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. However, many of these classical commentaries await full translation or retranslation with annotations to help explain their historical and cultural context.

The four classical commentaries 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. These topics were proposed and discussed long ago in these four commentaries. Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道 and Gu Gongxie 颜公燮 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 西湖钓叟 and Wu Jianren 吴趼人 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.

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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.
Melancholy Journal of a Traveler
Yuan Zhongdao

I once visited Hanlin academic Dong Sibai. 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 Zhenzhou with Zhonglang, 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...

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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*. 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 Shaoxing 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’ 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?

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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 Province.

14 ‘Mist-covered waves’ refers to the familial and societal relationships represented in the novel.
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 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 wine\textsuperscript{17}—Yuan Shigong\textsuperscript{18} 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 \textit{Shuihu}, \textit{Xiyou},\textsuperscript{19} and \textit{Jin Ping Mei} as three masterpieces? \textit{Xiyou} expounds the inner self by putting the Way to the test among demons, \textit{Shuihu} warns against chivalrous yet unruly behaviour by praising the brotherhood of bandits, and \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{17} This sentence comes from the Chinese set phrase yinzhen zhike（‘drink poison to quench thirst’）.

\textsuperscript{18} Yuan Shigong is Yuan Hongdao (see n. 11). Shigong is his hao (pseudonym).

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Xiyou Ji} (also known as \textit{Journey to the West} or \textit{Monkey}) is a sixteenth-century Chinese novel. The storyline of the novel is based on the historically verifiable travels of Xuan Zhang, 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.
Random Writings in an Idle Summer\textsuperscript{20}

Gu Gongxie\textsuperscript{21}

Wang Yu\textsuperscript{22} of Tai Cang\textsuperscript{23} kept Along the River during the Qing Ming Festival,\textsuperscript{24} a masterpiece

\textsuperscript{20}Random Writings in an Idle Summer is an eighteenth-century collection of historical anecdotes.

\textsuperscript{21}Little is known about the life of Gu Gongxie.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{23}Tai Cang is a city in today’s Jiangsu Province.

\textsuperscript{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 Shifan\textsuperscript{25} 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.\textsuperscript{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 Khan\textsuperscript{27} invaded Da Tong.\textsuperscript{28} At that time, Yu was the Governor-General of Jiliao.\textsuperscript{29} Yan Maoqing\textsuperscript{30} incited the censor,\textsuperscript{31} Fang Lu, to accuse Yu of large scroll. For an introduction to this painting, see Bradsher 2007.

\textsuperscript{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, fell out of favour with the emperor (see below). See Zhang 1974: 7920–21 for a description of Yan Shifan.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{28} Da Tong is a Chinese city in today’s Shanxi Province.

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

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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 censers, 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 Huaiyu,\(^{36}\) keeps this jade cup. Yan Shifan asks for the cup, and Mo presents a counterfeit cup to Yan. The mounter Tang Qin, 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\(^{37}\) (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,\textsuperscript{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!

\textsuperscript{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.
Miscellaneous Comments

Wu Jianren

"Jin Ping Mei and Rou Putuan" 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 [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 [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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