



**HAL**  
open science

# Divination and fate manipulation in a popular myth of late imperial China

Vincent Durand-Dastès

► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Durand-Dastès. Divination and fate manipulation in a popular myth of late imperial China : The wedding of Zhougong and Peach blossom girl . 2011, pp.1-34. hal-01378144

**HAL Id: hal-01378144**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01378144>**

Submitted on 8 Oct 2016

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



# Divination and Fate Manipulation in a Popular Myth of Late Imperial China

## The Wedding of Zhougong and Peach Blossom Girl

Vincent Durand-Dastès  
INALCO (Paris)  
11 November 2010

What can the Chinese vernacular novel (*tongsu xiaoshuo* 通俗小說) of the Ming-Qing period tell us about the mantic arts of late Imperial China, and, beyond, about the Chinese conception of fate? In many respects, *tongsu xiaoshuo* narratives are fated stories: not only is karmic causality widely employed in the novels as a narrative device, but prophecies and stellar or dream divination frequently occurs at important moments in the tales. Characters are physically depicted according to the principles of physiognomy, and many heroes are shown to have divinatory skills.<sup>1</sup>

To take only a famous example, let us look briefly at what

---

<sup>1</sup> On the mantic arts in Chinese ancient novels in general, see Wan Qingchuan 萬晴川, “gudai xiaoshuo yu zhanbu shu

happened to the very important history of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo 三國, 220-265 A.D.), the famous civil war that put an end to the glorious Han dynasty, when it was adapted to the format of a vernacular novel. As early as the Yuan Dynasty, the *Sanguo zhi pinghua* 三國志平話, one of the first examples of a vernacular historical narrative retracing the Three Kingdoms war had already injected an important amount of fated causality into the story, explaining the fall of the Han through the reincarnations at the end of the dynasty of Han Xin 韓信, Peng Yue 彭越 and Ying Bu 英布, the betrayed and murdered companions of the dynasty's founder, Liu Bang 劉幫. Divine justice allows them to return as Cao Cao 曹操, Liu Bei 劉備 and Sun Quan 孫權, the future rulers of the three kingdoms of Wei 魏, Shu 蜀 and Wu 吳, simply in order for them to take revenge by dismantling the glorious Han empire that they had helped to found, while Liu Bang is to be reincarnated as the last, weak emperor of the dynasty, and thus obliged to witness in this role the end of his great enterprise.<sup>2</sup> One may mention too the portrayal in the later "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" (*Sanguo zhi tongshu yanyi* 三國志通俗演義) of the strategist Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 as a diviner with supernatural foresight: often in the novel Zhuge Liang is described as a wise reader of heavenly signs, and, sometimes, as a sorcerer who is able to manipulate fate.

---

古代小說與占卜術", in *idem*, *Zhongguo gudai xiaoshuo yu fangshu wenhua* 中國古代小說與方術文化, Beijing, Zhongguo Shehuikexue chubanshe, 2005, p. 164-237.

<sup>2</sup> *Zhizhi xinkan quanxiang Pinghua Sanguo zhi* 至治新刊全相平話三國志, *juan zhi shang* 卷之上. Zhong Zhaohua 鍾兆華, *Yuankan quanxiang pinghua wuzhong jiaozhu* 元刊全相平話五種校注, Chengdu, Ba Shu shushe, 1990, p. 373-374.

### The diviner and his tutelary patrons

Zhuge Liang is, of course, not the only *tongshu xiaoshuo* character to be depicted as performing divination or manipulating fate: there is hardly a wise strategist in historical novels who is not also a master of the magical and mantic arts.<sup>3</sup> On a lesser level, here and there in vernacular novels, an ordinary diviner may be called on to explain an illness, to ensure the success of an adventurous enterprise, or to foretell the outcome of a happy or unhappy event. For example, in two roughly contemporary novels, written towards the end of the 16th century, we find scenes in which a diviner, before practising divination, invokes the blessings of the tutelary patrons of his art. The first appears in chapter 4 of the vernacular hagiography of the Daoist immortal, Xu Xun 許遜 (*Xu zhenjun* 許真君), “The Story of the Iron tree” (*Tieshu ji* 鐵樹記). A fortune teller is called upon to guess the gender of the unborn baby of a rich man. The diviner claims to be a disciple of the Master of the Valley of Demons (Guiguzi 鬼谷子), and is nicknamed the “devil’s guess” (*guitui* 鬼推). After lighting an incense stick, he begins to mutter the following incantation:

“I bow respectfully in front of the gods of the Six *ding*, may the trigrams of King Wen bear a numinous answer! [...] If one asks with a sincere heart, the Trigrams shall be responsive! Burning carefully a stick of perfect incense, I pray respectfully to the patriarchs of the Eight Trigrams: Fuxi, Yu-the-Great, King Wen, the Duke of Zhou, Confu-

3 See the chapter on the strategist in Ji Dejun 紀德君, *Ming Qing lishi yanyi xiaoshuo yishu lun* 明清歷史小說藝術論. Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000.

cius: the five Great Saints!

The Seventy two sages guarding the Way of Confucianism; Master of the Valley of Demons; Master Sun Bin; Master Guan Lu; Master Yan Junping; Master Mu Xiu, Li Yan; the Divine generals of the Six *ding* and Six *jia* within the Trigrams; Thousand li Eye; Favourable Wind Ear; the boy who reports on the trigram; the lad who launches the trigram; all the divinities pacing the void; and the Magistrate of the altar of the city walls of our prefectural province. May they all descend to inspect today's divination!"<sup>4</sup>

虔叩六丁神，文王卦有靈。[...]人有誠心，卦有靈感。謹焚真香，虔請八卦祖師，伏羲、大禹、文王、周公、孔子，五大聖人，孔門衛道七十二賢、鬼谷先生、孫臏先生、管輅先生、嚴君平先生、穆修李挺先生、卦中六丁六甲神將，千里眼、順風耳，報卦童子，擲卦童郎，虛空過往一切神祇，本省城隍社令，咸望降臨，鑒今卜筮。

The second scene is from Chapter 35 of the well-known masterpiece, "The Journey to the West" (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記). In a short scene, Monkey King Sun Wukong, yielding a calabash gourd, imagines playfully for a while that he is a diviner:

---

4 Deng Zhimo 鄧志謨 (end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century), *Tieshu ji* 鐵樹記. Reproduced in Hou Zhongyi 侯忠義, ed, *Mingdai xiaoshuo jikan* 明代小說輯刊, series 1 vol. 4, Chengdu, Ba Shu shushe, 1993, p. 481-482.

