在側，謂世蕃曰：“此圖某所目睹，是卷非真者，試觀麻雀，小腳而踏二瓦角，即此便知其偽矣。”世蕃患甚，而亦鄙湯之為人，不復重用。會俺答入寇大同，忬方總督薊遼，鄢懋卿嗾御史方輅劾忬禦邊無術，遂見殺。後範長白公（允臨）作《一捧雪傳奇》，改名《莫懷古》，蓋戒人勿懷古董也。忬子鳳洲（世貞）痛父冤死，圖報無由，一日偶偈世蕃，世蕃問：“坊間有好看小說否？”答曰：“有。”又問：“何名？”倉卒之間，鳳洲見金瓶中供梅，遂以《金瓶梅》答之。但字跡漫滅，容鈔正送覽。退而構思數日，借《水滸傳》西門慶故事為藍本，緣世蕃居西門，乳名慶，暗譏其閨門淫放。而世蕃不知，觀之大悅，把玩不置。相傳世蕃最喜修腳，鳳洲重賂修工，乘世蕃專心閱書，故意微傷腳跡，陰搽爛藥，後漸潰腐，不能入直。獨其父高在閣，年衰遲鈍，票本擬批，不稱上旨。上寢厭之，寵日以衰。御史鄒應龍等乘機勸奏，以至於敗。噫！怨毒之於人，甚也哉！

Random Writings in an Idle Summer²⁰

Gu Gongxie²¹

Wang Yu²² of Tai Cang²³ kept *Along the River during the Qing Ming Festival*,²⁴ a masterpiece

²⁰ *Random Writings in an Idle Summer* is an eighteenth-century collection of historical anecdotes.

²¹ Little is known about the life of Gu Gongxie.

²² Wang Yu (1507–60) was a high-ranking official during the reign of emperor Jia Jing 嘉靖 (1522–66). For a biography of Wang, see Zhang 1974: 5396–99.

²³ Tai Cang is a city in today's Jiangsu Province.

²⁴ *Along the River during the Qing Ming Festival* is arguably the best-known classical Chinese painting. The authorship of this painting is generally attributed to Zhang Zeduan 張擇端 (1085–1145), a court painter of the Song dynasty. The painting presents a panoramic view of Bianjing 汴京, today's Kaifeng 開封 of Henan 河南 Province, on a

painting. Yan Shifan²⁵ demanded it, with overtones of extortion, from Yu. Yu could not bear to give up the painting. He found a renowned painter to create a forgery, and presented that forgery to Shifan.

Prior to this, Wang Yu had been governor of Zhejiang, and met a person called Tang who made his living mounting painted and calligraphic scrolls.²⁶ Tang wandered around alone. Yu brought Tang back to his home to mount paintings and calligraphy, and soon afterwards recommended him to Shifan. Tang was present when Yu presented *Along the River during the Qing Ming Festival* to Shifan. He told Shifan, ‘I once saw the authentic painting, but this one is not authentic. Look at the sparrow. Its foot is tiny, but it steps on the corners of the two tiles. We can tell from this detail that the painting is a counterfeit.’ Shifan became exasperated with Yu. He also began to despise Tang, and no longer trusted him with important matters.

It happened that Altan Khan²⁷ invaded Da Tong.²⁸ At that time, Yu was the Governor-General of Jiliao.²⁹ Yan Maoqing³⁰ incited the censor,³¹ Fang Lu, to accuse Yu of

large scroll. For an introduction to this painting, see Bradsher 2007.

²⁵ Yan Shifan (c. 1513–65) was a high-ranking official during the reign of Jia Jing. He was notorious for his corrupt and licentious life. He was executed in 1565 after he and his father, Yan Song 嚴嵩, fell out of favour with the emperor (see below). See Zhang 1974: 7920–21 for a description of Yan Shifan.

²⁶ Mounting is a special technique used to preserve traditional Chinese calligraphy and paintings and to make them vivid. For more information about mounting, see van Gulik 1958: 33–36.

²⁷ Altan Khan (1507–82) was the emperor of the Tumet Mongols. He led several wars against the Ming empire during the sixteenth century. For an in-depth study of Altan Khan, see Yang 1992.

²⁸ Da Tong is a Chinese city in today’s Shanxi 山西 Province.

²⁹ Jiliao was an area that included portions of today’s Shanxi Province, Hebei 河北 Province and Liaoning 遼寧 Province. However, the precise boundaries of that area have yet to be determined. See Cao 1984: map 239.

³⁰ Yan Maoqing lived in the sixteenth century, and was a high-ranking official during the reign of Jia Jing. He belonged to the clique of Yan Song and Yan Shifan, and was notorious for his corruption. See Zhang 1974: 7924–25 for a brief description of Yan.

³¹ Generally speaking, censors observed the government officials on behalf of the emperor. They had the ability to charge the officials if they observed corruption and/or the abuse of power. For a discussion of the responsibilities of censors, see Li Konghuai 2006: 165–69.

being incapable of defending the borders. Yu was thus executed. Fan Changbai (Yunlin)³² later wrote *The Legend of a Handful of Snow*,³³ and then changed its title to *Do Not Keep Antiques* in order to warn people against storing antiques.

