Perceptions of Lay Healers in Late Imperial China

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IN
LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

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Perceptions of Lay Healers in Late Imperial China

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Introduction

When doctors and religious specialists failed to cure a patient, men and women whose social roles did not normally include medical practice took on the part of healers, as vernacular sources from late imperial China reveal. Referring to these non-professionals in the medical field as lay healers, this study attempts to reconstruct perceptions of their practices in the traditional Chinese world. Portrayal of them provides insight into the popular and unofficial culture of China, highlighting aspects of Chinese medicine that have rarely received attention in official documents and conventional historical sources.

Medical professionals in China’s imperial past would traditionally include: the medical establishment, represented by the grand physicians (taiyi 太醫) who would have graduated from the Imperial Academy of Medicine (taiyi yuan 太醫院),1 medical officials (yiguan 醫官),

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1 We identify physicians by evidence in the text that they practised medicine as an occupation and that their society recognised them as such; see Robert P. Hymes, ‘Not Quite Gentlemen? Doctors in Sung and Yuan’, Chinese Science 8, 1987, 9-76, 13-14. The term taiyi referred to palace physicians from the Former Han 漢 dynasty (206 BC-8 AD) onwards; in the Yuan 元 dynasty (1280-1368) the taiyi distinguished themselves
practitioners of folk medicine, medical pedlars or 'bell doctors' (lingyi 鈴醫), 2 Muslim physicians, and Buddhist and Daoist religious specialists. The term yiguan, medical official, normally denoted a professional, often hereditary, and a specialist rather than a member of the civil service, but it may also refer to members of the Imperial Medical Service (taiyi ju 太醫局) of the Imperial Academy of Medicine. 3 Common practitioners of folk medicine (yongyi 庚醫) would work alongside the scholar physicians (rayi 儒醫). 4 The common practitioners of folk medicine were often half-educated men from a farming background whose medical skills would traditionally pass down within the family from father to son but

from other medical practitioners through graduation from the Imperial Academy of Medicine, taiyi yuan 太醫院. From the mid-Ming, the term was widely applied to specialists we would generally call 'doctor'. On the historical background of the taiyi, see Charles O. Hucker, A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985, 478; Jutta Rall, Die Vier Grossen Medizinschulen der Mongolenzeit: Stand und Entwicklung der chinesischen Medizin in der Chin- und Yuan-Zeit, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1970, 25; Angela Ki Che Leung, 'Organized Medicine in Ming-Qing China: State and Private Medical Institutions in the Lower Yangzi Region', Late Imperial China 8.1, 1987, 134-66, 150.


3 From the Song onwards it was awarded as a prestige title that gave doctors honorific status comparable to the various ranks of civil officials; see Hucker, A Dictionary of Official Titles, 267.


who lacked the training to compete in the official examinations. 5

In contrast to professional medical specialists, lay healers mainly engaged in unorthodox forms of healing such as demonic or demonological healing (dealing with demons or lore about demons) and sympathetic magic. Demonological healing was always the more influential system of healing in traditional China, rather than orthodox medicine based on theories of yinyang 陰陽 and the Five Phases of Change, as Paul Unschuld has noted in his study of the history of Chinese medicine. 6 Portrayals of lay healers provide insight into the less orthodox, but not necessarily less popular, practices in traditional China.

Gender issues also play an important part in the study of lay healers and their practices, for here we also see women at work. Historians of Chinese medicine have described amateur attempts at healing through ritual as typically female activities:

Old grandmother will drug her grandchild with every kind of obnoxious preparation that she can think of. If unsuccessful she will try her magic arts, her superstitious practices, reviling or invoking the spirits according to her belief as to the cause of the sickness. 7

In exploring perceptions of lay healing, the modern historian faces the problem of finding source material. Less orthodox forms of healing

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5 The distinction between them and the rayi dates from the twelfth century AD when an imperial decree ruled that unqualified medical practitioners must pass provincial examinations in classical studies and medical subjects. The successful candidate would then qualify as a rayi; see Needham, Clerks and Craftsman, 265 and 391; Wolfram Eberhard, Social Mobility in Traditional China, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962, 230.


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are not often described in conventional historical sources. Paul Unschuld has drawn attention to the difficulty of finding descriptions of the daily medical practices of both traditional and popular healers, stressing the need for the examination of alternative sources. In 1977 the Dutch sinologist Wilt Idema drew attention to the large number of traditional novels and plays from late imperial China that contain passages of medical interest but he offered his study as a ‘very preliminary list’. Several more recent studies have used fictional narratives, in particular the late sixteenth-century novel Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase), as source material for the study of patients and healers in late imperial China, while one scholar has focused on female healers of the Ming 明 (1368-1644) dynasty.

Perceptions of healing and lay healing in traditional China can also be gleaned from the novel Xingshi yinyuan zhuans 醒世姻緣傳 (A Tale of Marriage Destinies that will Bring Society to its Senses; hereafter: YZ).

Yinyuan zhuans (from seventeenth-century China) is known so far to have examined these aspects in detail.