"He shook the gourd, producing immediately a noise within. He said: "It is exactly like the sound of the tube used for divination! Let's do some divination so! I'll ask when my Master will be able to exit from this place" just see: he kept on waiving the gourd, muttering at the same time: "King Wen of the *Zhouyi*, Confucius the Saint, Master Peach Blossom girl, Master of the Valley of Demons!"<sup>5</sup>

他拿着葫蘆，說着話，不覺的到了洞口，把那葫蘆搖搖，一發響了。他道：“這個象發課的筒子響，倒好發課。等老孫發一課，看師傅什麼時時才得出門。”你看他手里不住的搖，口里不住的念道“周易文王、孔子聖人、桃花女先生、鬼谷子先生。”

Those two sequences, though differing in length and tone, follow the same pattern: before proceeding, a diviner invokes divinities who may help him. We have thus here a short pantheon of the tutelary spirits of divination according, not to the literary tradition, but to the popular lore of the Ming period. Those divinities are of two kinds: some are remote beings, tutelary patrons of divination or diviners of ancient ages; others, only quoted in the "Iron Tree" episode, are more familiar divinities, called upon to assist the actual divination that is about to take place. Among the latter, we find the local gods of the place, heavenly inspectors, the child gods whose responsibility it is to look on the trigrams that are to be used

5 Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩, *Xiyou ji* 西遊記, Beijing, Renmin wenzue, 1988, vol 2., p. 447-448.

to read fate, or important figures such as the gods of the six *ding* and *jia*, a “set of spirits represent[ing] the animation of certain positions in the cycle of time” who may be summoned for prognosticatory as well as protective purposes.<sup>6</sup> Some ritual texts explain how to dispatch those spirits on errands in order “to be informed of all matters under heaven”.<sup>7</sup> There is little doubt that Thousand li Eye and Favourable Wind Ear, the pair of martial guardians renowned respectively for their supernatural far-reaching sight and acute hearing who are called upon just after the six *ding* and *jia*, are to be used here in a similar role to that of divine spies.

Let us now turn to the tutelary figures summoned in both novels. One finds the first characters taken from the group known as the “Nine sages” *jiusheng* 九聖. They are actually a genealogy of sages, beginning with the “Three Emperors” *sanhuang* 三皇 Fuxi 伏羲, Shennong 神農, and the Yellow Emperor 黃帝, and continuing with the wise rulers Yao 堯 and Shun 舜, their successor Yu the Great 禹, then the founders of the Zhou Dynasty, King Wen 文王 and the Duke of Zhou 周公, to end with Confucius 孔子. Those tutelary figures of Chinese civilization as a whole are here because the “Nine Sages” have been associated with the gradual composition of the “Book of Changes” (*Yijing* 易經 or *Zhouyi* 周易), the divinatory classic of the Zhou dynasty. The *chenwei* 讖緯 tradition of prognosticary treatises even linked them with the composition of the diagrams associated with the Zhouyi of the “Yellow River Chart” (*Hetu* 河圖) and the “Luo River

---

6 Robert Campany, « divination and the spirits of time cycle », in *idem*, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, p. 73.

7 *Baopuzi neipian* J.11. Quoted in R. Campany, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

Writing” (*Luoshu* 洛書).<sup>8</sup> The first extract quotes only five of them, Fuxi, Yu-the-Great, King Wen, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius, while the second lists only King Wen and Confucius.

Then come the names of the famous diviners of the past: the only one to be quoted in both extracts is Guigu zi, or the Master of the Valley of Demons. This very shadowy figure of the Spring and Autumn period is said to have lived in seclusion in the place from which he took his sobriquet, and legend has it that he taught his disciple, Sun Bin 孫臏, the next name in the “Iron tree” diviner’s list, the art of strategy. He has been venerated at the popular level as the patriarch of physiognomy (*xiangshu* 相術),<sup>9</sup> and is also associated with astrological methods of divination.<sup>10</sup> Guan Lu 管輅 (209-256), was a member of a group of diviners working for the Wei king, Cao Cao, and has been associated with physiognomy treatises also;<sup>11</sup> he is also the hero of a well-known medieval tale in which he saves a man who was fated to die young by telling him how to oblige the Northern and Southern polar stars so that they will grant him an extension of life.<sup>12</sup> Yan Junping 嚴君平, a Han dynasty man, is reported to have refused to embark on an official career and led the life of a fortune teller in Chengdu; he was a

---

8 Zhong Zhaopeng 钟肇鹏, *Chenwei lunlüe* 讖緯論略, Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, p. 70-71.

9 Sakade Yoshinobu, “Guigu zi” in Pregadio, ed. *The Encyclopaedia of Taoism*, vol. 1, p. 460-461.

10 Livia Kohn, “A textbook of physiognomy: the tradition of the *Shenxiang quanbian*”, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 45 (1986), p. 256 note 6.

11 Livia Kohn, « A textbook of physiognomy », p. 234.

12 See *Soushen ji*, j. 3 搜神記卷三.



specialist on *Yijing*.<sup>13</sup> “Master Mu Xiu Li Yan” refers actually to two different men, Li Zhicai 李之才 (*zi* Yanzhi 挺之) and Mu Xiu 穆修, also specialists on *Yijing* but in the Song period, who were involved in the transmission of the *Wuji tu* 無極圖 and *Xiantian tu* 先天圖 from Chen Tuan 陳搏 to Shao Yong 邵雍, and thus are important in the school of the “Book of Change” studies at the time of rising Neo-confucianism.<sup>14</sup>

### Holy patrons of divination in vernacular narratives

As we have pointed out, those famous diviners of the past constitute a kind of popular pantheon of holy diviners, so it is unsurprising to find some of them appearing in the cast of characters of Ming Qing novels or ballads. The Master of the Valley of Demons seems to have given birth to the richest lore: he appears in many vernacular genres, from plays of the Yuan dynasty through *tongsu xiaoshuo* to modern folktales. The novel “The Battle of Wits between Sun and Pang Sun” *Sun Pang dou zhi yanyi* 孫龐斗智演義 (also known as “Former Annals of the Seven Kingdoms” *Qian Qi guo zhi* 前七國志),<sup>15</sup> published in 1636, tells how Sun Bin 孫臏 and Pang Juan 龐涓, originally friends, go to seek guidance in the supernatural and martial arts from the Master of the Valley of Demons in his mountain abode. As Guigu zi favours Sun Bin, Pang Juan,

---

<sup>13</sup> On Yan Junping, see Alan Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: the Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China*, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 93-96.

