

*ZI CHA* (MISTAKEN CHARACTERS):  
A SHORT SHADOW PLAY FROM BEIJING

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*Zi cha* 字差 (Mistaken Characters) is a rare comedy about a series of misunderstandings arising from a letter written by a young man overly-confident of his writing skills that is read differently by different characters in the play. Imperfect mastery of writing and reading by ordinary folk might seem an odd topic for a shadow play, a type of regional opera regularly celebrated for enacting spectacular supernatural battles and visits to hell. But short plays such as this one are an important part of the repertoire in northeast China.

The vast inventory of Chinese shadow plays includes many that are episodes from long story cycles based on history or myth. The script translated below, however, is not derived from any familiar plot, but is instead a one-of-a-kind, anonymous play with no known antecedent. It also stands out from the many short, burlesque plays known in the Beijing area for its emphasis on language and puns and because it focuses on ordinary people.

The story has quite a bit of fun with people just trying to make a living. The script features a mix of classical and colloquial language spoken by a family of pawnshop owners, a brash simpleton, and a schoolteacher. The way the characters in the play use words and names exhibits a special interest in language and communication. The Chinese language naturally lends itself to punning (and miscommunication), in both written and spoken forms, because of the high number of homophones. Such punning and miscommunication is at the center of the play and is used to great

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<sup>1</sup> I would like thank the editor and assistant editor and the anonymous reviewers for their help with the preparation of the translation and its introduction.

effect. The action begins with the trusting father, Sun Zihui, dictating a letter home to Sun Gui, his not overly-educated son, who miswrites several characters and ends up turning what was intended as a simple letter into the catalyst that will, with a little help, turn the Sun family completely upside down when it is delivered back home.

In the play, customs that dictate reticence between strangers and especially between women and men instead devolve into a series of surprisingly rude exchanges between the supposedly docile old Ms. Qian (Sun Zihui's wife) and the simpleton messenger, Mao Bao. Meanwhile, Sun Gui, despite his ineptitude, always addresses his father and Master Zhou, the schoolmaster, in the most obsequious sounding formal language. While this usage seems slightly out of place, so too does the creative invective that the angry Sun Zihui later unleashes on his subservient daughter-in-law. The inappropriate use of important sounding phrases is Master Zhou's forte. His character is a calculated depiction of a pedantic scholar whose erudition is lost on the unlettered people who surround him. The conflicts and contrasts between different levels of literacy and language use are at the center of the play.

*Zi cha* is one of only eight shadow theater scripts included in the famous and voluminous Prince Che 車王 collection of oral performing literature manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> These manuscripts from the household of Prince Che in Beijing came onto the old book market in batches after the fall of the Qing dynasty. Some researchers made manuscript copies of them, and the original manuscripts and those early copies of them ended up in various library collections in China, Taiwan, and Japan. The largest

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<sup>2</sup> See Qiu Jiang 仇江, "Che wang fu quben zongmu" 車王府曲本總目 (Complete List of the Contents of the Prince Che Collection of Performance Manuscripts), *Zhongshan daxue xuebao* 中山大學學報 (Journal of Sun Yatsen University) 2000.4: 119–28, p. 123, for the eight titles, the originals for which are all held at the Capital Library (Shoudu tushuguan 首都圖書館) in Beijing. None of the eight plays is a serial play. It is not clear why there are so few shadow theater texts in this huge collection or why none of them are serial plays. By contrast, 108 volumes (volumes 166–273) in *Su wenxue congkan* 俗文學叢刊 (Collectanea of Popular Folk Literature), 500 vols. (Taipei: Xin wenfeng, 2001–2005) contain shadow theater scripts (the vast majority of which are serial plays). The other seven shadow theater scripts in the Prince Che collection treat the following topics: 1) an old tutor finds himself a wife, 2) the family of Tang general Guo Ziyi 郭子儀 honors his birthday, 3) an old woman at her food stall brags about her ancestry, 4) a scene from *Baishe zhuan* 白蛇傳 (Story of the White Snake) where the White Snake and Green Snake meet for the first time, 5) a wrongly imprisoned mother is released to her family, 6) a long absent and remarried husband reconciles with his first wife, and 8) a Taoist and a female demon curse and fight each other.

number of the originals of these manuscripts is held in the Capital Library (Shoudu tushu guan 首都圖書館) in Beijing, which photoreprinted them in traditional binding in a limited edition of fifteen copies in 1991.<sup>3</sup>

The *Zi cha* manuscript in the Capital Library is a unique copy. Most of the manuscripts in the Prince Che collection, including *Zi cha*, are undated but were probably written in the nineteenth century. *Zi cha* itself includes scenes set in Manchuria and Shaanxi, but since it was part of a Beijing collection and is a written script, it most likely belongs to the Eastside (*Dongcheng* 東城) style of shadow theater of Beijing, which in turn belongs to the Luanzhou 灤州 tradition of shadow theater.<sup>4</sup> The manuscript contains a lot of phonetic loans (*baizi* 白字) and unorthodox characters and does not show clear signs of literati input. It lacks the kind of annotations, additions, deletions, or corrections generally seen on private performers' copies in other traditions. However, that might mean that it is a fair copy produced especially for the Prince Che collection. Another possibility is that since it was common in some shadow play traditions, including the Luanzhou style, for performers to work from texts

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<sup>3</sup> *Qing Menggu Che wangfu cang quben* 清蒙古車王府藏曲本 (Performance Texts Held in the Qing Mongolian Prince Che's Residence), 1,661 vols. (*ce* 冊) in 315 cases (*han* 函) (Beijing: Shoudu tushu guan and Beijing guji, 1991). This work was reproduced in a more accessible edition: *Qing Che wangfu cang quben* 清車王府藏曲本 (Performance Texts Held in the Qing Prince Che's Residence), 57 volumes (Beijing: Xueyuan chuban she, 2001). *Zi cha* can be found toward the beginning of volume one of case 68 (there is no pagination; the play is 46 pages long) of the 1991 edition and in vol. 15, pp. 109–17 (each of these pages reproduces six pages of the original manuscript) of the 2001 edition.