The Novel Xingshi yinyuan zhuans

In the Yinyuan zhuans, one of the longest Chinese prose narratives ever written, the anonymous author charts, across one hundred chapters, the rise and fall of two families in provincial China. So far the author’s true identity has remained obscure and he is only known by his pseudonym, Xi Zhou sheng 西周生, scholar of the Western Zhou. The Yinyuan zhuans ranks among the lesser known traditional Chinese narratives and has not

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8 Unschuld, Medicine in China, 129-30.
10 Laurence G. Thompson, ‘Medicine and Religion in Late Ming China’, Journal of Chinese Religions 18, 1990, 45-59; Yoshimoto Shōji 吉元諸昭治, ‘Kimpeibai to Đôkyō igaku’ 金瓶梅と道教医学, Nihon ishigaku zasshi 日本歴史学雑誌, 1992, 36-52; idem, ‘Kimpeibai ni miru Chūgoku igaku’ 金瓶梅にみる中国医学, Nihon ishigaku zasshi, 1992, 133-63; Christopher Cullen, ‘Patients and Healers in late Imperial China: Evidence from the Jinpingmei’, History of Science 31, 1993, 99-150. Thompson, Yoshimoto and Cullen focus on the Jin Ping Mei. Idema has mentioned the Yinyuan zhuans but no detailed study of this aspect is known so far.
12 The present study refers to the following edition: Xingshi yinyuan zhuans 醒世姻緣傳, by Xi Zhou sheng 西周生, 3 vols., Shanghai: Guji, 1981, repr. 1985 (hereafter: YZ). All translations are my own except where otherwise indicated.
13 Various writers such as Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715), Ding Yaokay 丁耀亢 (ca. 1599-1670) and some lesser known literati, as for example Jia Fuxi 賈奕西 (1589-1675), have been credited with the authorship, but modern scholars have in turn discarded all such claims. For recent contributions to the debate, see Zhang Qingyi 張清吉, Xingshi yinyuan zhuans xiankao 醒世姻緣新考, Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji, 1991, 1-32; Xu Fuling 徐复岭, Xingshi yinyuan zhuans wuozhe he yuyan koulan 醒世姻緣作者和语言论考, Jinan: Qilu, 1993, 56-76; Yuan Shishuo 袁世頤, “Xu”序, in Xu Fuling, Xingshi yinyuan zhuans wuozhe he yuyan koulan, 1-5; Yenna Wu, Ameliorative Satire, 73-9. The author's pseudonym has been interpreted as an allusion to the Western Zhou 西周 dynasty (ca. 1050-770 BC), see YZ, 26.378; Yenna Wu, "Marriage Destinies to Awaken the World: A Literary Study of Xingshi yinyuan zhuans", Ph.D. diss., Harvard University 1986, 40.
yet been translated in its entirety into any other language.¹⁴ Lu Xun’s 鲁迅 (1881-1936) unfortunate omission of the novel in his influential work of Chinese literary history Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe 中國小說史略 (A Brief History of Chinese Fiction, first published in 1923-24), has certainly played a role in its relative neglect.¹⁵ During recent decades, however, the novel has increasingly been attracting scholarly attention.¹⁶

The narrative depicts in great detail the dark sides of life and the moral fall of mankind. The novel sets its action mainly in Shandong 山东 province in the mid-fifteenth century but the fictional world contains many references to the late Ming era. The author appears to have been most familiar with China in the 1630s and 1640s. The text must have been composed sometime between 1628 and 1681, spanning the transition period from the Ming to the Qing 清 (1644-1911) dynasty.¹⁷ The text conveys a millennial atmosphere as doom befalls the last native Chinese dynasty and the Ming era draws to a close, but it does not contain any references that would allow it to be classified as either a late Ming or an early Qing product.

The Yinyuan zhuán is a satirical novel that dramatizes human folly, vanities and vices. The plot focuses on the fates of the two major protagonists, Chao Yuan 潤源 from Wucheng 武城 county in northwestern Shandong and Di Xichen 狄希陳 from Mingshui 明水 Town in central Shandong, and their families. Chao Yuan and Di Xichen are structurally linked through the theme of reincarnation and karmic retribution. Chao Yuan, a profligate philistine, rises in society to become a member of the local elite when his father gets promoted to scholar-official position by virtue of bribery and nepotism. Chao Yuan neglects his wife and takes the vulgar singing girl Zhen’ge 珍哥, a former prostitute, as his concubine, flagrantly breaching all rules of social decorum. Out on a hunt, he takes pleasure in shooting a fox which turns out to be a fox demon that will return to torment him in his next life. An adulterous affair leads to Chao Yuan’s early and violent death as he is caught in the act and beheaded by his lover’s jealous husband. After his

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¹⁷ An internal reference to a historical personage suggests the early limit; see Sun Kaidi 孙楷第, ‘Yifeng kaozheng Xingshi yinyuan de xin’ 一封考證復世緣的信 repr. in YYZ, 3:1521-22. A reference to two copies of the novel circulating among literati in the Yangzi delta suggests 1681 as the late limit; see Yingshi jiangzu chuolu 頭氏家藏尺牘, by Yan Guangmin 顏光敏, Shanghai: Shangwu, 1935, 3:128-29.
premature demise, Chao Yuan is reincarnated as Di Xichen and the fox
demon reappears in the shape of Di’s shrewish wife. This domestic
drama is linked to the national problem of a corrupt and incompetent pseudo-
literati elite taking power and playing their part in the mismanagement of
the Ming empire that spells out its final doom.

The transition from the story of Chao Yuan to that of Di Xichen
happens across Chapters 23 and 24, sketching a utopian world of ideal
morals and manners. This utopia lacks the vices and illnesses that plague
the protagonists in the remaining 98 chapters and there is no need for any
healers.18 The narrative contrasts this brief glimpse of utopia with the
fallen world of the narrative present time, a world ravaged by natural
and man-made disasters, social degeneration and political disintegration.
In this satirical dystopia the theme of illness and healing is metaphorically
linked with the imagery of the body politic and the implementation of
good government.

