

*Ghostly Dicing*Gambling Games and Deception
in Ming-Qing Short Stories

JIAYI CHEN

Dice games have long been a popular form of gambling in China and beyond.¹ Gamblers toss one or more dice in each wager, aiming at a particular numerical sum or combination. Each throw leads unpredictably to good or bad fortune, which in turn triggers new rounds, one after another. Too ordinary to be noticed, yet too powerful to be neglected, these tiny cubes embody multiple dialectical significances of predestination and human agency, chance and control, and even life and death.²

While dice gambling is universal, its discourses are historically and culturally specific. In early modern China, the seventeenth-century novelist and playwright Li Yu (1611–80) described dice as innocent objects, transformed into devils (*yaonie*) in the hand of an addicted gambler:

Dice are innocent. Why should they be accused of wrongdoing? It is unknown why, despite their innocence, dice are viewed as evildoers. If you do not disturb them, they are merely some dry bones with thirty-six possibilities of pip combinations.³ Once they entangle you, these dry bones will become some wronged ghosts, their six faces becoming six iron chains, and the thirty-six combinations becoming thirty-six Celestial Rectifiers.⁴ They will tie you up, killing you or saving you as they wish.

Once animated, it is the ghostlike dice that entangle gamblers. The essence of dice lies in their malevolent effects on gamblers who initially disturb them and are now entirely passive to their impact.

Through personifying dice, Li Yu intends to warn his readers against the harm of gambling addiction. Indeed, according to his contemporary You Tong (1618–1704), gambling wastes people’s time, exhausts their minds, and depletes their property. Finishing his essay after the fall of the Ming dynasty, You Tong even ascribed the political turmoil to gambling and advised the Qing emperor to suppress it.⁵ Still, people in the late Ming and early Qing were fond of gambling—a fast, if high-risk, way to accumulate money.⁶

That said, Li Yu’s remark is not simply a moral admonition. It serves as a prologue to a longer story. In the form of the narrator directly addressing the audience with the pronoun “you,” Li Yu’s statement gradually guides the reader into a fictional realm where gambling occurs hand in hand with deception. In this chapter, I examine this story by Li Yu in tandem with two other stories by Ling Mengchu (1580–1644) and Pu Songling (1640–1715). All three are short stories that explore the intertwinement of dice gambling with assorted deceptions. They share a similar narrative structure, with the main story inserted between a prologue and a concluding remark.⁷

Specifically, I probe into how the moral messages about gambling are communicated to the reader through these narratives. Historically, readerly agency grew during Li Yu’s time. Readers were encouraged to engage more actively with the text—a phenomenon largely relevant to the development of commentaries and annotations (*pingdian*) and the prosperous print market.⁸ Within this context, some commentators offered “methods of reading” (*dufa*) before their annotated drama or fiction proper. For instance, Zhang Zhupo (1670–98), critic of the *Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin ping mei*), informed his readers of the potential danger of being deceived by the text. A solution is to read it as though it were a literary work of the reader’s rather than an invention of the author. Zhang writes:

Though you should certainly read it as if it were a work of your own, it is even better to read it as a work that is still in its early planning stages. Only when I start to work out every detail for myself in order to avoid being deceived will I avoid being deceived.⁹

For Zhang, the reading process is less passive reception than participatory recreation of the author's words. Reading becomes a way to claim ownership over a literary work; by taking control of it, the reader grasps and possesses the truth.

From a perspective of gaming, to echo Hongmei Sun's chapter on the novel *Journey to the West* (Xiyou ji), if the narrative is comparable to a game of reading, with the reader as the player, Zhang Zhupo's emphasis on readerly agency suggests that the reader should think like a game designer (namely, the author). Reading is like "a contest between reader/player and author/game designer" in which the former puzzles over the truth of the text manipulated by the latter through various narrative devices.¹⁰ In the gambling stories discussed in this chapter, the authors invite the reader to seek moral truth by inventing supernatural characters, employing multiple points of views, and interconnecting narrative registers. The reader does not join in a gambling game with the fictional characters. Rather, undermining a direct admonition against gambling, these stories become a playground in which they—an onlooker of all the happenings yet a "player" of the narrative—try to master the author's message while avoiding his deceit. The allure of reading the stories is like playing a metagame of gambling: uncertainty about a precise message entices the reader to continue flipping pages, hoping at some moment to discover the truth left by the author.

Inventing a Ghost Gambler

Li Yu's story is titled "A Living Person Pays the Gambling Debt for a Ghost" (Gui shuqian huoren huan duzhai). It was first published in his short story collection *Silent Operas* (Wusheng xi).¹¹ In this story, Li Yu broaches a consequence of gambling: winning is losing.¹² Though paradoxical, this claim implies a condemnation of gambling, as it suggests that regardless of the outcome, there are no true winners. However, as the entire story unfolds layer by layer, it is the invention of a ghost gambler that both reifies and undermines this statement, adding complexity to its validity.