<sup>4</sup> On the history of Eastside shadows, see Guan Junzhe 關俊哲, *Beijing piying xi* 北京皮影戲 (Beijing Shadow Theater; Beijing: Beijing chuban she, 1959), pp. 14–15; Jiang Yuxiang 江玉祥, *Zhongguo yingxi* 中國影戲 (Chinese Shadow Theater; Chengdu: Sichuan renmin, 1991), pp. 82–83 and 89, and Fan Pen Chen, *Chinese Shadow Theatre: History, Popular Religion and Women Warriors* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), pp. 223, 228–230, and 292n 10. The other main shadow theater tradition in Beijing, the Westside (*Xicheng* 西城) style, which belongs to the Zhuozhou 涿州 tradition of western Hebei, did not rely on written scripts (see Guan Junzhe, *Beijing piying xi*, p. 14.) This tradition declined in popularity as audiences came to prefer the more exciting and varied performances of the Eastside shadows. Eastside shadow figures are smaller (9–10 inches tall) than Westside figures (20 inches tall) and made from a different kind of rawhide (donkey vs. cow) that is usually finished with a lacquer coating. The figures and other shadow theater material collected in Beijing by Westerners almost exclusively reflect Eastside shadows.

as they performed, the large character size and comparatively profligate use of white space of the script might be to facilitate such use of it.<sup>5</sup>

I have not found any mention of this play or its performance beyond references to the playscript itself. This being so, the best clues to how it was performed seem to be in the play's stage directions and dialogue. Unfortunately, the stage directions are even more laconic than is the case with traditional Chinese playscripts in general, and even attributing the dialogue is sometimes difficult.

From old descriptions and preserved performance traditions we can expect that different props and scenic background elements would mark each new scene of *Zi cha*. But the stage directions are silent on this account, with the one exception being a stage direction for an entrance "on horseback." There are also no indications as to what props would be held or manipulated by the shadow figures, even though relatively small items such as brush pens, tea cups, and handkerchiefs can play important roles in the tradition. We hear, for instance, Master Zhou talking about putting on his spectacles, but no mention of this is made in the stage directions. The performers behind the backlit scrim, of course, did not need the type of guidance that we are looking for today from stage directions.

The text uses a symbol that looks something like ⊥ to indicate the end of one character's speech and when it is clear who is speaking or singing next, no stage direction is given. A line drawn completely around a part of the text sometimes seems to indicate a change from speaking to singing, though aria types are not indicated in this script.<sup>6</sup> Repeated words and phrases are indicated by the equivalent of a "ditto" mark.

While I have discovered brilliantly colored rawhide shadow figures and properties suited to this particular play among collections dating to the late Qing and early Republican era,<sup>7</sup> it is only possible at this point to make an

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<sup>5</sup> On the use of texts in Chinese shadow theater performance, see Wei Liqun 魏力群, *Zhongguo piying yishu shi* 中國皮影藝術史 (The History of the Art of Shadow Plays in China; Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2007), pp. 93–96.

<sup>6</sup> On aria types, the technique of pinched-throat singing used to produce a kind of falsetto, and the instruments used in the orchestra in the Eastside tradition, see Guan Junzhe, *Beijing piying xi*, p.18.

<sup>7</sup> Collections containing examples of Beijing Eastside style shadow figures in the U.S. and Europe include the East Asian Library and Gest Collection of Princeton University; the American Museum of Natural History of New York; the Avery Brundage Collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; the Bodde Collection of the Seattle Asian Art Museum; and the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Publications with good images from these and Chinese collections include Sven Broman, *Chinese Shadow Theatre*

educated guess as to what kinds of figures and props would most likely have been used for this play. It is unlikely that a troupe would have a dedicated folder containing only the figures and props for use in a short play of this type. A troupe would possess separate folders of numerous, essentially interchangeable, heads and bodies for characters differentiated by characteristics such as age or status. The episodic plays with casts of thousands merit large, labeled clothbound folders filled with the necessary pieces specific to that play. After the translation I have appended reproductions of heads that might be appropriate to use for characters in the play.

The play includes lines spoken by what I am calling the narrator. This narrator, like those in traditional Chinese vernacular short stories, is primarily interested in moral judgment and keeping the story going. He is not particularized or personalized beyond being presented as a professional storyteller by the performer doing his (and the other characters') lines from behind the scrim. No stage direction mentions him. According to the script, there is also at one point a classroom of students who figure in the play, but it seems that only their voices are heard and they are not represented by shadow figures.

Key to the plot in *Zi cha* is Mao Bao 毛包, simple-minded and impulsive pawnshop employee and part-time messenger, who remains oblivious of his part in creating havoc among the Suns. A native of Shaanxi, but working in Manchuria, he daydreams about the joys of matrimonial bliss but blows his one chance by gambling away the money he was going to use to find a bride. His is a hard life, and he is given a chance to complain, but the audience is not really invited to pity him and is instead largely assured, sometimes by the narrator, that he will muddle through somehow or other, even if not in a very elegant fashion. He is referred to in the stage directions as Mao 毛 or *xiaochou* 小丑 (lesser "clown"). Most of the characters in the play are referred to in the stage directions by the kinds of role-types (*hangdang* 行當) found in *xiqu* 戲曲 (indigenous Chinese theater). As might be expected in a play that comes so close to being a farce, *chou* 丑 ("clown") roles predominate. Although

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(Stockholm: Etnografiska Museet Monograph Series No. 15, 1981); Rainald Simon, *Das Chinesische Schattentheater: Katalog der Sammlung des Deutschen Ledermuseums* (Offenbach am Main: Guttenberg, 1986); and Wang Zhaowen 王朝聞 and 鄧福星, eds., *Zhongguo minjian meishu quanji* 中國民間美術全集 (Complete Collection of Chinese Folk Art), 14 vols. (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu, 1993–1995), vol. 12, Sun Jianjun 孫建軍, ed., *Youyi bian Mu'ou yingxi juan* 游藝編木偶影戲卷 (Section on Performing Arts, Volume on Puppet and Shadow Theater).