More than two dozen healers appear in the dystopian world of Chao
Yuan and Di Xichen, trying to treat the many illnesses and afflictions of
the major and minor protagonists.19 The ailing world of the novel suffers
from the consequences of its moral flaws. The world of Chao Yuan
thrives on scenes of crime and violence showing marital breakdown,
murder and the familiar face of vice as Chinese tradition defined it:
over-indulgence in wine, women, wealth and wrath (jiu se cai qi 酒色財氣), or

20 Confucius already warned the superior man to beware of lechery (se),
quarrelsome (dou) and covetousness (de) 論語引得, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series 16, ed. William Hung et al.,
Beijing: Hafu-Yanjing xueshe, 1940, 167. The Hou Hanshu 後漢書 quotes Yang Bing
楊秉 listing wine, women and wealth (jiu, se, cai) as three matters of delusion; see Hou
By the time of the Yuan dynasty the vices featured in a combination of four (jiu se cai qi) as
a common topos in popular literature; see Huangliang meng ju 黃梁夢劇, by Ma Zhiyuan
馬致遠, in Yinyuan xuan 元曲選, ed. Zang Jinshu 喻世紈, 4 vols., repr. Beijing:
Zhonghua, 1979, 2:793. On vices in the Yinyuan zhuang, see also Yenna Wu,
Ameliorative Satire, 203-19.

21 On medical ethics, see Paul U. Unschuld, Medical Ethics in Imperial China: A
Study in Historical Anthropology, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of

22 Paul U. Unschuld, Huichun: Rückkehr in den Frühling: chinische Heilkunde
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their practices in the late imperial Chinese context. The identification of the narrative voice and its tone plays an important part in the analysis of the text and its comparison with the literary and non-literary context.

The Maid and her Book of Exorcism

The first Grand Physician (taiyi) to appear at the outset of the novel, Dr Yang 楊太醫, turns out to be a notorious charlatan. The main protagonist Chao Yuan, however, relies on him whenever he needs a doctor, unaware of Dr Yang’s shortcomings. When Chao Yuan and his new concubine Zhen’ge both fall ill after celebrating New Year’s Eve, they summon Dr Yang.23 Zhen’ge suffers from a bad headache but Dr Yang’s medicine fails to cure her. At this point the wife of Chao Yuan’s servant, Mrs Chao Fengshan 楊春山, resorts to exorcism. She sends for a book of exorcism from a Daoist at the temple of Zhenwu 真武.24

The modern Shanghai edition of the Yinyuan zhuan identifies the book as Yuxiaji 玉匣記 (Record of the Jade Casket), a calendar that records on which days which gods, ghosts or demons exert evil influences on people and cause illnesses.25 Each entry prescribes certain methods of exorcism:

Chao Fengshan’s wife ... looked up the entry for the thirtieth day. It ran: “The god of the stove is angry. If you offer five notes of yellow paper money, as well as tea, wine, and cakes to the stove, it will bring good luck.”

Master Chao remarked: “It is not the thirtieth. She had a headache when she woke up, which was already the fourth stroke of the fifth night-watch, which means that it is

already the first. Look up what is written for the first.”

[She] looked up the entry for the first that ran: “You have offended the ghost of a relative. You should sit facing the ancestral shrine, sincerely repent your transgressions and pray. If you do, it will bring good luck.”26

Here social inversion implies satirical comment at the expense of Chao Yuan, the parvenu and would-be member of the elite: the literacy of the servant’s wife contrasts with the illiteracy of Chao Yuan, son of a scholar-official, and himself an aspiring member of the literati elite.27

As Chao Fengshan’s wife tries to cure Zhen’ge by exorcism, she plays the role of the medium and prays at the ancestral shrine as the book prescribes. Her ritual is successful, yet the narrative voice undermines its value. It sarcastically remarks beforehand that ‘she was a woman with a glib tongue’.28 Afterwards, it reports with irony: ‘It was really very odd, but Zhen’ge’s headache gradually receded.’29

The narrative voice synchronizes Mrs Chao Fengshan’s cure of Zhen’ge with Dr Yang’s medical treatment of Chao Yuan. Chao Yuan and Zhen’ge both interpret their condition with the help of dreams. Their double dreams reveal that their illnesses have demonological and karmic causes, i.e. Chao Yuan’s willful murder of a fox demon and his ancestor’s wrath. Therefore, Mrs Chao Fengshan’s ritual makes sense to them. The narrative voice offers two alternative explanations for Chao Yuan’s and Zhen’ge’s illnesses: on the one hand, the illnesses seem to have demonological and karmic causes and on the other, they seem to have purely physical causes. Dr Yang diagnoses nothing but lack of sleep, exhaustion and excessive indulgence in alcohol and sex. The narrative voice presents both lay healing and the grand physician’s treatment as

23 YYZ, 3.34.
24 See YYZ, 3.35.
25 See YYZ, 3.43, note 4.
26 YYZ, 3.35.
27 On Chao Yuan’s illiteracy see YYZ, 2.24, 13.198, 14.212.
28 YYZ, 3.35.
29 YYZ, 3.35.
ambiguous and comical. This ultimately returns the readers’ attention to the preceding events in the plot before Chao Yuan’s and Zhen’ge’s illnesses, dramatising their overindulgence in the traditional vices.30