The first half of the story concentrates on Wang Zhusheng, who loses in a gambling game hosted by Wang Xiaoshan. Since Zhusheng starts the game without anything to stake, he has to borrow money from Xiaoshan, eventually repaying these debts with the property rights of his father,

Wang Jixuan. The tragic ending of the first half is understandable: both of Zhusheng's parents die from regret because of their tremendous economic losses, and Zhusheng is forced to marry into his wife's family. Xiaoshan's profit from this gambling game is reversed in the second half of the story, where another game takes place between him and Wang Jixuan's ghost. Losing in a similar manner to his son, the ghost gives Xiaoshan all his silver, which then transforms into the worthless paper money that Zhusheng burnt for his father. Indeed, for Xiaoshan, winning becomes losing.

In this story, not only do dice metaphorically become ghostly beings that haunt gamblers, but a real ghost plays an essential role in overturning Wang Xiaoshan's good fortune. Like a man with no traces, the strange visitor (the ghost of Wang Jixuan) is never recorded in Xiaoshan's "leather account book," which lists the wealthy people in and out of Suzhou. The visitor, disguising himself as an experienced gambler, introduces himself to Xiaoshan with much ambiguity: "My surname is Tian, but I have never had a first name. Although I am now living in Fengdu County of Chongqing Prefecture, Sichuan Province, my ancestral home is Suzhou."¹³ He is somebody with his family name, while he is nobody (or rather everybody) without a first name.¹⁴ He is living somewhere with a precise location, but he is from nowhere to be found in the human world.¹⁵ Wang Jixuan's ghost is one of the rare supernatural characters in Li Yu's works. Preferring the ordinary to the extraordinary, Li Yu opines that the best material is from life as witnessed and experienced by people. He derides writing about ghosts as a technique of unskillful writers to hide their clumsiness.¹⁶ Given such rejection, why did he still choose to depict a ghost?

Wang Jixuan's ghost acts on money, the gleam of which overshadows the mysterious identity of the strange visitor. Its allure encourages Xiaoshan to resume hosting a gambling game, and its metamorphosis eventually exhausts all his property. Li Yu gives a remarkably detailed depiction of the silver brought by the ghost at the expense of suspending the narrative:

Their silver gleam flickered with jewel-like colors, varied and numerous. The ingots were as large as boats drifting across, with no passenger at the ferry landing. They were as curved as a crescent moon, whose light overflows onto the water reflecting the sky. On their faces, there was no vein that did not reach the end, as delicate as a spider's web. On their heels,

there were holes connecting the belly, as dense as a beehive. If someone used them to cover the land of the Jetavana Temple, [the person] would successfully purchase this auspicious place. If they were piled up, they would be sufficient to block passers-by.¹⁷

The silver is rendered from color and shape to texture and quantity, then transforms into different concrete things: a boat, a crescent moon, and a human being with a face, heel, and belly. Ambiguity arises from this montage-like set of images, casting doubt on what the silver's true form is until another lyric pauses the narrative again:

A layer of cardboard serves as the bone, covered with tinfoil to imitate silver. The veinlike texture on the surface is the marks of stiff paper.

They appear to weigh five *liang* but are actually less than three *fēn*. When [people] burn them in the stove to test their authenticity, they transform into butterflies, fly away, and disappear.¹⁸

In the end, the silver that used to be everything turns out to be nothing, echoing the identity of the ghost visitor, a somebody who is actually nobody.

Through the supernatural, Li Yu explores the dialectic between concreteness and nothingness, or more precisely, the illusory nature of wealth obtained through gambling. Indeed, gamblers can start a game with nothing in hand (as in the case of Wang Zhusheng) and win real property, but they may also lose everything they possess. So may the host of the game, who seems to take more control over the players but can still suffer the loss of property. As in the case of Wang Xiaoshan, winning against a ghost in a gambling game becomes futile.

Additionally, the ghost may represent karmic force. Ming-Qing short story authors often structure stories in symmetrical halves, with the second half designed to resolve the problems of the first and bring the narrative to closure.¹⁹ If familiar with the symmetrical narrative structure, the reader of this story may be able to anticipate a reversal after Wang Zhusheng's tremendous loss in the first half. But they will still be surprised that it is a supernatural being—a figure of “absurdity” (*huangtang*) for Li Yu—who fulfills this role. One explanation is that Xiaoshan's loss turns out to be his retribution (*baoying*) “based on a law of heavenly justice.”²⁰ The ghost

of Wang Jixuan, in other words, becomes the visible manifestation of the invisible force that human beings can never manipulate, like the ghostly dice, forcing people into passivity.