Mao Bao's name is generally presented as a perfectly ordinary name, *maobao* 毛包 in Northern dialects can mean either "flurried, in a hurry, impetuous, rash, impatient" or a person with those characteristics. Possible English language colloquialisms with this second usage could include simpleton, idiot, doofus, and goofball.

Sun Zihui is the owner of a pawnshop in Manchuria but is a native of Shaanxi. He is referred to in the stage directions as *laoxi* 老西 (Shaanxi-Shanxi native),<sup>8</sup> or by the role type *wai* 外 (secondary older male). His son, Sun Gui, is living with him and learning the family trade. Sun Gui does not seem to have any real affection for the wife who pines for him back home. Believing her dead (just one of the many misunderstandings in the play), he is capable of saying in a very matter of fact way that it's time to remarry in order to continue the family line. He is referred to in the stage directions alternately as *chou* 丑 (clown) and *sheng* 生 (primary male).

The two female characters, Ms. Qian, wife of Sun Zihui, and Ms. Li, wife of Sun Gui, show both conformity to the gender prescriptions of the time and a remarkable ability to lose control of themselves, if only verbally. Ms. Qian, in particular, switches abruptly between the modes of polite elder and sharp-tongued pragmatist. She is referred to in the stage directions as *laodan* 老旦 (older female) or just *lao* 老. Ms. Li, unlike her mother-in-law, tells us her personal name: Guiyue 桂月 (Cassia Moon).<sup>9</sup> She is referred to in the stage directions as *xiaodan* 小旦 (younger or secondary female) or just *xiao* 小 or *dan* 旦.

The sometimes flippant and other times overly cordial interactions among the characters in the play intimate that a healthy sense of irreverence among both the performers and the audience members during a performance of this piece would have been welcome. While the family at the center of the play, the Suns, are in the pawnshop business and supposedly earn their livings off the bad luck and misery of others, it is

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<sup>8</sup> *Laoxi* is more often used to refer to people from Shanxi.

<sup>9</sup> Both *gui* 桂 (cassia) and *yue* 月 (moon) are common elements in women's names in popular literature. Putting the two together in Ms. Li's name might mean no more than that she was born in the eighth month (*guiyue* was a poetic way to refer to that month). There was also supposed to be a cassia tree on the moon, so her personal name could also link Ms. Li with Chang'e 嫦娥, the goddess of the moon, whose proverbial loneliness there might be used here to refer to Ms. Li's separation from her husband. Picking cassia flowers on the moon was also used to talk about success in the civil service examinations, so there might also be an ironic comment on Sun Gui's lack of promise in that direction.

hard to find any real social criticism in the play itself. If anything, there might be sympathy with the Sun family for having to live apart, with the men living in Manchuria so that they can run the pawnshop and their wives remaining at home in Shaanxi. In the later imperial period, merchants and bankers from the neighboring province of Shanxi were prominent in the financial world outside of Beijing and elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> and it seems likely that the play is not distinguishing between the two provinces, just as it does not really do so in its use of the term *laoxi* to refer to Sun Zigui. Although Shaanxi men can be ridiculed for their accents and other proclivities in popular literature, it is hard to find examples of this in *Zi cha*. Still, it would ultimately be up to the performers as to how exactly to depict these characters.

Although no stage direction in the script indicates Master Zhou's role-type, we can surmise from what he and the other characters say that he was conceived of as a *chou*. Although pedantic and given to showing off his limited learning in a rather obnoxious fashion, he is allowed to explain and resolve the misunderstandings caused by the letter. He does so in a garbled fashion, but that might as well be attributed to the lack of editing of the script as to any particular conception of the character. He, as well as everyone else on hand, including Uncle Qian, the younger brother of Ms. Qian (referred to in the stage directions as *chou*), is invited at the end to partake of the chicken dinner that presents a more plebian and less ostentatious form of the *da tuanyuan* 大團圓 (grand reunion) banquets that so often bring to an end Chinese literati drama.

Any script represents only a fraction of what would go on during a performance of the work itself. That problem is rather magnified in the case of *Zi cha*, with its laconic stage directions and the absence of any outside information as to how the play was performed or circulated. Regardless, *Zi cha* is a lively play of a kind not available in English translation and readers will hopefully enjoy trying to visualize a performance of it for themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Guo Songyi, "The Shanxi Merchants in Beijing in the Qing Dynasty: An Analysis Based on 136 Samples of Merchants and Their Activities," *Frontiers of History in China* 4.2 (2009): 165–82.

*Zi cha* 字差 (Mistaken Characters)  
An Anonymous Shadow Play Script

Dramatis Personae<sup>11</sup>

SUN ZIHUI 孫子會, pawnshop owner  
SUN GUI 孫貴, his son  
NARRATOR, offstage voice  
MAO BAO 毛包, pawnshop employee  
MS. QIAN 錢氏, wife of Sun Zihui  
MS. LI 李氏, wife of Sun Gui  
MASTER ZHOU 周先生, schoolmaster  
UNCLE QIAN, brother of Ms. Qian<sup>12</sup>  
STUDENTS, offstage voices

SUN ZIHUI (enters [and recites]):<sup>13</sup>

Wife in the West but husband in the East,  
We long for each other, but this helps not in the least.  
If one day I get a chance to return home,  
When I see the old wife, ho ho ho!<sup>14</sup>

I am a native of Baishui District in Tongzhou Prefecture in Shaanxi Province. My surname is Sun, personal name is Zihui.<sup>15</sup> They all read my name wrong, and always call me Sun Zibei or “my grandson’s generation”!<sup>16</sup> When I was young I came with my father to Shenyang to

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<sup>11</sup> Though not part of the original play script, the cast is listed here in order of appearance for the readers’ convenience.

<sup>12</sup> We only know his surname, not his personal name.