Demonological healing also appears in other episodes in the *Yinyuan zhuan* as ambiguous and inconsistent in efficacy. The narrative voice frequently demonstrates that holy books neither heal nor protect against supernatural forces. Other sutras all occur in a comical context, exposing demonological healing as a materialistically motivated fraud. For example, when Chao Yuan falls into a delirious fever, a doctor (*yiguan*) is called but no sooner than he enters the Chao household, he becomes possessed himself. A monk suggests fetching a copy of the *Jingangjing* 金刚经 (Diamond Sutra), which Chao Yuan already possesses, but to no avail. The monk then suggests obtaining a copy of the *Lianjing* 蓮經 (Lotus Sutra). Both sutras are placed beside his bed but they have no effect whatsoever.31

The Chan Buddhist sutra *Fahuaijing* 法華經 (Sutra of Buddhist Glory) is mentioned in an ironic narratorial aside describing how unscrupulous Magistrate Chao 趙 connives in his son Chao Yuan’s vicious slandering of his former friends, the actors-turned-monks Hu Dan 胡旦 and Liang Sheng 梁生, after he has exploited them and profited from their help.32

The sutras *Sanguanjing* 三官經 (Three Officials’ Sutra) and *Zaojing* 灶經 (Stove Sutra) occur in the context of an aspiring scholar without shame or conscience who lives as a parasite in a Daoist temple. When the Daoists are forced to flee, he wants to steal their belongings but when he finds nothing to steal, he in turn falsely accuses them of having stolen his belongings. As the sutras and other Daoist items feature in his list of lost property, the magistrate sees through his fraud. These episodes mainly contain satirical glosses on the vice of covetousness.

The *Yinyuan zhuan* furthermore weaves a story about the *Xinjing* 心經 (Heart Sutra) and a red-dyed cat into its plot.34 A very similar story also appears in Feng Menglong’s *Xinming pu* (1574-1646) collection *Zhinangbu* 智囊捕 (Additions to the Wisdom Sack, 1634) in the early seventeenth century, which in turn stems from the twelfth-century anthology *Yijianzi* 夜堅志 (Accounts of Yijian) by Hong Mai 洪邆 (1123-1202).35 Chao Yuan buys a red-dyed cat with a copy of the *Heart Sutra* for an exorbitant price. He believes that both cat and sutra have magical powers to subdue fox demons, yet both turn out to be useless, nothing but sales’ gimmicks. The joke plays on the theme of Chao Yuan’s overspending and his gullibility, exposing his excesses and upstart mentality. The narrative voice shows that the ex-singing girl Zhen’ge possesses more common sense than Chao Yuan, a would-be member of the gentry elite.36

Satire and irony enhance the entertainment value of lay healing. Ambiguity in the outcome makes the reader insecure. The reader therefore gropes for further hints from the narrative voice at how to

30 See *YYZ*, 3.31.
31 See *YYZ*, 17.245.
32 See *YYZ*, 15.219.
33 See *YYZ*, 26.384.
34 See *YYZ*, 6.84-90.
36 See *YYZ*, 7.93-94.
decipher the story. In other passages, the narrative voice systematically undermines the characters’ visions of the supernatural world, exposing human follies and vanities. The remarks of the narrative voice create inconsistencies between showing and telling in the narrative. For example, after Mrs Chao Fengshan’s exorcism, Zhen’ge thanks the ancestor’s spirit for her cure and has a vision of the spirit grabbing her skirts. As she flees in panic, the narrative voice reveals that nothing happened except for her dress being caught in the threshold.37

In sum, the episode on Mrs Chao Fengshan’s exorcism corresponds to other cases of demonological healing in the novel by satirizing human folly in terms of the traditional four vices of excess and illustrating a foolish and vainglorious world. Chao Fengshan’s wife represents a female lay healer who ranks low on the social scale. Other examples of lay healers in the Yinyuan zhuang, however, correspond to Paul Unschuld’s observation that belief in the existence of evil spirits applies not only to the lower or uneducated segments of society in Ming and Qing times.38

The Lady’s Demonic Healing

Mme Chao 晏夫人, wife of District Magistrate Chao and mother of the major protagonist Chao Yuan, attempts demonic healing when Chao Yuan suffers from delirious fever attacks and has visions of ghosts.39 The

narration ironically comments on her eclectic approach: ‘Mme Chao invoked Heaven and prayed to the Polar Star. She promised to sacrifice pigs and sheep and made vows to the Buddha. She stopped at nothing.’40 Her methods have no effect and she later summons medical and religious specialists to heal Chao Yuan.

The episode does not imply comment on the moral character of the healer, Mme Chao. The reason for the failure in healing lies in Chao Yuan’s moral character and social conduct. Demonistic healing must fail in this case, for the narrative voice points out that illness and visions of ghosts derive from the violation of one’s conscience, liangxin 良心.41 The introductory poem states: ‘The sickness demons attack the son [Chao Yuan] ... I am sure this happened because he violated his conscience.’42 The narrative voice explicitly tells the reader why all kinds of healing fail:

Chao Yuan continued to have visions of ghosts and spirits as before and nothing was effective. Do you know the reason? If there really had been any evil spirits and wild ghosts, they would naturally have retreated the moment they saw the holy sutras. The guardian spirits would naturally not have let them enter. The many ghosts Chao Yuan saw were products of his guilty conscience. It was not really true that any ghosts came to beat him [as he believed].43

Chao Yuan’s illness results from a crime: he has driven the two actors Hu and Liang, his former friends who had been relying on his help and goodwill, into poverty, leaving them no alternative but to become