<sup>14</sup> Alain Arrault, “Les diagrammes de Shao Yong (1012-1077): qui les a vus?”, *Études Chinoises*, vol XIX 1-2, p. 85-86.

<sup>15</sup> Modern edition under the title *Qian Hou Qi guo zhi* 前後七國志, Changsha, Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1984.

jealous, leaves the mountain after destroying the heavenly books (*tianshu* 天書) given to Sun by Guigu zi. When, following the well-known, long and pitiless fight between the two former friends<sup>16</sup>, Pang Juan is eventually killed by Sun Bin, the latter disappears from the world to return to his master in the Valley of Demons. In this story, we find the theme of the celestial book as both a divinatory and military treatise (*bingshu* 兵書), whose possession allows its owner to become a divine strategist or even a founder of empire. Another theme that is closely related to the *tongsu xiaoshuo* lore on divination is the dangerous disclosure of heavenly secrets: Heaven will sometimes punish too brilliant diviners, when they use their divine abilities to disclose facts that should have remained hidden. This theme appears in the Dong Yong 董永 story cycle, which features in the role of the holy diviner, depending on the version, either Sun Bin or Yan Junping, two of the characters who appear in the incantation of the “Story of the Iron Tree”. The story relates how the weaving maid, a celestial goddess, has been married to the deserving Dong Yong in order to bear him a son. As she has afterwards returned to Heaven, the son – who in some versions of the story is none other than the philosopher Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 – tries to find his mother. Sun Bin (or Yan Junping) then gives the young man a clue about how to find her: in one version, he has to await the moment where seven heavenly maidens will fly from the sky in the guise of birds to bathe in a pond, and then steal the feathered garment of the seventh: she is his mother. The young boy does as prescribed, but his mother, obliged to ap-

---

<sup>16</sup> Already object of a splendid narrative by Sima Qian in the “Records of the Grand Historian” (*Shi ji*).

pear naked before her son, is enraged and decides to punish the fortuneteller for lightly disclosing heavenly secrets: she sends him a bottle concealing a magic fire that will eventually burn his “heavenly book”. In some versions, the fire even blinds the unfortunate Yan Junping. The story is often quoted to explain why fortunetelling became so difficult and unreliable afterwards, or why diviners are often blind.<sup>17</sup>

One will find those two themes of the heavenly book given to or stolen by a mortal, and of the concern of Heaven to prevent his secrets from being disclosed by too clever diviners in the story which is the main subject of this paper, the fight between Zhougong and the Peach Blossom Girl.

---

<sup>17</sup> On the various versions of this story, which appears first in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century short story collection, *Qingping shan tang huaben*, see Wilt Idema, *Filial Piety and its Divine Reward: The legend of Dong Yong and the Weaving Maiden, with Related Texts*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2009.

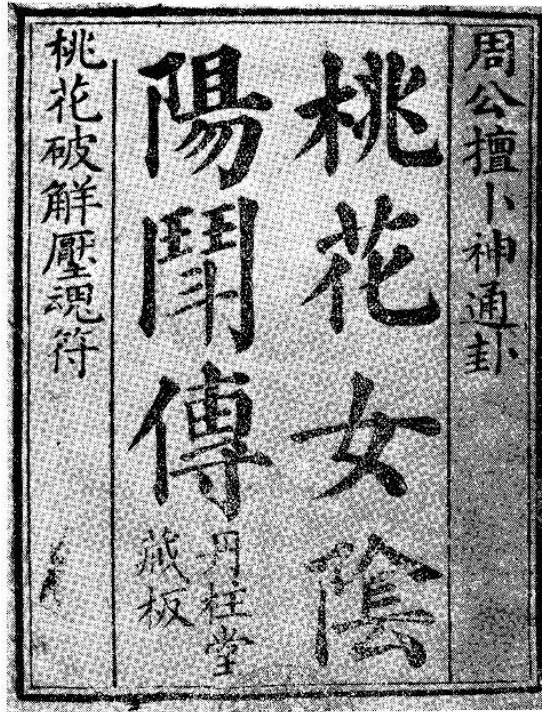


Figure 0.1: Cover of the 1848 Edition

## The Zhougong and Taohua nü cycle

Before turning to the core of the Zhougong-Taohua nü story, let us say a word concerning the cultural and literary background of its two main protagonists, both of whom appear in the diviner's incantation quoted above. One, Zhougong 周公, the "Duke of Zhou", ranks among the most illustrious figures of Chinese culture. The historical Duke of Zhou lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and was the son of King Wen 文 and the brother of King Wu 武, the founders of the Zhou dynasty. He was especially revered by Confucius, and became in Chinese tradition the incarnation of perfect government with a total lack of selfishness, having always refused to claim power for himself. This figure, who may be described as a sort of Confucian saint, has, among many other things, been linked to divination, especially in the later popular tradition. How was this connection established? As we have seen, Zhougong is counted among the "nine sages" involved in the composition of the "Book of Changes", as he is supposed to have authored the *yaoci* 爻辭 sentences in it, but tradition has him involved in the composition of another classic, the "Rite of Zhou" (*Zhouli* 周禮), and he appears as a character in the calenderical and cosmological treatise "the Gnomon of Zhou" (*Zhoubi suanjing* 周髀算經),<sup>18</sup> although it is in medieval times that his name begins to be linked with divinatory treatises. Among the Tang dynasty manuscripts found in the grotto-library of the Dunhuang monastery, one counts indeed several books claiming to transmit the mantic techniques invented by the Duke of Zhou:

---

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Cullen "Chou pi suan ching", in Michael Loewe ed., *Early Chinese Texts*, University of California Berkeley, 1993, p. 33-38.