<sup>13</sup> In the original script, stage directions explicitly identifying the speaker are rare. For the convenience of the reader, however, the characters’ lines are attributed in the translation below in the manner of a modern playscript.

<sup>14</sup> Recited poems will be indented one step and sung arias will be indented two steps.

<sup>15</sup> Zihui’s name could be a pun on *zihui* 自會 (i.e., *ziji hui* 自己會, “can do it myself”).

<sup>16</sup> In Chinese popular literature and culture people often jokingly call others (or trick others into calling themselves) by terms fit for someone of a younger generation (“son,” “grandson,” etc.) and call themselves (or trick others into calling them) by terms fit for





SUN ZIHUI (sings):

Sun Zihui busily grinds the old ink stick,

SUN GUI [sings]:

Sun Gui wields the ink brush as fast as the wind.

SUN ZIHUI [sings]:

No need to hurry, think before you write,

SUN GUI:

Right! [Sings]

First make a rough draft, then a clean copy.

SUN ZIHUI:

You don't need to write it all out neatly. [Sings]

Just say, we don't have time to come home, and so on, those  
few characters,

SUN GUI [sings]:

I have to put some feeling into it.<sup>22</sup>

SUN ZIHUI:

Ai! [Sings]

This old one has never been able to recognize characters,

SUN GUI [sings]:

This young one is no good at writing.

SUN ZIHUI [sings]:

You said you can write the daily accounts,

SUN GUI [sings]:

You're the one who told me to hit the books.

SUN ZIHUI [sings]:

Just pick the simplest way, and write a couple of sentences,

SUN GUI [sings]:

Let me write the envelope, like so, like so.

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<sup>22</sup> *Xuxu* 緒緒 presumably is a mistake for *xuxu* 敘敘.

SUN ZIHUI [sings]:

I'm so pleased, I could die of happiness,  
Son, you're as good as our ancestors ever were!

SUN GUI [sings]:

In a flash, I've finished the piece,  
But I don't know if it makes sense or not.

SUN ZIHUI [sings]:

It doesn't matter if it's good or bad, just as long as you've  
written it out that's fine,

This saves us bothering someone else. [Sings]

If you're worried, just go ahead and read it out for me to hear.

SUN GUI:

Okay. [Sings]

I wrote, "Business in the shop is doing great,"

We're really making money! [Sings]

"No need for you at home to spill tears over us."

SUN ZIHUI:

In any case, your mother is certainly thinking of me.

SUN GUI: [sings]:

"The messenger can explain the depth of my feelings,  
We are so busy that we've hired another person."<sup>23</sup>

SUN ZIHUI:

That "hired person," you wrote that in?

SUN GUI:

This way, they won't be able to blame<sup>24</sup> us for not coming home.

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<sup>23</sup> This is what he means to say, but what he wrote is: "In the midst of being so busy, one of us died," which is the first example of "mistaken characters" in the play. Sun Gui miswrites *gu* 雇 (to hire) as *gu* 故 (to die).

<sup>24</sup> Taking 跪 *gui* (kneel) to be a mistake for *guai* 怪 (blame).

SUN ZIHUI:

Not going. Originally wanted to. Oh. That you wrote it that way is okay. It will save those two women from worrying and fretting about us. [Sings]

“P.S.: You must send a letter in reply. . .”<sup>25</sup>

SUN GUI:

So, even if someone at home has died, we’ll at least have news of it.

NARRATOR (sings):

Thirty taels of silver accompany the letter.  
Quickly they seal up silver and letter,  
That Sun Gui wasn’t really careful.  
The wrong and missing characters went unnoticed,  
But, in no time at all, everything was ready.

MAO BAO (enters) [sings]:

Mao Bao in a hurry arrives at the shop,

SUN ZIHUI:

You’re here! Please take a seat. [Sings]

No need to be polite, sit right down.

MAO BAO (speaks):

You don’t need to move, I’ll seat myself.

SUN ZIHUI:

You really are a *maobao*!<sup>26</sup>

SUN GUI:

Oh! Uncle Mao,<sup>27</sup> here’s the letter to our family with 30 taels of silver to go with it. We would like to bother you to take it to our home. Tell my mother by all means to send back a reply!

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<sup>25</sup> Here and below, where couplets are shared between different voices or separated by a fair amount of dialogue, ellipses are sometimes used to show that the first line, which might express a stand-alone thought, is musically connected to the next sung line. In a couple of cases, the second line of the couplet is never sung.

<sup>26</sup> Sun Zihui is making a pun by alluding to the regular meaning of a word formed from the characters used to write Mao Bao’s name, a word which is commonly used to refer to acting impulsively and carelessly or to someone who acts that way (see the introduction).

MAO BAO:

Well, of course I will! I'll be going now.

SUN ZIHUI:

Son, get some wine to send your Uncle Mao off on his journey.

MAO BAO:

It's not necessary for the pawnshop manager to send me off.

SUN ZIHUI:

Well, if that's the case, then we'll wait and have a party for you when you return.

MAO BAO:

Okay! I'm off. (Exits.)<sup>28</sup>

SUN ZIHUI:

Brother Mao is going home to get married! After he's back, we'll drink a toast to celebrate.

MAO BAO [offstage]:

Yeah, for sure. Now father and son the two of you, go back in to your heated room. (Enters [and recites]):

Hard to avoid the discomfort of wind and frost,  
Don't even speak of wading through water.

I am Mao Bao. I just took leave of my buddies.<sup>29</sup> Nothing for it but to follow the main road to Shaanxi, take my time and enjoy myself. Ahh! (sings)

Here is Mao Bao, on the road, trying to amuse himself,  
Ahh! For many years I have suffered hardship.  
Ever since I was eight, I've lived East of the Pass,<sup>30</sup>  
Day and night, I work hard and try my best.  
In the daytime, I make the tea and sweep the walk,

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<sup>27</sup> Sun Gui is here using the term "uncle" (*shufu* 叔父: father's younger brother) to denote a family friend of lesser status and/or younger than his father. Mao and the Suns are not related.