37 See YYZ, 3.36-37. Another example is the narrator’s ironical remark on Chao Yuan’s illness: ‘After all Chao Yuan did not have any illness. He had simply slipped, so when he had taken the medicine, he felt relatively at ease.’ YYZ, 3.34.
38 See Unschuld, Medicine in China, 216; for a discussion of demonology, ‘psychiatry’ and ‘psychoanalysis’ in medical thought during the Ming and Qing epochs see ibid., 215-23.
39 See YYZ, 17.244.
40 YYZ, 17.244; these activities also occur in YYZ, 4.53, and Jin Ping Mei cihua 金瓶梅詞話, 4 vols., ed. Hong Kong: Xinghai wenhua, 1987 (hereafter: JPMC), ch. 12, 21.219, ch. 39.
41 See YYZ, 17.244.
42 YYZ, 17.244.
43 YYZ, 17.245.
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Buddhist monks. The narrative voice explains:

It was rather because the spirit of his own conscience was not at ease. This took the opportunity to create mischief when his debility resulted in an excess of fire. So what good could those sutras do?

The introductory poem to Chapter 11 (dealing with Zhen’ge’s possession by ghosts) argues in a similar way without denying the existence of ghosts:

Don’t say that ghosts and spirits do not exist,
they have existed since ancient times,
but they don’t hover in space,
they just sit within yourself.

Conscience (liangxin) and ghosts alternately prosper and decline ...

Disaster and illness therefore result from the decline of conscience, from depraved morality: ‘Since you know that ghosts are in your conscience, you also understand that disaster is not a punishment sent down by Heaven.’ The narrative voice assumes the tone of a Confucian moralist, seeing the root of evil and illness in the loss of morality and conscience. Here the narrative voice interprets the world true to the ancient Confucian spirit as exemplified by the book of Mencius (Mengzi 孟子).

The implied attitude towards the supernatural world and demonological healing in the Yinyuan zhuang reflects late Ming views.

Most renowned medical writers such as Yu Bo, Li Shizhen 李時珍 (fl. 1515), Li Ting 李梴 (fl. 1570), and Xu Chunfu 徐春甫 (fl. 1570), Gong Tingxian 龔廷賢 (fl. 1615), and Xu Dachun 徐大春 (1693-1771) included suggestions for demonological methods of healing in their writings. They all acknowledged the pathogenic influence of demons as a self-evident fact.

In the early sixteenth century, Yu Bo admitted that demons may exist, but he considered the activities of shamans and sorcerers as merely materialistically motivated fraud. This aspect anticipates the description of the Daoist specialists in the Yinyuan zhuang whose activities as healers expose them as covetous, greedy and corrupt.

Xu Chunfu integrated demonology in his writings, yet he maintained that all demons and supernatural apparitions were figments of the human imagination. He concludes: ‘If you do not take medicine but instead engage a shaman (wushi 師) for exorcism, you will get no effect at all.’ By contrast the Yinyuan zhuang primarily focuses on the question of morality and the human conscience.

In 1624, Zhang Jiebin 張介賓 (fl. late Ming) advocated healing by exorcism in his medical book Leijing 類經 (Classic of Classifications), but he considered demons to be creations of the human mind and

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44 See YYZ, 15.216-28.
45 YYZ, 17.245.
46 YYZ, 11.155.
47 YYZ, 11.155.
49 Cf. Unschuld, Medicine in China, 216.
51 For example, the Wicked Daoist (yao dao 嚇道), see YYZ, 93.1331; and the depraved Daoist Zhang Shiyun 張士雲, see YYZ, 28.414-29.421.
52 Gujin yitong daquan 古今醫統大全, by Xu Chunfu 徐春甫, Gesongli edn., 1570, 49.15b-16b.
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therefore not phenomena of the real world. In the Yinyuan zhuan, the incidents of illness and lay healing expose the corrupt morals of the sufferer, Chao Yuan. The ambiguity about demonological healing and the efficacy of the lay healers reflect back on situations of moral depravity in the patients. People suffer from illnesses, see ghosts and get possessed because they violate their conscience. Their sins and crimes disturb the balance of the physical body, the social and the cosmic harmony.

The acts of Mme Chao and Chao Fengshan’s wife typically show female characters of different classes engaging in lay healing. These episodes do not imply comment on the moral characteristics of either character. The significance of these episodes rather lies in the acts of lay healing and the explicit and implied comments on society, opening a window on the perception of the world and the moral universe in seventeenth-century Chinese minds.

Medical Cannibalism and the Magistrate’s Son

The most detailed account of lay healing by rituals depicts Chao Yuan, the major male protagonist in the Chao plot, a newly arrived member of the local elite. He tries to heal his concubine Zhen’ge, when she is in a critical condition after a miscarriage that Dr Yang proved unable to treat. This example of lay healing inverts the typical gender role:

Chao Yuan flew into a panic. He fetched fortune telling spills from the Yue Temple; he had performing birds produce divination hexagrams before the royal palace; he asked the

blind man to produce a horoscope; he asked shamansesses to perform exorcism dances (tiao shen 跳神). He had divination practised by clapping bamboo chips. He had a child tell the fortune from a mirror made magical by incantations. He had the Baoan jing 保安經 (Sutra of Ensuring Safety) read at the temple of the City God. He made vows. He vowed to pray to the Buddha. He vowed to pray to the Polar Star for three years. He vowed to wear nothing but thin clothes for five years. Moreover, he wanted to cut flesh from his thigh to decoct into medicine.