Fengzhou (Shizheng),³⁴ son of Yu, grieved over the unjust death of his father. However, he could not find a way to exact revenge. One day, he paid a visit to Shifan. Shifan asked, ‘Is there a novel worth reading available?’ Fengzhou answered, ‘Yes.’ ‘What is its name?’ Seeing a golden vase holding a plum, in a rush of inspiration, Fengzhou came up with the name *Jin Ping Mei* and gave it as his reply. He gave the excuse, however, that the manuscript was not legible, and asked for Shifan’s permission to make a legible copy before presenting the novel to him. He went home, and several days later he worked out the plot, which was borrowed from the story of Ximen Qing in *Shuihu Zhuan*. Shifan was then living at the West Gate,³⁵ and had once been known as ‘Qing’ when he was an infant, which meant that the novel *Jin Ping Mei* was actually a mockery of the licentious and dissipated life in his household. However, Shifan was not aware that Fengzhou’s novel was actually a mockery of his life. He very much enjoyed the book, and kept reading it without putting it down.

It was known that Shifan liked pedicures. Fengzhou gave a large bribe to the pedicurist. The pedicurist slightly injured the edge of Shifan’s foot and then secretly applied a medication that rots flesh to the wound, while Shifan was concentrating on reading the novel. Shifan was

³² Fan Yunlin (1558–1641) was a well-known calligrapher and painter. Changbai is his *hao* (pseudonym).

³³ *The Legend of a Handful of Snow* is a play that tells a story about a precious jade cup, ‘A Handful of Snow’. An official, Mo Huaigu 莫懷古 (the name literally means ‘does not keep antiques’), keeps this jade cup. Yan Shifan asks for the cup, and Mo presents a counterfeit cup to Yan. The mounter Tang Qin 湯勤, whom Mo recommends to Yan, informs Yan that the cup is a fake. Yan becomes angry with Mo, and persecutes him. At the end of the drama, Mo has barely survived and has lost everything except for the cup. However, the true author of this play remains the subject of debate. Li Yu 李玉 (c. 1590–1660), for example, is one of several candidates for the authorship of the play (see Li Yu 1989).

³⁴ Wang Shizhen (1526–90) was a famous scholar who also held several important government positions. Fengzhou is his *hao* (pseudonym). See Zhang 1974: 7379–81 for a brief biography of Wang.

³⁵ In Chinese, Ximen literally means ‘West Gate’.

thus unable to go to the cabinet to perform his duties. Shifan's father, Yan Song,³⁶ was also in the cabinet, and was old and mentally and physically decrepit. The instructions that Song drafted for the emperor [without his son's assistance] no longer satisfied the emperor. The emperor gradually became tired of him, and Song soon fell out of the emperor's favour. Censor Zhou Yinglong took this opportunity to impeach Song, which eventually led to the fall of his family. Alas! What resentment people can possess!

³⁶ Yan Song (1480–1567) was a top-ranking government official during the reign of Jia Jing. He has often been depicted as a corrupt official who abused his power. See Zhang 1974: 7914–19 for a biography of Yan.

雜說
吳趸人

……《金瓶梅》、《肉蒲團》，此著名之淫書也，然其實皆懲淫之作，此非著作者之自負如此，即善讀者亦能知此意，固非余一人之私言也。顧世人每每指為淫書，官府且從而禁之，亦可見善讀者之難其人矣。推是意也，吾敢謂今之譯本偵探小說，皆誨盜之書。夫偵探小說，明明為懲盜小說也，顧何以謂之誨盜？夫仁者見之謂之仁，智者見之謂之智，若《金瓶梅》、《肉蒲團》，淫者見之謂之淫，偵探小說則盜者見之謂之盜耳。嗚呼！是豈獨不善讀書而已耶，毋亦道德缺乏之過耶！社會如是，捉筆為小說者當如何其慎之又慎也。……

Miscellaneous Comments³⁷

Wu Jianren³⁸

Jin Ping Mei and *Rou Putuan*³⁹ are both well-known examples of erotica. However, as a matter of fact, they actually speak out against lust. Not only do their authors demonstrate this intention, but careful readers can also see this intention. I am not the only one who holds this opinion.

Ordinary people regard these works as erotica. The government agrees with them and subsequently has banned them. We can see the difficulty of finding careful readers who truly

³⁷ This commentary was first published in the eighth issue of *Yueyue Xiaoshuo* 月月小說 [All-Story Monthly] in 1907. *Yueyue Xiaoshuo* is a journal that published novels, short stories, and literary criticism from 1906 to 1908. Wu Jianren, the author of this commentary, was the general editor of the journal, and also contributed many stories to it.

³⁸ Wu Jianren (1866–1910) was a Chinese writer best known for his *Ershi Nian Mudu Zhi Guan Xianzhuang* 二十年目睹之怪現狀 [*Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades*], one of the ‘Four Great Satirical Novels’ in the late Qing period. He also edited several newspapers and journals in Shanghai.

³⁹ *Rou Putuan* (also known as *The Carnal Prayer Mat*) is a Chinese erotic novel published during the mid-seventeenth century. Authorship of this novel is generally attributed to Li Yu 李漁, a playwright and novelist. *Rou Putuan* tells the story of Weiyang Sheng 未央生, or Scholar Vesperus, who indulges in debauchery before becoming a Buddhist monk. For a translation, see Hanan 1990.

understand books. If we agree that these books are erotica, it would follow that detective stories that are translated into Chinese are books that promote criminal behaviour. However, detective stories actually speak out against crimes. How can we say that they propagate crimes? Benevolent people find benevolence everywhere, and wise people find wisdom in everything. Just as lustful people call *Jin Ping Mei* and *Rou Putuan* erotica, only criminals focus on the crimes depicted in detective stories.

Alas! Is this just a matter of not knowing how to read, or is it due to the readers' lack of morality? Society is like that. Those who write novels should be very very careful.

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