<sup>28</sup> The stage directions as given in the script seem muddled here and I have not followed them strictly.

<sup>29</sup> Presumably his Western Pawnshop co-workers.

<sup>30</sup> The pass Mao Bao lives east of is Shanhai guan, the easternmost gate of the Long Wall. "East of the Pass" refers to Manchuria.

At night, I have to hold the boss' pisspot.  
I've just gotten paid my percentage,  
I've saved up more than sixty ingots of silver.<sup>31</sup>  
This time when I get to Shaanxi,  
Why worry that I won't get a pretty little wife?  
Just thinking of such success lifts my spirits high,  
Before I know it, I've arrived at Apricot Village.<sup>32</sup>  
On the road at dawn,<sup>33</sup> sleep at night, no reason to change that,  
And now I've arrived at Baishui City in Shaanxi.  
There's nothing for it but to ask where the Sun family lives,  
As a new arrival, I don't know how to find their door.

NARRATOR [sings]:

We'll put aside Mao Bao as he searches for their house,  
([MAO BAO] exits.)  
And instead turn to mother-in-law Qian and daughter-in-law  
Li. ([MS. QIAN and MS. LI] enter and sit.)  
Yesterday the lamp wicks flared and flared,  
Could it be that there is some news?  
The two ladies haven't finished their conversation when,

MAO BAO:

Open the door! Open the door!

MS. QIAN:

Ya! Who has come and is knocking on the door? [Sings]

Let us mother-in-law and daughter-in-law together go see who  
it is. (Exits. [Offstage])

Who is knocking on our door?

MAO BAO [sings]:

Open up and I'll have something to say. . .

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<sup>31</sup> This is a sizable sum of money, and it may be that he is exaggerating by tenfold. The script later refers to his entire savings as only six ingots.

<sup>32</sup> There are many Apricot Villages throughout China. It is very likely he has arrived at the one near Taiyuan, which would be on his way to Baishui. Interestingly, a utopian Apricot Village is mentioned in classical poetry and in popular fiction.

<sup>33</sup> The text has *xiao* 宵 instead of *xiao* 曉.

MS. QIAN [sings]:

In our house, we've got no men.

MAO BAO [sings]:

Those I seek are precisely women. . .

MS. QIAN [sings]:

What have you come here about?

MAO BAO [sings]:

Well, no matter what, I'm not here to rob you. . .

MS. QIAN:

Oh! [Sings]

Just what kind of a little pimp are you?<sup>34</sup>

MAO BAO:

Aiyo! [Sings]

Why do you curse a good man?

NARRATOR [sings]:

He's so angry that his speech is mixed with cursing.

MAO BAO:

Ahem! I, Old Mao, have brought a letter all the way from East of the Pass, but you two don't even ask me to have a seat. Instead, you curse me pimp this and pimp that. This makes me wonder if in this world there is any place for good men.

MS. QIAN (opens door, responds):

Oh! You are someone who has brought a letter for us. We didn't know, we hope that you'll be so magnanimous as to forgive us.

MAO BAO:

Don't be so polite. It was I who was pushing too roughly. Here's the letter with its accompanying thirty taels of silver. There, I have handed them over. I'm off then.

MS. QIAN:

Why such a hurry? Why don't you stay for lunch and then go?

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<sup>34</sup> China has a venerable tradition of swear words involving eggs. The term translated as "pimp" here is *shuidan* 水蛋 ("water egg").

MAO BAO:

No. I have got too many things to do. Please excuse me for not staying. I'm off. (Exits.)

MS. QIAN:

Oh! Daughter-in-law, see how especially careless that person was. We didn't even get a chance to ask him what it's all about before he took off.

MS. LI:

Oh! I bet the letter will explain everything. But neither of us can read a word. What are we to do?

MS. QIAN:

Oh! Daughter-in-law, I think that Master Zhou is in the schoolroom right now. I'll go ask him to come here. He has no reason for not coming.

MS. LI:

That is a good idea. I'll stay here and make tea for him. (sings)

I, beautiful Ms. Li, with a joyful heart,  
Go to the courtyard to boil the tea. (Exits.)

MS. QIAN [sings]:

I, Ms. Qian, am off to invite the teacher. . . (Exits.)

NARRATOR [sings]:

Let us now narrate how the useless Master Zhou.  
He was just then in the schoolroom copying *The Hundred Surnames*,<sup>35</sup>  
"Zhao Qian Sun Li. . .,"<sup>36</sup> *The Hundred Surnames* is done.  
He reads it once, then recites it again. . .

MS. QIAN: [sings]

I, Ms. Qian, enter the classroom and politely salute the Master.

MASTER ZHOU:

Please sit down, please sit down.

---

<sup>35</sup> *The Hundred Surnames* (*Baijia xing* 百家姓) is an anonymous text composed entirely of surnames used as an elementary primer. "Hundred" here is just a round number, the text actually contains over 400 names.

<sup>36</sup> These are the first four surnames listed in the text.



MS. QIAN:

Thank you. [sings]

I come to invite “your esteemed steed to my humble dwelling. . .”

MASTER ZHOU [sings]:

But I don’t know what business brings you here.

MS. QIAN:

It’s like this, like this.<sup>37</sup>

MASTER ZHOU:

I thought it was something really important!<sup>38</sup> [Sings]

Then I’ll go to your place and have a look. . .

MS. QIAN:

Let’s go then!

MASTER ZHOU:

Students!

STUDENTS:

Yes!

MASTER ZHOU [sings]:

Don’t you start acting like a bunch of monkeys!

MS. QIAN [sings]:

Then, please sir, let us hurry. . .

MASTER ZHOU:

Alright then! [Sings]

Let us go together to your honorable abode. (They exit and reenter.)

MS. QIAN [sings]:

In no time at all, we’ve arrived. . . (They exit.)

MS. LI (enters [and sings]):

I, Ms. Li, have already made the tea.