Chao Yuan’s activities as a lay healer imply satire at his own expense on several levels. First, the hyperbolic enumeration of various devices suggests excess. Second, Chao Yuan paradoxically inverts gender roles as he engages in rituals for demonic healing — which we have noted as typically female activities. Third, the catalogue of twelve different kinds of ritual practices climaxes in the most horrific one, the idea of committing the act of gegu 割股, or cutting flesh from one’s thigh and

54 See YTZ, 4.53.
55 Tiao shen, a spirit possession ritual. A woman acts as shaman and performs a dance until possessed by spirits; also in JPMCH, ch. 48, 59, 79, and in Liaozhai shi yi: hui jiao hui bu hui p ing ben 聊齋志異會校會注會評本, by Pu Songling 潘松齡, ed. Zhang Youhe 張友鹤, Shanghai: Guji, 1962, rev. edn. 1978, 6.755-56. In his analysis of healers in the Jin Ping Mei, the historian of science Christopher Cullen has pointed out that the tiao shen 跳神 spirit possession ritual was a ‘strongly gender-specific procedure’ during which the presence of men was generally discouraged; see Cullen, ‘Patients and Healers’, 123 and 128.
57 Y TZ, 4.53.
using it for a medicinal broth.58 Several turns of satire by paradoxical inversion operate on this level.

The earliest reference to gegu as an act of supreme sacrifice occurs in the book of Zhuangzi 莊子.59 In 739 Chen Cangqi 陳藏器 in his Bencao shiyi 本草拾遺 (Rectifying Omissions in the Materia Medica) listed human flesh as an effective medicine for senile decay, both physical and mental, and also for consumption.60 This seems to have promoted medical cannibalism as a filial act for the sake of ailing parents. Historical and literary sources frequently mention the practice of gegu from the Tang dynasty onwards.61

Gegu appears as the most notorious rite of filial piety in Chinese history. This cannibalistic and masochistic practice proves a perversion rather than a proof of filial piety. The controversy about gegu derives from the conflict between Confucian norms. Filial piety demands that one cures one’s parents with the best medicine, but filial piety also means preserving one’s body as a form of respect towards one’s parents. In the Tang, the Confucian scholar and reformer Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) wrote

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59 ‘Jie Zitui 介之推 was extremely loyal. He cut flesh from his thigh to feed Duke Wen 文公.’ Zheangzi jishi 莊子集釋, ed. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, Beijing: Zhonghua, 1961, 29.998.

60 According to the late Ming physician and pharmacologist Li Shizhen (quoting from Yishao 養生, by Zhang Gao 張杲), see Bencao gangmu 本草綱目, by Li Shizhen 李時珍, ed. Beijing: Renmin weisheng, 1982, 52.2697.


63 See Bencao gangmu, 52.2967-68.


65 Cf. Iderna, ‘Diseases, Doctors, Drugs and Cures’, 37-63.


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with a soup made of their flesh.\textsuperscript{70}

These examples illustrate \textit{gugu} conforming to the proper hierarchical order, that is to say, a socially inferior person (e.g. a child or wife) commits the act for the benefit of a socially superior person (e.g. a parent or husband). In Chao Yuan’s case, however, \textit{gugu} functions to shock: the husband and master of a household, a member of an elite family, considers committing \textit{gugu} for the sake of his concubine, a vulgar prostitute and an adulteress. Satire by inversion attacks Chao Yuan as he displays the kind of behaviour befitting neither a man nor a member of the gentry elite.

\textbf{The Martyrdom of the Filial Scholar}

Another instance of \textit{gugu} contrasts with the Chao Yuan episode. Chao Liang 昌梁, Chao Yuan’s half-brother and his antithesis as a model of filial piety, contemplates committing the act for his ailing mother, Mme Chao.\textsuperscript{71} Chao Liang’s proposed act maintains the proper hierarchical order as in the contextual examples, but in contrast to that of Chao Yuan.

One further aspect shows irony in both Chao Liang’s and Chao Yuan’s roles as lay healers. Irony derives from the implied comment on their social positions. Both characters are men from the local elite. Chao Yuan has gentry status and Chao Liang counts as a scholar.\textsuperscript{72} According to records of the Tang and Song dynasties, commoners and lower level servants carried out \textit{gugu}. No literati or gentry were among them.\textsuperscript{73} We do not know if this evidence merely reflects the bias of the recorders, and whether people really committed \textit{gugu} or not, but we can conclude that the \textit{Yinyuan zhuàn} reverses the picture these documents sketch.

In the late Ming Li Shizhen commented on \textit{gugu}: ‘The gentleman (\textit{junzi} 君子) does not do it.’\textsuperscript{74} His statement suggests how we have to judge Chao Yuan, a member of the gentry elite, when he considers committing \textit{gugu}. Although the act received official sanction up to the end of the Ming, it counted as an expression of filial piety by the uneducated masses. It had not much relevance to academic scholars — even if they occasionally admired or pitied it. This trend was reversed in the Qing: illiterate peasants laughed at \textit{gugu}, while many first-degree scholars committed the act.\textsuperscript{75} It is possible that the \textit{Yinyuan zhuàn}, apart from inverting values, actually reflects a historical trend in this respect.

The episodes concerning Chao Yuan and Chao Liang as lay healers mainly illustrate their moral characteristics as vices and virtues. Social inversion functions as a didactic paradox and includes comic relief. In both cases, \textit{gugu} does not take place after all. Divine intervention at a temple prevents Chao Liang from committing \textit{gugu} at the last moment — a turn of events corresponding to descriptions in many contextual sources.\textsuperscript{76} Here the perversion of norms and the inversion of roles already suffice to shock. The \textit{Yinyuan zhuàn}, however, depicts another incident in which \textit{gugu} does take place.