Winning in gambling is an illusion, and the literary representation of the gambling games, too, is illusory. Taking advantage of the supernatural, Li Yu underscores the fictionality of the entire story. “Such fiction should be sold like an immortal’s prescription,” he advocates in the concluding remark.²¹ Instead of commenting on the narrative itself, he self-consciously urges more people to buy and read the story. Comparing the story to “an immortal’s prescription,” he provides a particular method of reading. The reader is encouraged to follow the moral message underneath the narrative, regardless of its absurdity.²² This reading method derives from the prologue. The “immortal’s prescription” echoes the story in the prologue following Li Yu’s account of the ghostly dice. In that story, a gambler buys an immortal’s prescription from a Daoist priest that promises no loss in gambling. Following the prescriptive words, he endures his addiction to gambling and becomes the host of gambling games. Consequently, he wins back the money that he loses. The prologue story further alludes to a Song dynasty anecdote in Su Shi’s (1037–1101) *Forest of Anecdotes of Dongpo* (Dongpo zhilin) about a Daoist priest selling “prohibited prescriptions” at the Xiangguo Temple. A young gambler spends one thousand *jin* on a “prescription of no loss in gambling,” but on opening it, discovers that the prescription works only “when one becomes a host of gambling games.”²³ The anecdotal account calls attention to different textual layers of a prescription through the act of “opening”: one must uncover the playful, amusing words and find the hidden serious message. For Li Yu, reading the story is not dissimilar to opening such a prescription. In fact, serving as an “anticipatory comment,” his prologue has already made this method evident.²⁴ He concludes the prologue story by saying, “We realized that it was not the immortal’s prescription but the principles that the Daoist priest sold. Even though everyone knows these principles, nobody practices them.”²⁵

Yet the search for the principles of the main story is not easy, because Li Yu does not fashion the narrator in an omniscient position. From the opening remark on the ghostly dice to the prologue story and then to the main story, the narrator is unable to effectively advocate against the evils of gambling but continuously seeks suitable accounts to substantiate his

changing claims. While the prologue claims that the host of gambling games can benefit, he then demonstrates in the main story that even the host does not always win: the revenge of Wang Jixuan's ghost results in Wang Xiaoshan's loss. The narrator's viewpoint is traversable. Right before the prologue story, someone points out, "Storyteller, you are wrong."²⁶ Without a clear addresser, this comment can be interpreted as being made by the implied audience or the narrator himself. In either case, the narrator continues to explore, layer by layer, how to present a persuasive argument about winning money in gambling. Then, to what extent can the reader be persuaded by the narrator that winning is losing? It is up to the reader to gamble on whether the narrator is trustworthy as they are enticed into the narrative until they finish reading.

Gambling as Deception

The unanswered question of Li Yu's story is how Xiaoshan could constantly win in all the gambling games. This is because Xiaoshan colludes with other local gentry members and tricks the gamblers.²⁷ The trickery is concealed until the second half of the story, as the first half concentrates the reader's attention on Zhusheng's experience. Notably, when reprinted in Li Yu's second short story collection, *Priceless Jade* (Liancheng bi), the story's original title was revised to "Innocently Tricked into the Trap; Accountably Losing All Fortune by the Ghost's Deception" (Shourenqi wuxin luojū, lianguipian yougu qinjia). Echoing the symmetrical narrative structure, this new title elucidates the deceptions embedded in the story: Xiaoshan's trickery and Jixuan's revenge.

Human and ghost swindlers are common characters in late Ming and early Qing short stories on gambling, including the two written by Ling Mengchu and Pu Songling, which I turn to now. The stories each have well-designed swindles at the center. Framing the deceptions with varied narrative devices, the authors invite the reader to inquire into the causality of the protagonists' encounters, especially whether a premeditated deception diminishes the aspect of chance in gambling.

In late Ming and early Qing discourses on gambling, chance—normally manifested as the unpredictability of each wager's outcome—has a paradoxical relationship to fate (*ming*). On the one hand, chance and fate are

perceived as the two sides of a coin. Winning or losing money, in Ling Mengchu's exposition, for instance, is merely "brought about by fate."²⁸ Another intriguing example is the literary trope of using dice to connote one's destiny. The late Ming scholar-official Wang Shizhen (1526–90) recorded an ode on die composed by a courtesan. The poem, literally describing a die's material, appearance, and exploitation, reads: "The stretch of humble bones are turned into [something] with dots on all sides. Since it was tarnished, it has been tossed till present days."²⁹ As each line contains a pun simultaneously referring to a die and to the courtesan herself, the quatrain can be further read as a rendering of her humble family backgrounds, sophisticated social skills with her clients, and her wandering, degrading living conditions. Like a die, she can be easily played with out of her clients' desire and her uncontrollable destiny.³⁰