---

<sup>37</sup> *Ruci ruci* 如此如此: a formula often used to save the copyist and/or performers from repeating material already known. It is also possible that in actual performance the material would just be repeated in full.

<sup>38</sup> Literally, “I thought it was about memorializing the emperor.”

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MS. QIAN [offstage, sings]:

Please master, enter first. . .

MASTER ZHOU [offstage]:

Okay. [Sings]

Not yielding at all I go right in. (Both enter.)

MS. QIAN [sings]:

Master Zhou, please do sit down. . .

MASTER ZHOU: Thank you.

MS. QIAN [sings]:

I, Ms. Qian, hurriedly offer tea porridge.<sup>39</sup>

MASTER ZHOU [sings]:

What characters have been brought back from East of the  
Pass?

Give them to me to look at so I can correct them.<sup>40</sup>

MS. QIAN:

Alright.

MS. LI [sings]:

I hurriedly hand the letter over,

MS. QIAN [sings]:

Master, take your time, and read it clearly to us.

MASTER ZHOU:

Okay. [Sings]

I tear<sup>41</sup> open the seal but I can't read it right. . .<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> "Tea porridge," *chageng* 茶羹, may be correct, but it is also possible that *geng* 羹 ("porridge") has just been added to fill out the rhyme.

<sup>40</sup> Zhou acts as if the text is one of his student's compositions.

<sup>41</sup> *Che* 扯, "to tear or pull," can also mean "to talk nonsense, to lie." Perhaps there is a pun intended here.

<sup>42</sup> The second line of this couplet is not sung (presumably to indicate that Master Zhou has become absorbed in his reading).

Aiya! My two eyes are dim, I can't see the words properly. Better get out my spectacles. Ah! What a pain! I take a look. This is what is written: "Letter sent home: Business East of the Pass is flourishing. Each year we're about to make a certain amount of profit from the interest. The messenger will naturally know all about it." "The messenger will naturally know all about it." This sentence says that the messenger carrying it knows. Didn't you ask him if the people in the pawnshop are all safe and healthy, and all the details?

MS. QIAN and MS. LI (together):

After the guy turned over the letter, he didn't wait for us to ask him, he just went off in a hurry.

MASTER ZHOU:

Aiya! What a careless person!

MS. QIAN:

Truly a *maobao*!<sup>43</sup> Old Master, please continue reading.

MASTER ZHOU:

I read up to the part, "the messenger knows all." "There's been a small death."<sup>44</sup> Used fifteen taels of silver. You must absolutely, absolutely send a return reply. P.S.:<sup>45</sup> Enclosed: Thirty taels of silver." Aiya! In the letter, that sentence "There's been a small death," that means someone in the pawnshop died.

MS. QIAN:

Aiya! Old sir, how can that be?

MASTER ZHOU:

It's written clearly here in the letter. This character "dead" means "to lose your life," action completed. That character *wang* means the same as *si* or

---

<sup>43</sup> See the note on Mao Bao's name above. Ms. Qian essentially repeats what her husband said earlier to Mao Bao; but here she is responding to Master Zhou's characterization of Mao Bao as *maocao* 毛草 ("careless").

<sup>44</sup> Above, we saw that Sun Gui, wanting to use a character meaning "hire" (*gu* 雇), used one meaning "died" (*gu* 故) instead. Master Zhou, in turn, seems to have misread the character for "busy" (*mang* 忙) as two characters, *xiao wang* 小亡, the first of which means "little" and the second can mean "died."

<sup>45</sup> The *zhui* of *zhuiji* 贅及 (postscript) has been miswritten with a homophone and prefaced by the character as *xia* 下 (below). The resultant compound, *xiazhui* 下墜, can mean to "have diarrhea."

to die.<sup>46</sup> Am I not right? “Use the fifteen taels of silver” is definitely for buying a coffin. The coffin should be not bad, you know.

MS. QIAN:

Use the fifteen taels of silver to buy a coffin! Certainly this means that the older one must have died.

MASTER ZHOU:

Hmph! That’s not right.

MS. LI:

Oh! Old Sir, how do you know it’s not?

MASTER ZHOU:

How could it not be? Isn’t it written as clear as clear? “... *little* death of a person.” The “little” means “younger person.” “Died” is a word, don’t you know. Whoever wrote this letter certainly has a belly full of learning.

MS. LI:

Aiya! What agony!

MS. QIAN:

Oh! Daughter-in-law, stop your wailing a minute and trouble Master Zhou to write a spirit-tablet epitaph. Tomorrow will be the third day after the death.<sup>47</sup> What do you think?

MS. LI:

It’s up to you, Mother-in-law. I have nothing to say.

MASTER ZHOU:

That’s okay. I’ll go write you a spirit tablet! After all, aren’t we neighbors? I’m off. [Exits.]

MS. QIAN:

Daughter-in-law! Go call “Second Uncle” Wu in the western courtyard to go out onto the street to get the things for the burial. Then go ask “Old Uncle” Mei to notify all the relatives. That should do it.

MS. LI:

Aiya, life is so bitter!

---

<sup>46</sup> The characters involved here are *wang* 亡 and *si* 死.

<sup>47</sup> On the third day after death the mourning family typically invites a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest to chant liturgies that will elevate the soul from its suffering to a higher realm.

MS. QIAN:

Aiya, my son! ([They] exit.)

VOICES OFFSTAGE:

Stop him! Stop him! Don't let him run away!