*Zhougong jiemeng* 周公解梦 (“Explanation of dreams by the Duke of Zhou”, a method of oniromancy.)

*Zhougong bufu* 周公卜法 (“method of divination of the Duke of Zhou”, a treatise on cleromancy, or divination by casting lots).

*Zhougong wugu fa* 周公五鼓法 (“Method of the five drums of the Duke of Zhou” which belongs to the field of hemerology, the science of choosing auspicious and inauspicious moments in time.)

*Zhougong Kongzi zhanfa* 周公孔子占法 (“Method of divination of Confucius and the Duke of Zhou”, a treatise on auguromancy.)<sup>19</sup>

Although most of those texts were not transmitted after Tang times, the oniromantic treatise enjoyed a long period of prosperity, been printed and reprinted, with constant transformations, from Song times to the present day.<sup>20</sup> The reason why Zhougong has been associated with mantic techniques has been the subject of conflicting interpretations. The alleged authorship by Zhougong of an extremely popular book on dream interpretation may originate from the fact that he was reputed to have written the oldest dream classification in the Chinese tradition, which figures in the *Zhouli*,<sup>21</sup> but

---

<sup>19</sup> On the different divination treatises claiming to transmit the techniques invented by Zhougong, see Marc Kalinowski, ed., *Divination et société dans la Chine médiévale: étude des manuscrits de Dunhuang de la Bibliothèque nationale de France et de la British Library*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Richard J. Smith, *Fortune Tellers and Philosophers, Divination in Traditional Chinese Society*, Westview Press, 1991, p. 252-253.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Pierre Diény, "Le Saint ne rêve pas : de Zhuangzi à Michel Jou-

it may also have been influenced by the extremely famous quote of the “Analects” of Confucius, where the aging sage complains that he is so old and decaying that he no longer dreams of the Duke of Zhou.<sup>22</sup> However, as far as the *tongsu xiaoshuo* is concerned, the link between Zhougong and divination rests mainly in his connection with the extremely important *Yijing* technique of trigram computation. As the early 17th century novel, “The story of Han Xiangzi” (*Han xiangzi zhuan* 韓湘子傳), beautifully expresses, Zhougong is close to being the very impersonation of Trigrams divination:

“Some day, the great limit will be just above your head. Then, can your loving son or tender daughter replace you in death? Even with money, it is impossible to buy a medicine to combat impermanence. Even if you had the Venerable’s Lord Li elixir, the face of the Buddha Śākyamuni, the literary skills of Confucius, the divinatory abilities of the Duke of Zhou (*my stress; literally* “the yin, yang, and eight trigrams of the duke of Zhou” Zhougong *bagua yinyang* 周公八卦陰陽), the magical recipes of the famous physicians Bian Que and Cang Gong – each and every one of them has perished!”<sup>23</sup>  
有一日大限臨在你頭上，那一個親的兒，熱的女，替得你無常？有錢難買不死方，有錢難買不無常。

---

vet”, *Etudes chinoises* XX 1-2, p. 147 note 48.

<sup>22</sup> *Lunyu* 論語, “Shu er 述而”, 5. See Jean-Pierre Diény, “Le saint ne rêve pas”.

<sup>23</sup> *Han xiangzi zhuan*, chap. 16 ; quoted in the translation by Philip Clart, Yang Erzeng, *The Story of Han Xiangzi*, University of Washington Press, 2007, p. 231, with a few modifications.

你就有李老君的丹，釋迦佛的相，孔夫子的文章，  
周公八卦陰陽，盧醫扁鵲仙方，他也一個個身亡。

As we have seen, the Peach Blossom girl (Taohua nü 桃花女) appears in the *Xiyou ji* diviners' incantation among the tutelary figure of the mantic trade. In spite of this apparent equal position with Zhougong as a patron of diviners, she cannot match this grand figure, being a considerably less important character in the theatre of Chinese culture. Besides, she is rooted, not in the noble Confucian tradition, but in the popular realm of exorcism and eroticism. One of the first connotations of peach blossom is erotic. As early as the *Tao zhi yao yao* 桃之夭夭 poem of the "Book of Odes", the blossoming peach tree heralds the time for love and weddings. From the sky, the Peach Blossom Star (*taohua xing* 桃花星) influences human destiny by driving man and woman towards lust. In the caves of the immortals, Peach Blossom fairies (*taohua xian nü* 桃花仙女) are the heroines of love encounters with wandering mortals. In chapter eight of the 17<sup>th</sup> century novel, "The Dream of the Return to the Lotus" (*Guilian meng* 歸蓮夢), the male hero is thus led back towards the woman whom he loves through a dream encounter with an erotic female immortal called the Peach Blossom Goddess (*taohua nüshen* 桃花女神).<sup>24</sup> The other connotation is the well-known exorcistic virtues of peach tree wood – present as well, as we will see, in the Zhougong-Taohua nü story – but most of the allusions to a "Peach Blossom girl" that we find in Ming Qing novels seems to derive directly from her appearance as a powerful diviner and magician in the story of her conflict with Zhougong. She is listed in chapter nine

---

<sup>24</sup> For a modern edition, see *Gui lian meng*, Shenyang, Chufeng wenyi chubanshe, 1987, p. 93-95.



of the late Ming novel, “The quelling of the sorcerers by the Seven Planets” (*Qi yao pingyao zhuan* 七曜平妖傳) alongside a group of well-known female magicians, such as Hu Yong'er 胡永兒, the heroine of the early sorcerers' novel, “The Quelling of the sorcerers by the three Sui” (*San Sui pingyao zhuan* 三遂平妖傳), female generals of the Yang family, or Liu Jinding 劉金錠, the magician heroine of a cycle about the founder of the Song dynasty. In all the other cases, she is quoted together with Zhougong, being described as her arch-ennemy, such as in the 18th century “A country codger's words of exposure” *Yesou puyan* 野叟曝言, or, interestingly, as a member of the couple of complementary divine fortunetellers that they form, such as in the 33<sup>rd</sup> tale of the 17<sup>th</sup> century short story anthology, *Erke pai'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇.