On the other hand, the unpredictability intrinsic to gambling was thought to challenge the nature of fate that was predetermined by invisible heavenly forces. Like divination, gambling could reflect people's desire to master and even overpower these forces. This becomes the central theme of the prologue in Ling Mengchu's "Court Gentleman Shen Buys a Laugh for Three Thousand Taels; Lord Wang Lays a One-Night Trap" (Shen jiangshi sanqian mai xiaoqian, Wang chaoyi yiye mihunzhen), which exemplifies the complex interplay between gambling, divination, and fate. Based on an account in Hong Mai's (1123–1202) *Record of the Listener* (Yijian zhi), the story centers on a Northern Song gambling addict, the scholar Ding Shi. A physiognomist foretells that Ding will achieve the top honor in the civil service examination only to claim the impossibility of his success when Ding revisits him two days later. According to the physiognomist, this is a heavenly punishment, because Ding has won six million *qian* through gambling; only by returning the ill-gotten gains and quitting gambling can he win the sixth place in the examination. Despite depicting a failure in triumphing over heavenly forces, this story is more than a warning against the immorality of profiting via gambling. The irony lies in the fact that even predestination is modifiable and thus unreliable, as Ding's predetermined fate changes based on his behavior.

A detail is worth our attention: the physiognomist writes down that "the top honors of the civil service examination this year goes to Ding Shi" after the first divination but tears the paper up during Ding's second

visit. It highlights the paradox of writing as an authoritative yet unstable medium for conveying divinatory messages. The warning that immoral gains will negatively affect one's fate is never explicitly written. In other words, owing to the limitations of the divinatory message, even though Ding's fate has been foretold, it remains uncertain and subject to change once Ding violates the hidden rules.

Again, like Li Yu's opening remark on the ghostly dice, this prologue story, along with two mini-essays on gambling, cannot be well interpreted when detached from their original literary context. Functioning as prefatory materials to the main story, they can be compared to a written divinatory message, anticipating the fate of the protagonist, Court Gentleman Shen. As the reader would know from the start, Shen, a playboy who "squanders money like dust," will lose all his property in a gambling game with a group of rascals. These prefatory materials lack absolute authority, much like the written words of the physiognomist, as they merely reflect the perspective of the narrator. Nonetheless, it is the perspective of the narrator that largely determines the ways one can read the main story. It creates uncertainty for the reader to determine whether Shen's loss is a result of the rascals' swindle.

The main story is also developed from a *Yijian zhi* anecdote about Shen falling into a deceptive trap. Ling Mengchu retains Hong Mai's original narrative structure and preserves the revelation of the deception until the end. An experienced reader, however, may yet realize the illusory nature of the narrative. Its structure largely echoes that of the "strange encounter" stories, which have a relatively fixed formula composed of "encounter, interaction, parting, and revelation."³¹ Shen is invited by strangers to a luxurious house at night, where they have a banquet. When dawn comes, the strangers, who are actually swindlers, disappear, and the house turns out to be a deserted residence.

A closer look at the narrative showcases how Ling, through deliberately inserting the narrator's point of view, elaborates on the original *Yijian zhi* version to spotlight this illusory quality.³² In the story, Shen is attracted by the sound of dice being tossed. Peeping from behind the screen, he sees a group of beauties gambling. This is an important moment that sets the stage for the subsequent gambling game involving Shen, his two "friends," and those beauties. The original account is neutral and concise: "Suddenly,

Shen heard the sound of someone laughing and tossing the dice in the hall. Hiding from behind the screen and peeping through its crevice, [he observed that] inside, candles were brightly lit, and there was a large table at the center, around which seven or eight beauties were gambling.”³³ Ling Mengchu, however, suspends the narrative by describing the scene through the narrator’s point of view.

[Audience,] What do you think is going on inside? Look: there are candles lit up brightly, and there is a large table positioned at the center. The slender jade-like hands toss the dice; the little rouge lips call out the number. Golden hairpins and jade bracelets all become stakes for a single throw; romantic battles and flesh formation are all on display. If this is not the Moon Palace, how could it possess such immortal atmosphere? If this is not the Golden Valley Garden, where else could these beauties come from? While the foolish should remain silent, how come the prodigal son wouldn’t expose his innermost thoughts?³⁴

Sexually arousing and sensually seductive, this gambling scene is too vivid to be true. The narrator directs the reader’s perspective through two parallel rhetorical questions by comparing the gambling site to the Moon Palace and the Golden Valley Garden. As neither of these places existed during Ling’s time, he reminds his readers that the scene is nothing more than an inaccessible hallucination.