MAO BAO (hurries on stage):

Who do you think you are?! Aiyo! Aiyo! What a rough bunch of scoundrels! I am Mao Bao. Yesterday, I came home carrying six ingots of silver. I was hoping to arrange a match and live happily with my wife. Unfortunately, I was walking around and happened to find myself at an opium den. What with eating and drinking and spending money and gambling, within a couple of days I had spent all the money as clean as clean could be. They even wanted to strip me of my clothes! But my eyes were quick and my legs fast. I “put on my rabbit shoes”<sup>48</sup> and ran outta there. Oh no! Hold on. My money is gone and I haven't got anything to eat. I'd better go East of the Pass, stick to what I ought to be doing, and do business. Here I go. Oh no! Hold on. I almost forgot. There's that return letter for Elder Brother Sun that I'd better go get. Maybe I can borrow a couple of strings of cash for traveling expenses. Surely they'll agree. I'm off, I'll go there. (Exits and reappears [at Sun's house].) Here I am! Huh? What's this? Peach longevity paper hanging from the doorway?!?<sup>49</sup> I think someone must have died.<sup>50</sup>

MS. LI (crying inside):

Woe, woe! Mama, I'm going to die of grief! Mama!

MAO BAO:

Aha! Aha! So, I was right after all—someone has died. They're still crying.<sup>51</sup> I'd better not ask to borrow money. I'll return home to bring father and son, the two of them, the news, and definitely have them hurry back home. Holding onto my hat, I run back. (sings)

Mao Bao is once again headed East of the Pass,  
The only feeling in my heart is worry.

---

<sup>48</sup> An idiom used to describe how fast someone runs.

<sup>49</sup> “Peach longevity paper” (*tao qian zhi* 桃千紙), may be a particular type of longevity paper. Peachwood was considered useful in keeping away evil influences.

<sup>50</sup> It appears that *si* 死 (to die) got left out by mistake in the script.

<sup>51</sup> The script is difficult to read here. The purpose of the two characters *men* 門/們 and *zhi* 只 is not clear.

Following my feet, I feel as if I have stumbled into the “Soul  
Bewildering Battle Formation,”<sup>52</sup>

My six silver ingots gambled away.

All I can do is borrow travel expenses on the way,

Before I know it I’ll be at Shanghai Pass.

Traveling by day and resting by night, here I am. . . (Exits.)

SUN ZIHUI (enters [and sings]):

Sun Zihui’s work is done, now it’s free time. (Sits down.)

Just now, I’m looking for someone to play chess with. . .

MAO BAO (enters [and sings]):

Mao Bao enters the shop and starts to speak.

Big Brother Sun, have you got problems!

SUN ZIHUI:

Humph! Brother Mao, you’ve just got back. Why are you saying such  
drunken words?

MAO BAO [sings]:

Actually, it’s like this, this is how it is.<sup>53</sup>

SUN ZIHUI:

What?! You say someone’s died in our family?

MAO BAO [sings]:

If no one died, why is there longevity paper hanging there?

It’s definitely the case that someone has died.

SUN ZIHUI [sings]:

When I, Sun Zihui, hear this, how sad I am!

SUN GUI (offstage [sings]):

Sun Gui in the counting room is just going over the accounts,

[Enters.]

I just heard someone’s died, so I hurried up front.

---

<sup>52</sup> This magical and dangerous battle formation (or references to it) appears often in popular traditional fiction.

<sup>53</sup> The last half of this line works the same way as the formula *ruci, ruci* 如此如此 above, but here it is written *ruci shi zheban* 如此是這般 in order to fill out the rhyme.

Uncle Mao,

Who in our family died?

MAO BAO:

I don't know who it was, but no matter what, there were peach longevity papers hanging from the front gate. Those that were small were very many, most of them were small.

SUN ZIHUI [sings]:

That [the big ones] weren't many must mean it's a young person.

MAO BAO:

I also heard someone crying for "Mama."

SUN GUI [sings]:

Who could have been calling for Mama?

SUN ZIHUI:

Son, [sings]

It must have been your mother fell sick.

MAO BAO:

It has to be your ma.

SUN ZIHUI [sings]:

Father and son must go home to see what's going on. . .

MAO BAO:

That makes sense.

SUN ZIHUI [sings]:

We ask Uncle Mao if he'll look after the business for a year.

MAO BAO:

That's fine. [Sings]

I'll ask them to get the horses ready,

SUN GUI:

I'll get the bedding ready.

MAO BAO [sings]:

Make sure to bring plenty of money for traveling expenses.

NARRATOR [sings]:

We won't speak of how father and son made their way home,  
(They exit.)  
Instead I'll speak of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.  
([They enter and] sit.)  
In their hearts, it's like there's a knife twisting,  
The third day mourning was completed last night.

MS. QIAN:

Daughter-in-law, waaah! [Sings]

In my heart, this is so hard to bear!  
I want to go stay with your uncle's family for a while.

MS. LI [sings]:

What Mother says is how it should be,  
If the ache is terrible for you, Mama, then it's even more so  
for me.

MS. QIAN [sings]:

I can't stay at home forever in pain and sorrow,  
Don't make this old body be sick at heart.  
Without any more words, I'll just go now. . . (Exits.)

MS. LI [sings]:

I, the beautiful Ms. Li, with tears not yet dried.  
I return to the back chambers and begin to cry. . .

Aiya, the bitterness! (Exits.)

NARRATOR [sings]:

Now we turn to father and son returning home.  
([SUN ZIHUI and SUN GUI enter] on horseback.)

SUN ZIHUI [sings]:

Today we've arrived at Withered Plum Ridge. . .<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Withered Plum Ridge, unlike Apricot Village, is not a well-known site. This is another unfinished couplet.



SUN GUI:

Oh! May it please my father, Withered Plum Ridge is where my maternal uncle lives. I would like to go pay him a visit.

SUN ZIHUI:

That's fine, it's not out of the way. I will go ahead first to the house to take care of some things. Don't tarry there!

SUN GUI:

Of course not!

NARRATOR [sings]:

On the road one cannot fathom this "Soul Bewildering Battle Formation,"  
Not until reaching home can one find out what is in the gourd.<sup>55</sup>

([Sun Zihui and Sun Gui] exit on separate sides.)

MS. QIAN (enters, recites):

The fate of father and son are not yet clear,  
Parted by mountains and rivers, news is scarce.

Yesterday, I, Ms. Qian, went over to my brother's house. This whole time I've been feeling woeful and vexed. Last month, in a complete daze I went along with the third day mourning rites for my son's burial. But I don't know his fate and that of his father. This causes constant doubt in my heart.