\textsuperscript{70} See \textit{Yesou puyan} 野讎暴言, by Xia Jingqu 夏敬渠, ed. Shanghai: Shijie, 1936, 131.417.

\textsuperscript{71} See YYZ, 36.537-38. Mme Chao is his adopted mother; he is the posthumous son of Mme Chao’s husband Mr Chao by his concubine Chunying 春英.

\textsuperscript{72} See YYZ, 46.667-69. Chao Liang passes the civil service examination by virtue of his sympathetic character rather than learning.

\textsuperscript{73} See T’ien, \textit{Male Anxiety and Female Chastity}, 157.

\textsuperscript{74} Bencao gangmu, 52.2967.

\textsuperscript{75} Cf. T’ien, \textit{Male Anxiety and Female Chastity}, 160-61.

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One Family’s Filial Piety

The Zhang 張 family episode sketches a model image of lay healers who also represent a utopian ideal in moral and social conduct.77 The aged scholar Zhang Yangchong 張養冲 of Mingshui Town has two sons Zhang Qiyou 張其猷 and Zhang Qimei 張其美 and two obedient daughters-in-law, Yang Sigu 楊四姑 and Wang Sanjie 王三姐. The narrative describes how the Zhang brothers, and in particular their wives, become paragons of filial piety by nursing old Zhang Yangchong and his wife when they are old and sick. The narrative voice tells how they nurse old Zhang until his death. It advertises their behaviour as an ideal:

When Zhang Yangchong fell ill and took to his bed, his two sons went out to call doctors and inquire by divination, make vows and implore the spirits. The two daughters-in-law stayed at home brewing tea and decocting medicines, serving food and boiling soup. They attended to him for two or three months without ever complaining. When Zhang Yangchong died, they spent everything they had in their poor household to arrange the funeral and bury him.78

The tone of the narrative voice sounds as serious here as in the description of the ideal inhabitants of utopia.79 Scholar Zhang’s two daughters-in-law make concerted efforts to wait upon their widowed mother-in-law. Their conduct climaxes in physical self-sacrifice by committing gegu when the old lady falls ill:

Later, when their mother-in-law fell ill because of old age and was no more able to move,

they dressed her and fed her, bound her feet and washed her face, combed her hair and helped her on the toilet. The two daughters-in-law looked after her like a baby. When the mother-in-law’s geriatric disease gradually worsened and she ate less and less, the two sisters-in-law discussed the matter and decided to cut their flesh (gegu) to treat their mother-in-law so she might be restored to life. Both sisters-in-law fasted and prayed to Heaven and Earth. They vowed to wear thin clothes in the cold months of winter, to live on a vegetarian diet ever after and to pray to the Buddha. Each of them cut a slice of flesh from her left thigh and mixed it into a bowl of soup. They did not tell their mother-in-law the truth, but simply said it was pork. The mother-in-law consumed it and found it fresh and delicious. It turned on her appetite and gradually she again started to eat. Although she was not able to leave her bed, she revived to live another year and eight months before her death at the age of 78 sui.80

The act here has strongly positive connotations. It corresponds to the influential Song dynasty philosopher and Confucianist Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130-1200) attitude towards gegu. Zhu Xi endorsed gegu favourably but with reserve. Zhu Xi stated: “It is certainly not right to commit gegu, but if one does it with sincerity without intending to show off, then it may be all right.”81 The Yinyuan zhuan affirms this attitude. Here the act is ‘all right’ because the devotees do it with sincerity without any intention to show off and in accordance with the proper order of social hierarchy.

The model characters Yang Sigu and Wang Sanjie commit gegu to the letter, literally cutting a piece of flesh from the thigh. The collection Yiianzhi from the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) describes in detail how a devotee cut his thigh. His seated, contorted posture served as a gesture to let his family know about his act.82 After the Song era, gegu

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77 A brief sub-plot within the story of Di Xichen recounts their story, see YZZ, 52.758-61.
78 YZZ, 52.758.
79 See YZZ, ch. 23-24.
80 YZZ, 52.759-60.
82 See Yongle dadian 永樂大典, MS copy (1562-7), partially repr. Beijing: Zhonghua, 1960, 10813.2b.
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exclusively meant cutting the flesh of either arm. The idealised glorification of this ritual adds a grotesque dimension to the Yinyuan zhuan. Its description transcends its controversial nature and glosses over the often recorded negative or fatal results. Selective narration and hyperbole turn the ideal case into a super-ideal. The serious tone of voice increases its didactic effect. Rhetoric and imagery here highlight the utopian quality of this scene.

Nursing, medical healing and rituals such as gegu function as a remedy for the fallen world. In the course of a campaign for a Confucian moral revival, the local mandarin selects the Zhang brothers and their wives for public distinction. He bestows honorary titles on them and builds a virtue arch in their honour. The reaction of the spectators in Mingshui Town illustrates the didactic nature and effect of the story on its audience:

It really had the effect of moving all those men and women who were usually not filial, rebelled against their parents and offended their parents-in-law, to have good intentions, to set their minds on learning from them and to reform. Among the mischievous people who did not listen to the advice of their parents, who favoured their wives and were partial towards their children, and among the shrewish wives who disregarded the position of their parents-in-law, who beat their fathers-in-law and cursed their mothers-in-law, there was no one who did not take pains to correct their former misbehaviour and set their minds on learning how to become good. Thus the mandarin wanted to reform the customs and habits of the common people, to make them discard evil and revert to goodness, to incite them to change.