The narrator then shifts back to Shen’s perspective by repeating the same scene through his eyes: “As he peeps under the light, truly [the beauties] are like Chang’e who transcends this world. Their pretty looks and demeanors are seldom witnessed in his eyes.”³⁵ What appears to be a shared view between the narrator and Shen eventually reveals itself as an ironic disparity. While Shen metaphorically applies the figure of Chang’e to describe the beauties he gazes at, the narrator’s portrayal utilizes the Moon Palace, where Chang’e is said to reside, for its literal meaning: a nonexistent fairyland.

This discrepancy shines a spotlight on Shen’s initiative. In comparison to Hong Mai’s account, which leaves Shen’s agency ambiguous, Ling’s elaboration makes it evident that Shen actively immerses himself in this illusory realm and participates in the game. Dice are animated again, but in this story, instead of haunting people like a ghost, they “go with people’s feeling and desire”:

Although the dice have no consciousness, they are incredibly efficacious and go with people's feeling and desire. At first, Court Gentleman Shen is in luck, and the "win" wager follows him. Therefore, every time he tosses the dice, he wins. After he rests for a while, an omen of failure is coming. As Shen somehow feels sorry and willingly chooses to lose [to the beauties], his own spirit is significantly deflated. He feels it charming that the mistress appears angry while invigorated, which further captivates him. Distracted by these thoughts, he is completely defeated in the [final] throw.³⁶

The plot is interrupted again by the narrator's comment on tossing dice. Yet the reader who has flipped through the prefatory materials would be told more than once that dice never follow one's sensibilities. Gamblers unconsciously lose money when "the losing dice displace the winning dice" or a special "medicine die" (*yaotou*) filled with lead is tailored to cause gamblers to lose.³⁷ But here, the narrator takes a self-contradictory stand by suggesting that even unconscious dice can empathize with gamblers' feelings. Rather than ascribing results only to fate or chance, Ling provides the alternative interpretation that in a gambling game, fortune becomes intertwined with the gambler's emotions.

More complicated than the original version, "Shen pinched [the dice], tossed them, and lost," the representation in Ling's story displaces deception as the real impetus of the game.³⁸ In this illusory realm constructed by the swindlers, that the outcome depends on the gambler's fortune is never denied but rather highlighted. It is Shen who perpetuates the ceaseless tossing of the dice. The swindlers, in a subsidiary position, play the simple role of deciding when to terminate the game through their trickery. Upon revisiting the prefatory materials of different genres, the reader will notice multiple anticipatory explanations for Shen's fate. The first mini-essay focuses on the emotions and avarice of gamblers, the prologue story discusses predestined heavenly order, and the second essay considers cheating. As the narrative unfolds in this manner, the reason for Shen's loss in the final toss is presented to the reader as a multiple-choice question, involving factors such as Shen's emotions, his destiny, and the swindlers' manipulation.

In Pu Songling's "The Confidence Men" (*Nianyang*), gambling is merely one of many kinds of deception. While Ling portrays a real gambling game

that dominates the deception, Pu turns deception into a game metaphorically, the failure of which keeps triggering new rounds until the swindlers' final success. Pu employs a similar narrative structure by situating the story proper between his introductory and concluding remarks. Yet in contrast to the story of Shen, there is neither a gambling addict nor a detailed moral teaching. Instead, Pu's story centers on how a group of swindlers defraud Wang Zixun of his money, while Wu Anren, with the assistance of a fox spirit, wins the money back from the same group. In the introductory account, Pu provides a general exposition about *nianyang*, preparing the reader with a proper perspective to approach his account:

The Historian of the Strange (Yishi shi) says: Even though [the confidence men] randomly meet [you], their words are as sugary as the sweet wine. Their approach is gradual, but the draw of their deception is profound. . . . They set traps whenever opportunity arises, and as a result the setting and form of deception can vary. It is often said that these people would infiltrate, using pleasing words to gain your trust. They are called *nianyang*.³⁹

What is worth attention is the word “gradual” (*jian*; meanwhile, *jinrun*, meaning “to infiltrate,” also connotes “gradualness”) in this opening, suggesting the multiple steps, slow progression, and indirectness of the swindle. These characteristics are elucidated in Pu Songling's rendering of the gambling episode in which Wang Zixun is involved.

Pu Songling achieves an illusory effect comparable to Ling's by emphasizing the performative aspect of the swindle. Everything is artificial in the swindlers' performance, and dice also become props. The swindler Xu, who is seemingly unable to understand the swindler Jin's southern dialect for the word *touzi*, does not take out the little cube until Jin mimes its shape. This single episode also attracted the attention of Qing dynasty commentators. Feng Zhenluan (1760–1830), for instance, regarded it as a typical moment reflecting how swindlers approach a victim gradually.⁴⁰

Wang, however, declines the swindlers' invitation to gamble, claiming that he does not know how to play the game. The swindlers do not give up. Similar to actual gamblers, they enact another round of deception, aiming to entice Wang into joining their game. Wang decides to remain as

a spectator, observing their gambling activities and harboring doubts about its authenticity. In contrast to Shen, who cannot help but enter the illusion, Wang is able to distance himself from the swindlers' performance. Failing again, the swindlers persist in their pursuit of new rounds. By changing their strategy, they force Wang to "join" the game: Xu acts on Wang's behalf and tells him the game's outcomes. Unable to withdraw, Wang is forced to lose to a bandit named Tong, another swindler; ultimately, they succeed in obtaining Wang's property through this multistep deception.