Let us now turn to the story itself. Because it belongs basically to an oral cycle, and figures prominently in performance genres, from “precious scrolls” (*baojuan* 寶卷) ballads to local operas, I choose to call it a “popular myth”. However, it has surfaced twice in the print culture world of Late Imperial China: first in a Yuan dynasty *zaju* play, “Peach Blossom breaking the magic marries Zhougong” (*Taohua nü pofa jia Zhougong* 桃花女破法嫁周公), printed in the Ming period in the *Yuan qu xuan* 元曲選,<sup>25</sup> and again with a *tongsu xiaoshuo* published in 1848 (but possibly dating to the Qing Qianlong period).<sup>26</sup>

---

25 The *zaju* play is generally attributed to Wang Ye 王暉 zi Rihua 日華, a rather obscure playwright from 14<sup>th</sup> century Hangzhou.

26 On the history of the versions of the Zhougong Taohua nü tale, the most comprehensive work of which I am aware is the Master's thesis of Liu Hui-ping 劉惠萍, *Taohua nü dou Zhougong gushi yanjiu* 桃花女鬥周公故事研究, (shuoshi lunwen 碩士論文) supervisor Zheng Acai 鄭阿財, Zhongguo wenhua daxue Zhongguo wenxue yanjiusuo 中國文化大學中國文學研究所,

None of these two works however, being rather crude in style, can be ranked among novels (*wenren xiaoshuo* 文人小說) or dramas written by and for the literati. Aware of the dangers of attempting to characterise the Zhougong-Taohua nü story as a whole, which would indeed reveal many variations and contradictions,<sup>27</sup> I will focus on the sole version of the story existing within the *xiaoshuo* format, the 1848's "Marvellous Tale of the Peach Blossom Girl's Fight of *yin* against *yang*" *Tao-hua nü yin yang dou chuanqi* 桃花女陰陽鬥傳奇.<sup>28</sup> Let us first present an outline of the story:

During his asceticism on Mount Wudang 武當, the god Zhenwu 真武 cuts open his own stomach in order to purify his bowels. Distracted by the extreme pain, he discards the sword he has used, then ascends to Heaven. The forgotten sword, whose contact with Zhenwu has enabled it to take human shape, ascends to Heaven too, where it becomes the lad keeping the trigram box of Lord Laozi 老子. One day, the boy escapes to descend to the earth and is born into the family of a minister from the Shang 商 Dynasty. Succeeding to his father's post, he becomes known by the name of Zhougong. Soon,

---

Taibei, 1992 (Minguo 81).

27 On the differences in tone and meaning among the great oral cycles, see Wilt Idema and Lee Haiyan, *Meng Jiangnü brings down the Great Wall: Ten Versions from a Chinese Legend*, University of Washington Press, 2005.

28 The text of the novel has been photographically reprinted in the Shanghai guji chubanshe collection, *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 古本小說繼承; it has also been republished in modern typography in the book *Ming Qing shenhua xiaoshuo xuan* 明清神話小說選, Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1988. An electronic version is available on the website *Handian guji* 漢典古籍 <http://gj.zdic.net/archive.php?aid-2108.html>. It is quoted in this paper from the Zhejiang guji edition.

## *The Wedding of Zhougong and Peach Blossom Girl*

dettered by the lack of virtue of the Shang king, he resigns from his high position at court and decides to lead the life of a simple fortuneteller. As Zhougong has studied during his stay with Laozi the *Tiangang zhengjue* 天罡正訣, an heavenly book on divination and magic, he soon becomes a very famous diviner: his predictions never fail, but Heaven, worrying that he may thus disclose too many secrets of fate, sends against him a female immortal named the Peach Blossom Girl. The Peach Blossom Girl is none other than the avatar of Zhenwu's sword sheath. She is born as the daughter of a benevolent old couple, and, now a teenager, has never left the inner quarters of their home. The action takes a dramatic turn when, twice, the Peach Blossom girl helps people whose imminent death Zhougong had predicted to escape with their lives. Not that the predictions were inaccurate: the two men should indeed have died, but the Peach Blossom girl has taught them some white magic that has permitted them to dodge their fate. Troubled and angered at being challenged by a simple girl, Zhougong decides to get rid of this unexpected opponent in an original way: he asks her to marry his son, but the marriage plan is actually a deadly scheme: Zhougong has used all of his fortunetelling skills to choose the most dangerous time and place for a marriage. Having to travel through places under the deadly influence of the most baleful stars (*xiongshen* 凶神 "evil gods", or *shaxing* 煞星 "murderous stars"), Taohua nü is doomed to perish. However, the girl cleverly employs so much magic and so many rituals that, on the day of the wedding, she arrives safely at Zhougong's gate. She eventually succeeds in pushing in her place the daughter of Zhougong under the claws and teeth of the potent White Tiger star who is waiting in ambush in the wedding chamber. To add to his humiliation,

Zhougong cannot but beg for the Peach Blossom Girl's mercy to bring his daughter back to life. Although he eventually succeeds in killing the Peach Blossom Girl with black magic using a branch of the peach tree where her "basic fate" (*benming* 本命) dwells, the poor diviner cannot prevent her organising her own resurrection. Unable to defeat each other, the two enemies then engage in such a terrible fight that it shakes the heaven and earth, attracting the attention of Zhenwu. The god, stopping the fight, recalls to him the two enemies who were originally his sword and sheath, and restores them to their place in his retinue of heavenly marshals.

### **Duel of diviners, duel of magicians**

Both Zhougong and the Peach Blossom Girl display in this story brilliant divinatory skills, but their mantic arts differ in both form and purpose. Zhougong, a former high official, has decided to become a diviner in order to provide guidance to the common folk. As he says at the beginning of his career:

“Although unable to lead my sovereign back to the right ways, and in no position to sacrifice my person for the sake of the country, can I spend my life as a mere commoner? Shouldn't I seize this occasion to resign, and live in seclusion in the capital by seeking a quiet place to live? Couldn't I open a soothsayer shop to lead the people of my time? Be a leader in discussing the matters of Former Heaven, a chieftain in the analysis of the eight trigrams? Even if I cannot devote myself to my country and people, I'll be thus able to be remembered for many centuries: wouldn't that be

fine?”