The tone of the narrative voice and the ideas about moral reform expressed in this episode resemble the advice given by the scholar-official Huang Liuhong 黄六鴻 (ca. 1633-after 1705) in his handbook for magistrates Fuhui quanshu 福惠全書 (A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence). Huang served as a magistrate in Tancheng 鄰城 county in southern Shandong in the early 1670s. His handbook is based on his experiences and observation of local society during that time and outlines the principles of good government. Huang urged:

The magistrate has the duty to confer distinctions on virtuous women and filial sons. However, many of them live in obscurity and poverty and lack power or influence. They cultivate their conduct by themselves and do not seek to exhibit themselves. How should the magistrate confer distinctions on such people? Yet those receiving honours in our days all come from the cities and suburbs, are from the gentry or influential families, and have connections to get public nominations or powerful backing. Every year the magistrate ought to order the village elders to search for virtuous wives, exemplary women, filial sons and obedient grandchildren, people of admirable conduct and exceptional character among those from poor and humble backgrounds and those living in hidden or remote places.

The description of the Zhang family illustrates Huang Liuhong’s utopia, translating his programme of social reform into action. Moreover, the idyll of poverty has yet another dimension. In sharp contrast to the bulk of the novel that dramatises the theme of money and revolves around financial matters, the ideal society lacks money and consequently corruption and vice. This aspect reminds of the utopia depicted in Chapter 24 of the Yinyuan zhuan, a world free from the troubles of the money economy. The story of the Zhang family provides

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83 See Yongle dadian, 10813.2a-2b.
84 Cf. T’ien, Male Anxiety and Female Chastity, 154.
85 YZZ, 52.761.

a brief glimpse of this ideal society in microcosm.

The instances of ideal healing form part of the utopian concept and the idea of moral reform in the novel. The life that Yang Sigu and Wang Sanjie provide for their parents-in-law appears as a bucolic, self-sufficient utopia. Filial devotion and subservience create an archaic idyll. The narrative voice compares the scene to the ancient ideal of King Wen’s 文王 good government: ‘Although old [Zhang Yangchong and his wife] were poor, they were just like the aged people in the care of King Wen who had meat to eat.’

88 The image of King Wen recurs to stress the point. The narrative voice describes how the two sisters-in-law spin silk to dress their parents-in-law and concludes: ‘Although they did not wear gauze or satins, yet they resembled the elderly in the care of King Wen who had silk to wear.’

89 The image of old people who have meat to eat and silk to wear stems from the book of Mengzi and illustrates ideal government. Thus the narrative affirms a utopian ideal true to the ancient Confucian spirit.

The theme of the ideal lay healers thus dramatises utopia. The episode is short and corresponds to the general pattern of the narrative interspersing brief glimpses of a perfect world within long accounts of dystopia. Cases of extreme filial defiance and domestic discord frame the utopia of the Zhang family. The contrast enhances the didactic effect as the narrative equates fictional reality with a world in dire need of reform.

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88 YIZ, 52.759.
89 YIZ, 52.759.
90 Mengzi, 1A.3, 1A.7, 7A.22. Mencius points out that King Wen took good care of the aged, see Mengzi 4A.13; 7A.22.
91 See YIZ, 52.756, 53.764-77.

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Concluding Remarks

The lay healers in the Yinyuan zhuan demonstrate how the imagery of illness and its cure links to the theme of decadence and moral reform. In advertising a revival of Confucian norms and values, the narrative voice reveals itself as a Confucian conservative and a moralist but it also paints a carnivalesque, and therefore ironic, picture of society, delving with great delight into the obscene and the grotesque.

Belief in the powers of demonological healing does not appear restricted to any particular social group. The lay healers hail from a wide social spectrum: the maid, an uneducated character of lower social status appears alongside a lady and wife of a scholar-official and her two sons, both would-be members of the literati elite. Scholar Zhang’s daughters-in-law, paragons of virtue and utopian examples of filial piety, also belong to an elite family.

Both men and women appear as lay healers in the Yinyuan zhuan. This adds another dimension to their dramatisation, for their gender roles also convey social comment. The maid, the lady and the scholar’s daughters-in-law typically show women resorting to lay healing. The portrayal of two men in the role of lay healers, however, inverts expectations, turning social hierarchies topsy-turvy. In exposing Chao Yuan’s foolishness, the narrative voice insinuates that lay healing is not appropriate for a male character and, what is more, the master of an elite household. Chao Liang’s intended act in the name of filial piety expresses his single-mindedness and as such also contains irony and comic entertainment. The Zhang family daughters-in-law by contrast maintain proper social hierarchies. The narrative voice depicts their act in hyperbolic enlargement, projecting a utopian ideal and ideas for moral reform that anticipate and resonate with political writings in the
seventeenth century.

The depiction of the lay healers, moreover, reveals an implied ethical attitude. The narrative voice remains ambiguous about the existence and value of supernatural phenomena and the efficacy of lay healing. It ultimately defines the world in Confucian terms. Chao Yuan’s illness exposes his violation of the conscience (liangxin), one of the primary moral values in the Mengzi. Both Chao Yuan and Chao Liang as lay healers invert gender roles and social hierarchies. Their attempts at healing pervert Confucian moral values. Satire and comedy convey social criticism, targeting in particular the nouveaux riches and pseudo-members of the literati elite. The perversion and ironic inversion of Confucian values provoke laughter at the carnival of vices. In regarding demons as creations of the human mind, as some of the author’s contemporaries did in seventeenth-century China, the narrative voice firmly places the emphasis on issues of morality and individual responsibility for the integrity of the human body and the well-being of the state and society.

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