Pu Songling never details the process of gambling itself. The game is not real for a single moment; rather, it is the deception that is transformed into a figurative game. The swindlers act as gamblers of their deception, initiating new rounds of trickery aiming for a final win. As individual episodes in the narrative, all these rounds point to the final success of the swindlers winning the money. This very nature of the swindle is revealed through Wang Zixun's personal view after he realizes that he was deceived by *nianyang*: "When one round fails, [they] would enact a new round to make sure that he can be trapped."⁴¹ After the final round, Feng Zhenluan remarks, "It is as if [they] have constructed a ghost's cave, where miraculous transformations have reached their zenith."⁴² According to Feng, this illusionistic world belongs to the "ghost," an allegory of these swindlers. The gambling game, as part of the deception, possesses a ghostly quality. Instead of inviting active participation, it haunts the victim, on and on.

Like Li Yu, Pu Songling uses a symmetrical structure and brings supernatural power into the second half of the narrative. An omnipotent fox helps Wu Anren to defeat the swindlers in each round of their deception and win the money back. Allan Barr showcases the similarity between "The Confidence Men" and the vernacular stories in terms of their symmetry and neatness.⁴³ Nevertheless, Pu's story distinguishes itself from Li Yu's through a distinct narrative technique that derives from historical biographies. As Wai-ye Li points out, the story proper of "The Confidence Men" is modeled on some accounts in Sima Qian's (145–86? BCE) *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji).⁴⁴ Within the latter's narrative framework, two or more historical incidents involving the same figures are connected in a chronological sequence by transitional sentences such as "several years later there took place so-and-so's incidents." By adapting this structure, Pu parallels

the fox story with Wang Zixun's, thus equalizing the two halves.⁴⁵ Adding the second half in this manner leaves the reader uncertain as to whether the fox is as authentic as a historical figure or the swindlers are as illusory as supernatural beings. Indeed, the "Historian of the Strange," in his unusual anticipatory comment, states, "The human realm is comparable to that of ghosts and demons."⁴⁶ This calls the reader's attention to the parallelism between the swindlers and ghosts. Yet again, like a divinatory message, the information revealed in this anticipatory comment is incomplete without any mention of the swindlers' ultimate failure. Even this authorial remark becomes unstable, susceptible to being overturned once the reader takes the second half of the story seriously.

Coda: Ghostly Dicing

About one century after Pu Songling completed *Liaozhai's Records of the Strange* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*), Yuan Mei (1716–97) finished his story collection *What the Master Would Not Discuss* (*Zibuyu*). The collection is full of accounts concerning supernatural beings and strange happenings. In this collection, there is a gambling story that addresses Li Yu's doubt about whether ghosts gamble in the netherworld.⁴⁷ Yuan Mei's answer was yes. In this story, "The Gambling God Called Mi Long" (*Duqianshen hao Milong*), a lifelong gambler surnamed Li does not stop gambling even on his deathbed. Soon dead, he returns to life only to ask his wife to burn some paper money for him so that he can repay his gambling debt in the netherworld.⁴⁸ To make his wife believe in him, Li then tells her about the game in the ghostly realm.

The Gambling God in the netherworld was said to be Mi Long [Delusion Dragon]. He has several thousand disciples, and all driven by him. . . . The way ghosts gamble in the netherworld is not like gambling in the living world. In the netherworld, a few dozen ghosts gather round to gamble with thirteen dice. Every time the dice are thrown into the gambling pan, and the winner is the ghost who gets the five-colored die with the golden side. The ghosts will gamble with all the money they have accumulated. . . . When the ghosts incur losses and become destitute, they come to the living world to spread plagues and cheat people out of food and wine.⁴⁹

Yuan Mei's story provides a counterpart to the three stories discussed in this chapter. In his preface, Yuan regards himself as merely a recorder of the stories "that delight the heart and astonish the ears."⁵⁰ That Yuan largely masks his role as an author and discourages any careful interpretation of his accounts contrasts with the attitudes of Ling Mengchu, Li Yu, and Pu Songling toward their stories.