我既不能匡君于正，又不能舍身為國，豈可同俗人一輩？  
我何不趁此告職，隱居在這朝歌，尋一個僻靜之處。

開一卜市引導世人？作一個講先天的班頭，  
剖八卦之領袖，雖不能為國威民，亦可流名萬載，豈不是好？

Unsurprisingly, when he begins his trade, Zhougong acts as a member of the elite. Although he will make a living out of it, his purpose in engaging in the mantic trade is also a moralistic and paternalistic one, and his tools will be those of a literatus: he sits sternly at a table covered with paper, ink, and brushes, and practices *Yijing* divination by selecting hexagrams from a trunk. Conversely, Peach Blossom Girl uses her body as a medium, counting fate on her fingers. As Richard Smith explains, in Late Imperial China, “popular mantic techniques included a rudimentary system of counting on finger joints”, through which “even illiterates could determine the proper timing of a given enterprise”, and which was “much in vogue among the common people”,<sup>29</sup> but there may be more to the exclusive use of finger counting by the Peach Blossom Girl than the logical use of a popular technique by a common girl: stretching the fingers forms figures which can be not only a divinatory gesture but also have a direct magic efficiency. The hagiographic novel about the Fujian female deity, Chen Jinggu 陳靖姑, thus shows how the goddess “by counting on her finger, [...] transformed the room into a map of the *bagua*, the divination trigrams”. As Brigitte Baptandier, who has studied the cult of this deity, observes, the hand constitutes in itself a diagram where the earthly branch and heavenly

---

<sup>29</sup> Richard Smith, *Fortune Tellers and Philosophers*, p. 87 ; cf *idem*, p. 185, 198.

stems appear. It is used in astrology and in magic to calculate horoscopes and astral time.<sup>30</sup> The divinatory gesture of the hands actually resembles closely the *mudrā* that priests and exorcists draw on their fingers, with immediate efficiency.<sup>31</sup> The use of this technique by the Peach Blossom Girl demonstrates both her divinatory skill and her ability to go further: not only to read fate, but also to change it.

---

**30** Brigitte Baptandier, *The Lady of Linshui, a Chinese Female Cult*, Stanford University Press, 2008, p. 76 and 281 note 16. French version, *La dame du bord de l'eau*. P. 106, p 119 n. 22.

**31** See Baptandier, "Les *mudrā* du Lüshan pai, le battement de la vie", forthcoming.



Figure 0.2: Portrait of Taohuanü, in the 1848 Edition



Figure 0.3: Portrait of Zhougong, *idem*



### The challenged order of fate

Zhougong is not without his own ritual powers as well. In several places in the novel, he bares his feet, undoes his hair, and, holding a sword, dances according to the pattern of the Northern Dipper constellation. This dance, in which one may easily recognize the well-known *bugang* 步罡 ritual, is widely performed by taoist priests and *fashi* 法師 exorcists,<sup>32</sup> but, while doing so, the Zhougong of our novel never tries to act against fate. Let us take as an example the first time he performs *bugang* in the story: a couple of days before, he has predicted the imminent death of his assistant, Peng Jian 彭翦, with sadness, but without giving to the poor man the slightest hope of escaping his fate either. It is only when he thinks that Peng Jian has died that he will perform the *bugang* exorcism near his unconscious body, only to prevent the souls of his deceased aide from dispersing, thus permitting him to transmigrate into a good rebirth. When Peng Jian, not dead at all but only pretending to be asleep, suddenly rises up, Zhougong at first thinks that he has seen a ghost.<sup>33</sup> His shock is hardly surprising: Zhougong believes in the order of fate, and uses, modestly, the exorcistic techniques that he commands only to bend destiny in the best direction. The Peach Blossom Girl does the opposite: she can read the decrees of fate as well as Zhougong, but does not shy away from utterly correcting, or even reversing, the order of destiny. She is said to be able to “break” (*po* 破) or “reverse” (*fan* 反) the trigrams (*gua* 卦) of Zhougong’s divination, and,

<sup>32</sup> On the *fashi*, see Edward L. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China*, University of Hawaii Press, 2001.

<sup>33</sup> *Taohua nü yin yang dou zhuan*, chapter 9, p. 263.

in order to do so, resorts to rather transgressive methods. In the episode just quoted, it is she, of course, who helped Peng Jian to escape his fate. How did she do it? She has instructed Zhougong's assistant to hide at night in the temple of the Three officers (*Sanguan miao* 三官廟), as, this very night, the seven stars of the Northern Dipper (*Beidou xingjun* 北斗星軍) are to come and call out the names of those doomed to die shortly. As instructed by the Peach Blossom Girl, Peng Jian, having prepared offerings for the gods, has come outside, waving a golden chain and chanting an incantation: the incantation and chain bind the star gods and even give them a bad headache, thus obliging them to fulfill Peng Jian's demands: he is given by each of the star gods an extension of life, ending with a new promised lifespan of no less than 850 years: he will no longer be called Peng Jian, but will be known as Pengzu 彭祖, the well-known Chinese Methuselah of ancient mythology.<sup>34</sup> Peng Jian's rescue is not the only one performed by the Peach Blossom Girl in the story: she will save from death or even restore to life no less than five people, including Zhougong and herself. She does so by using various techniques, most of which involve acts containing a touch of transgression or inversion: placing old, dirty garments on the threshold of a house (a place that should be kept clean and pure), constraining or blackmailing the gods, and using "counterflowing water" (*niliu shui* 逆流水, or water taken from a river pressed upstream by the mounting seaflood).

---

<sup>34</sup> *Taohua nü yin yang dou zhuan*, chapter 9, p. 262-263.

### **The Peach Blossom Girl – a demonic champion of life?**

When confronted with the unexpected challenge posed to him by the Peach Blossom Girl's actions, Zhougong uses two different methods. One, as we have seen, is to act as a diviner in a distorted way, selecting for the wedding ceremony the most lethal, day, hour and directions rather than the most propitious ones in order to ensure that the bride is killed instead of married. When that proves insufficient,<sup>35</sup> he will turn to another skill that he possesses: exorcism.

To explain why and how he does that, we must turn to a component of Zhougong's character that we have only mentioned in passing. The Zhougong of the story, while drawing very clearly on the mythology of the Duke of Zhou as a patron of the mantic arts, is also modelled on another very eminent figure: the god Zhenwu. Not only is Zhougong an incarnation of the very weapon of the god, but he also resembles him in many respects: from his first appearance in the human world, he is depicted as having a black face and a dark complexion, just like Zhenwu, the god of the northern parts of the sky – a direction associated with the colour black. Then, as the story progresses, Zhougong will act less and less as a literary diviner and be increasingly portrayed as a *fashi* exorcist, barefoot and bareheaded, wielding a sword: this is exactly the way in which Zhenwu, as one of the greatest exorcistic gods, is displayed in the iconography.

---

<sup>35</sup> To counter the danger of the unfortunate wedding, Peach Blossom "invents" a set of rituals which are actually part of the traditional wedding ceremony. The story serves to explain the origin of those rituals. I will not dwell on this question, because it is not directly connected to divination, and because it has been analysed by several Chinese articles on the Zhougong-Taohuanü story.

When Zhougong, failing to trap the Peach Blossom Girl by arranging the deadly marriage, requires the aid of a powerful divinity, he chooses to call upon the Black Killer, Heisha 黑煞, another god whose ritual role as well as features in the iconography are extremely close to those of Zhenwu.<sup>36</sup>

In Chinese religion, a *fashi* exorcist may call upon a powerful martial god for a single purpose only: to get rid of a demonic being. Does this imply that the Peach Blossom Girl could be such a being?

Sure enough, the Peach Blossom Girl is the heroine of this tale, while poor Zhougong appears in turn as a villain or a fool, but hints of the unorthodox, unruly nature of Taohua nü appear clearly too, and are obviously linked to her femininity. When Zhougong first tries to identify his opponent using his divinatory skills, he is warned that *yin* 陰 forces are dominating and that he will have to defeat a *yinren* 陰人, a term which refers to a female being, but also a dangerous, malevolent creature.<sup>37</sup> An even more significant episode, later in the story, shows Taohua nü summoning her own heavenly champion to resist Zhougong's attack: she has a being called Hongsha 紅煞, the 'Red Killer' descend from the sky. This Red Killer, as the chromatic antithesis of the Black Killer, will actually neutralize the powerful exorcistic god: when confronting each other, the Black and the Red Killer decide to retreat to their heavenly abodes without fighting.<sup>38</sup> Heisha is a well-known god, object of a cult since at least the Song dynasty,<sup>39</sup> but the same cannot be said of Hongsha.

<sup>36</sup> *Taohua nü yin yang dou zhuan*, chapter 11, p.275.

<sup>37</sup> *Taohua nü yin yang dou zhuan*, chapter 6, p. 249.

<sup>38</sup> *Taohua nü yin yang dou zhuan*, chapter 12, p.278-281.

<sup>39</sup> On the cult of the Black Killer, see Edward L. Davis, *Society and the*

No figure of this name appears among the gods of the Chinese pantheon. Highly demonic beings called *hongsha* do, however, appear in various circumstances. One of those is at weddings, where *hongsha* represent the demonic forces threatening to destroy the smooth proceeding of the ceremony. This demonic force seems directly connected to a powerful and dangerous substance: the virginal blood that is soon to be shed. Quite a few of the rites performed at weddings are obviously designed to neutralize the evil forces of the “Red Killer” in order to ensure an happy outcome for the marriage.

It has long been noted that specifically female blood, shed during menstruation, birth or defloration, gives women in China both “power and pollution”.<sup>40</sup> What is remarkable about the Zhongong-Taohua nü story is the way in which this force is transformed, or almost sublimated, by the tale. Threatening *hongsha* evil influences become the benevolent god Hongsha, lending a helpful hand to the very positive

---

*Supernatural in Song China*, University of Hawaii Press, 2001, p. 67-86.

40 To quote the title of the classical article by Emily Martin Ahern, “The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women”, in Margery Wolf, Roxane Witke, *Women in Chinese Society*, Stanford University Press, 1975. On the power of female blood, see also Catherine Despeux, *Immortelles de la Chine ancienne*, Pardès, 1990, p. 215-219, and Paul A. Cohen, “Magic and Female Pollution” in *idem*, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. On virginal blood pollution, see Christian De Pee, *Text as Practice: The Writing of Weddings in Middle-Period China (Eighth through Fourteenth Centuries)*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 168-174, and Liu Ruiming 劉瑞明 « Hunli zhong de ‘bisha’ minsu tanxi : jianlun chunühong jinji shiyuan 婚禮中的避煞民俗探析—兼論處女紅禁忌始源 », *Sichuan daxue xuebao – Zhexue shehuikexue ban* 四川大學學報- 哲學社會科學版, 141 (2005-6 ), p. 95-102.

character of the Peach Blossom Girl, but, on the other hand, they also serve as a reminder of her less than innocuous nature: to fight successfully against the *yang* order of fate, doesn't one need a benevolent demon, a powerful character, gathering all of the frightful forces of the *yin*? Only then can such a towering figure as the Zhougong of the novel, modelled half on the highest Confucian Saint and half on one of the most powerful Taoist gods, be defeated. Only a transgressive force can carry a rebellious spirit against the decree of fate. Perhaps it is advisable to recall here the *Xiyou ji* episode from earlier, where Sun Wukong imagines for a while that he is a diviner: having invoked the very orthodox King Wen and Confucius, the “diviner” Monkey-king, calls the Peach Blossom Girl together with the Master of the Valleys of Demons. Isn't it possible to detect here a discrete reminder of the unorthodox, almost demonic nature of the Peach Blossom Girl? It would be logical to regard Sun Wukong, himself a problematic figure, a former demonic character who is enrolled as a heavenly protector, and the Peach Blossom Girl as kindred spirits...