In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, gambling was so prevalent among various social echelons that even state laws could not prohibit it. In this context, the three authors chose to use stories to form an interactive relationship with the reader, inviting them to join a metagame of reading and to carefully decipher the embedded moral messages. They connect gambling with deception in different ways, exploring the relationships between predestination and unpredictability, truth and illusion, strangeness and ordinariness, and ultimately, between themselves and the reader. In Li Yu's story, the ghost character is a manifestation of heavenly forces that control the game's outcome, yet the absurdity of the narrative diminishes the persuasiveness of the narrator's warning against gambling. In the illusory realm where Ling's game is staged, deception is intertwined with the gambler's emotions and fortune. By introducing multiple points of view, the narrator deliberately leaves open the question of which factor serves as the driving force behind gambling losses. Pu transforms the entire deception into a gambling game, while the introduction of a fox character in the story's second half raises doubts about the authenticity of the entire account of these swindlers.

The narrative complexity of these stories motivates the reader to keep seeking the author's true message about gambling. Interestingly, exploring the interplay between gambling and deception is not confined to early modern Chinese short stories. Eighteenth-century British novelists also utilized the trope of deception to explore the dialectics between chance and control and the episodic nature of gambling. As the literary historian Jessica Richard points out:

The romance of gambling is in the episode, as the gambler seeks this particular moment again and again and resists combining episodes into a longer narrative, a narrative that would perforce suggest walking away from the tables. . . . Cheating reinforces the episodic quality of gambling,

undermining the effectiveness of any attempts to combine discrete gambling episodes into aggregate long averages.⁵¹

In the three stories I discuss, cheating becomes an integral part of the narrative. Diverging from the literary imaginings of gambling in the British novels, it is rather the narrative, filled with uncertainty and skillfully crafted by the author, that captivates the reader and keeps them engaged until they uncover the embedded moral principles.

Yuan Mei's story deprives a gambling story of its complexity. Whether it be Yuan's authorly manipulation or his recording from other sources, he does not care if the reader perceives it as history or literature. At least in the story, the family members of the gambler Li believe his words about gambling in the netherworld and burn paper money for him so that he can go on to gamble. Within Yuan's literary world, ghostly dicing takes on its literal meaning, referring neither to an illusion of victory nor to a haunted deception. Gambling is simply rendered as an addiction that is incessant even in the netherworld. Ghosts dice like human beings, winning or losing by chance. As long as the ghosts have sufficient stakes, the dice they toss can keep rolling, again and again, one round after another.

Notes

1. All the short stories discussed in this chapter refer to dice as *touzi*, a term that came into being in the Tang dynasty. Before then, dice were called *qiongce* or *qiong*. This terminological change was largely in alignment with the modification of the shape and material of dice in the Tang dynasty: from oblong to cubic and from jade and stone to bone and ivory. The attention to bone as the raw material is reflected by an alternative name for dice, *xuege* (drilled ["holed"] bone). For an overview of dice in game cultures in Asia, see Colin MacKenzie and Irving Finkel, eds., *Asian Games: The Art of Contest* (New York: Asia Society, 2004), 39–44.

2. Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 2–3.

3. If Li Yu was referring to the six-sided dice (twenty-one pips in total), the number thirty-six probably indicates the possibilities of pip combinations with two dice, that is, a result of six times six.

4. The "Thirty-Six Celestial Rectifiers" refers to a group of perilous cosmic

powers. See Mark Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 69–70.

5. You Tong 尤侗, *Jiedu wen* 戒賭文, in *Zhaodai congshu bieji* 昭代叢書別集, Shikai Tang 1833, *juan* 10, 1:a–3:b.

6. For the Ming and Qing codes on gambling, see Guo Shuanglin and Xiao Meihua, *Zhongguo dubo shi* (Taipei: Wenjin Chubanshe, 1996).

7. The two vernacular stories by Ling Mengchu and Li Yu have more complex prologues. Meanwhile, in Pu Songling's story, the account of "the Historian of the Strange," which normally appears at a story's end, is, unusually, positioned at the very beginning.

8. For a comprehensive study of the fictional *pingdian* traditions in early modern China, see David Rolston, *Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing between the Lines* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997). For scholarship on print culture in early modern China, especially how it invites an active reading experience, see, for example, Wei Shang, "Jin Ping Mei' and Late Ming Print Culture," in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, ed. Judith Zeitlin and Lydia Liu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 187–238; Yuming He, *Home and the World: Editing the "Glorious Ming" in Woodblock-Printed Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

9. English translation modified from David T. Roy, trans., "How to Read the *Chin Ping Mei*," in *How to Read the Chinese Novel*, ed. David L. Rolston (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 224. The subject "I" (*wo*) in the second half of this entry is translated into "you" by David Roy, probably for consistency with the first half, which is without a subject. For the Chinese text, see Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡, *Gaobe tang piping Mingdai diyi qishu: Jin ping mei* 皋鶴堂批評明代第一奇書：金瓶梅 (Taipei: Guangwen Shuju, 1981).