### **A tale for extending longevity**

Exactly like the masterwork, “Journey to the West”, the plays, ballads and novel that relate the story of Zhougong and Taohua nü are comedies: the way in which they depict a teenage girl poking fun at the prestigious name of the Duke of Zhou is indeed funny, and the brilliant story of the deadly fight taking the shape of a wedding is full of carnivalesque fantasy, but, again like the “Journey to the West”, the comedy is indeed not without religious seriousness. There are many indications that the story had a ritual function in late imperial

Chinese society: the theme is, for example, widely present on “precious scrolls”,<sup>41</sup> a kind of ballad, which was a well-known medium for the transmission of religious tales and myths; and, in the world of local theatre, the story of Zhougong and the Peach Blossom Girl sometimes formed part of the ritual theatre: in the Anhui province dramatic genre *Huiju* 徽劇, for example, the Taohua nü story, closely following the plot of the novel we have analyzed, involved a large cast of “humans, gods, devils and buddhas”. It was staged at night, beginning at sunset to be played until dawn.<sup>42</sup> this kind of representation is typical of the “Yin plays” (*yinxi* 陰戲), a kind of ritual theatre involving the exorcism of ghosts and the resolution of tensions relating to matters of life and death.

Interestingly, one of the two different *baojuan* ballads about the story is entitled “The Precious Scroll of the Extension of Longevity” (*Yanshou baojuan* 延壽寶卷). It is what I believe the story is all about. In his fight against the Peach Blossom Girl, Zhougong incarnates the order of fate, which can be read but cannot be changed. Like other clever diviners in vernacular literature, he basically has good intentions, but is in danger of being pursued by Heaven because he may leak secrets that ordinary humans should ignore. The Peach Blossom Girl is precisely sent initially by Heaven to belie Zhougong’s too perfect predictions but, paradoxically, in doing so, she will have to disobey the very decrees of fate,

---

41 There seem to be two different Baojuan about the Zhougong-Taohua nü story, number 1124 and 1125 of the *Zhongguo baojuan zongmu* 中國寶卷總目 by Che Xilun 車錫倫, one with 17 and the other with three extant manuscript copies.

42 *Zhongguo xiqu zhi Anhui juan* 中國戲曲志安徽卷, Zhongguo ISBN zhongxin, 1993, p. 194.

and act in a transgressive manner in order to save humans facing an impending death. This is in no sense an invention of the anonymous authors of the Taohua nü legend. Very early in Chinese religious history, the quest for longevity or immortality has included a certain degree of transgression, as immortality can be achieved through moral acts and patient practice, but also by rebellious or deceiving acts.<sup>43</sup> Taohua nü, as a *yin* being, a popular diviner but also a magician and sorceress, incarnates this very desire to extend the limits of one's allocated life span (*ming* 命).

In the *Taohua nü yin yang dou zhuan*, the fight between the Peach Blossom Girl and Zhougong fails to reach a conclusion: interrupted, they are summoned by Zhenwu and enrolled among his heavenly marshalls. This seems to be a rather late development in the Zhougong-Taohua nü cycle, corresponding to the inclusion of the pair in the god's temple near to the end of the Ming Dynasty.<sup>44</sup> By showing Zhougong and his young enemy taking their places on each side of Zhenwu, as they are depicted in the temples of the

---

43 On those questions, see the excellent article by Ursula-Angelika Cedzich. "Corpse Deliverance, Substitute Bodies, Name Change, and Feigned Death: Aspects of Metamorphosis and Immortality in Early Medieval China"; *Journal of Chinese Religion* (2001), p. 1-68. See also Robert Ford Campany, "Living off the Books: Fifty Ways to Dodge *Ming* 命 in Early Medieval China", in Christopher Lupke, ed., *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture*, University of Hawaii Press, 2005, p. 129-150.

44 Willem A. Grootaers, "The Hagiography of the Chinese god Chen-wu", *Folklore Studies*, 192, p. 144. In the *zaju* play, for example, the fight of the diviners and the marital confrontation were not yet so clearly linked with the mythology of Zhenwu.



exorcistic god, the story stresses the complementary nature of these two enemies and, in a way, their interrupted fight retains all of his potential power and energy.

Let us, as a concluding note, return to the patron gods of divination whom we depicted earlier. In the Xuejiawan 薛家灣 village of Gansu province exists a community whose members practice the mantic and exorcistic arts as a traditional trade. They worship as their main tutelary god Zhenwu, with the title of “infinite patriarch” (Wuliang zushi 無量祖師). Wuliang zushi is assisted by two gods, “the patriarch of divination” Suanming zushi 算命祖師, who is Zhougong, and the other is known as “the patriarch of release from evil influences”, Yasheng zushi 壓勝祖師, who is the Peach Blossom Girl.<sup>45</sup> According to the type of practice that they intend to perform, diagnostic divination or therapeutic exorcism, the religious specialists of Xuejiawan will call on the help of either the Duke of Zhou or the Peach Blossom Girl.

As Robert Campany has written about medieval China, “The whole point of *ming* was its ineluctability. The whole point of many esoteric and Daoist tenets and practices was to alter or circumvent *ming* nevertheless”.<sup>46</sup> The late imperial popular myth of the fighting “wedding” of Zhougong and the Peach Blossom Girl provides us with a delightful, picaresque illustration of this two sided vision of fate: the two characters

---

45 “Xuejiawan ren de zhiye jiqi xinyang xisu 薛家灣人的職業及其信仰習俗”, quoted by Li Qiao 李橋, *Hangye shen chongbai: Zhongguo minzhong zaoshen yundong yanjiu* 行業神崇拜中國民眾造神運動 研究, Beijing, Zhongguo Wenlian, 1999, p. 572-573.

46 Robert Ford Campany, “Living off the Books”, p. 141.

## *The Wedding of Zhougong and Peach Blossom Girl*

impersonate respectively *yang* and *yin*, sword and sheath, order and disorder, resignation and hope, fated death and rebellious quest for longevity. It confirms the existence of an ordered fate, as well as the ever tempting possibility to subvert it.



Figure 0.4: Following Peach Blossom advice, Peng Jian 彭翦 prays for longevity to the Seven Stars of the Northern Dipper (Woodblock illustration for the Yuan 元 Zaju 雜劇 dramatic version of the Peach Blossom story, *Yuan qu xuan* 元曲選, edition of Zang Maoxun 臧懋循, 1615).