10. According to Murray, there are two important structures shared by games and stories. The first is a contest between protagonist and antagonist and the second is the puzzle, "which can also be seen as a contest between the reader/player and the author/game-designer." See Janet Murray, "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 2.

11. This story's title is paired with that of the previous story in the collection, "An Impoverished Ghost Appealed to the Injustice of Prostitution for a Living Brothel Client" (Ren suji qionggui su piaoyuan). The two stories could be read in tandem; they warn against the harms of prostitution and gambling, respectively.

12. Li Yu 李漁, *Wusheng xi*, in *Li Yu quanji* 李漁全集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Guji Chubanshe, 1990), 8:148–49.

13. Li Yu, *Wusheng xi*, 166.
14. The surname Tian 田 is part of the character *gui* 鬼 (ghost).
15. Fengdu is another name for the netherworld.
16. “Jie huangtang,” in Li Yu, *Xianqing ouji* 閒情偶寄 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2000), 29.
17. Li Yu, *Wusheng xi*, 167.
18. Li Yu, *Wusheng xi*, 169.
19. Allan Barr, “*Liaozhai zhiyi* and Chinese Vernacular,” in *Reading China: Fiction, History and the Dynamics of Discourse. Essays in Honour of Professor Glen Dudbridge*, ed. Daria Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 17.
20. According to Kao, the idea of *bao* (requital) functions as the central ideological value determining the narrative structure of Ming-Qing short stories, and *baoying* helps to “make sense of the irrational or the non-rational, sometimes absurd, occurrences by giving them an interpretation according to a higher law of causality.” See Karl Kao, “*Bao* and *Baoying*: Narrative Causality and External Motivations in Chinese Fiction,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 11 (1989), 135.
21. Li Yu, *Wusheng xi*, 171.
22. Li Yu expresses his own anxiety about whether readers will grasp the moral message underlying his story by comparing his relationship with the readers to his relationships with friends. For Li, only students definitely listen to their teachers’ words; friends might not do so. See Li Yu, *Wusheng xi*, 150.
23. Su Shi 蘇軾, “Ji daoren xiyu,” in *Dongpo Zhilin* 東坡志林, in *Congshu Jicheng Chubian* 叢書集成初編 (Changsha: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1939), *juan* 2, 27.
24. Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 20.
25. Li Yu, *Wusheng xi*, 150.
26. Li Yu, *Wusheng xi*, 149.
27. Li Yu, *Wusheng xi*, 168.
28. Ling Mengchu 凌濛初, *Erke pai'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇 (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 2017), 94.
29. Wang Shizhen 王世貞, *Yiyuan zhiyan* 藝苑卮言, Ming Wulin qiaoyun shushe keben 明武林樵雲書舍刻本 (1589), in *Xuxiu Siku Quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1695, *juan* 8, 533.
30. It can also be that the clients’ desire was driven by the courtesan, just as the gamblers were always attracted by the die.
31. Sarah Allen, *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip, and Lore in Narratives from Tang Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 165.
32. For a discussion about point of view in Chinese fiction critics, see David

Rolston, “‘Point of View’ in the Writings of Traditional Chinese Fiction Critics,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 15 (1993), 113–42.

33. Tan Zhengbi, ed., *Sanyan liangpai ziliao* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1980), 789.

34. Ling Mengchu, *Erke pai'an jingqi*, 99–100.

35. Ling Mengchu, *Erke pai'an jingqi*, 100.

36. Ling Mengchu, *Erke pai'an jingqi*, 102.

37. Ling Mengchu, *Erke pai'an jingqi*, 94, 96.

38. Tan, *Sanyan*, 789.

39. Pu Songling 蒲松齡, *Liaozhai zhiyi huijiao huizhu huiping ben* 聊齋誌異會校會註會評本 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2011), 564.

40. Feng comments, “It seems that [the swindlers] approach him gradually.” See Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 567.

41. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 569.

42. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 568.

43. Barr, “*Liaozhai zhiyi*,” 17.

44. Wai-ye Li, “Rhetoric of Fantasy and Rhetoric of Irony: Studies in ‘Liao-chai chih-I’ and ‘Hung-lou meng’” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1988), 31.

45. The first half of the story may have been based on Wang’s actual experience. See Barr, “*Liaozhai zhiyi*,” 17.

46. Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 564.

47. Li Yu, *Wusheng xi*, 171.

48. Thanks to Ariel Fox for pointing me to this story.

49. Paolo Santagelo, trans., *Zibuyu*, “*What the Master Would Not Discuss*” (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 280–81.

50. Santagelo, *Zibuyu*, 161–62.

51. Jessica Richard, *The Romance of Gambling in the Eighteenth-Century British Novel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 45–46.