SUN GUI (offstage):

I've arrived at my uncle's gate. Now I'm going inside. (Enters.)

MS. QIAN:

Weiya! There's a ghost! There's a ghost!

SUN GUI:

Huh? Mother, your son has just come home, how can you talk about ghosts? I beg for Mother to enlighten me.

MS. QIAN:

Oh! My son, are you really a human being?

---

<sup>55</sup> It is common to speak of mysteries being hidden inside gourds, especially in tales involving Taoists.

SUN GUI:

Truly I am.

MS. QIAN:

You really haven't died?

SUN GUI:

Your son has been doing just fine East of the Pass. How can you say that I'm dead?

MS. QIAN:

Oh! Oh! Oh! That's what it is. This will be the death of me! (Falls down.)<sup>56</sup>

SUN GUI:

Mother, wake up! Wake up! Wake up!

MS. QIAN:

Aiya! (sings)

For a second, my breath stopped, but now I am conscious  
again;

From my barely opened pair of eyes tears overflow.

I rush forward to embrace my son,

MS. QIAN:

Ai! Son, ahh!

SUN GUI:

Ai! Mom, ahh!

MS. QIAN [sings]:

I sigh that you, so young, could be such a karmic  
encumbrance.

SUN GUI:

Since you're son is still alive, it won't be too hard for me to find a wife  
again.

MS. QIAN:

Let me ask you something [sings],

Is wearing heavy mourning not permitted East of the Pass?<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> This is a rare example in this script of a very specific stage direction.

SUN GUI:

The custom is the same everywhere, why shouldn't it be permitted?

MS. QIAN [sings]:

Why aren't you wearing filial mourning attire?

SUN GUI:

Your son has just come back and does not know. Moreover, as for the mourning done by a husband, that can surely be forgiven. Mother, have you thought about this carefully?

MS. QIAN [sings]:

The mourning period for parents ends after two years,  
You say it can be forgiven, as if it was no big deal.  
I, Ms. Qian, am crying as if drunk. . .

SUN GUI [sings]:

Sun Gui exhorts you by your side.  
Since, after all, Ms. Li is dead,  
Your son will just take another wife, why object?<sup>58</sup>

MS. QIAN:

Ms. Li is doing just fine over at the house. Who says that she's dead?

SUN GUI [sings]:

East of the Pass we heard that someone had died in our family,  
Because of this we came home, not caring that the road was a  
thousand *li* long.<sup>59</sup>

MS. QIAN:

Who did you hear say that?

SUN GUI [sings]:

Mao Bao said so, that's how I know,  
He saw paper streamers hanging from our gate.

---

<sup>57</sup> Heavy mourning clothes made of hempen cloth were worn to honor the death of a parent. When a family member with lower status dies, such as a spouse, it is not customary to wear heavy mourning clothes.

<sup>58</sup> Taking *fang* 方 as a mistake for *fang* 妨.

<sup>59</sup> *Bu yuan qian li* 不遠千里 (“not thinking of 1,000 *li* as far”) echoes language in the opening passage of the *Mencius*.

MS. QIAN:

Isn't your father the one who is dead?

SUN GUI [sings]:

Dear old mother, you're still talking nonsense,  
Dad and I returned home together.

MS. QIAN [sings]:

I, Ms. Qian, lower my head and suddenly see the light,  
Oh! Oh! Oh! Now I see! [Sings]  
That both sides lost a life, it was all absurd.

SUN GUI:

What? Are you saying that nobody's died in the family?

MS. QIAN [sings]:

In the end it was like this and like that: it was Master Zhou's  
mistake. . .

SUN GUI:

Enough, enough! Enough!

MS. QIAN [sings]:

Like moneybags headed to market, home we go. ([UNCLE  
QIAN] enters.)

SUN GUI (speaks):

Uncle, how are you doing?

NARRATOR [sings]:

One look and he's shaking like a leaf. . .<sup>60</sup>

UNCLE QIAN (speaks):

There's a ghost! There's a ghost!

MS. QIAN:

Ooh! Brother, you don't know yet. It's like this, like this . . . . There never  
was such a thing.

---

<sup>60</sup> This is another instance in the script where only a single line of a couplet is sung.

UNCLE QIAN:

Well, if it's really like you say, then I won't be scared. But, nephew, now that we've met, I'll have your aunt make you up a bowl of noodle soup, with lots of vinegar, and we'll pretend that it's your birthday.

SUN GUI:

To pay my respects to aunt is precisely what I want to do.

UNCLE QIAN:

Let's go then, and drink vinegar.<sup>61</sup>

NARRATOR [recites]:

When the water is muddy, you can't tell bream from carp,  
Only once the water clears you can see that they are two kinds of  
fish!

UNCLE QIAN:

My nephew was almost taken for dead! ([All three] exit.)

MS. LI (enters [and recites]):

Tears like continuous rain,  
Drop after drop without break.

My humble name is Li Guiyue. Ever since the funeral for my husband, I have had no interest in eating or drinking. I am afraid that my life is in peril.

SUN ZIHUI (offstage):

Someone really died here! Couplets on white mourning streamers are pasted up all over. I'm going to knock on the door. Come and open up! Come and open up!

MS. LI:

It must certainly be Mother-in-law returning now. I'll go and open the gate. (Exits.) (Offstage) Oh! So it was you, Father-in-law. How are you? Let your daughter-in-law tie up your horse.

SUN ZIHUI [offstage]:

OK. (Enters.) Huh? Well then, I guess it must be the old woman who is dead.

---

<sup>61</sup> It is tempting to see a pun here with the other meaning of "to drink vinegar" (be jealous), but the text has *ha[he] cu* 哈[喝]醋 and not *chicu* 吃醋 and a pun here about jealousy seems out of place.

MS. LI (enters):

Most honorable father-in-law, your daughter-in-law kowtows to you.

SUN ZIHUI:

Dead is dead, just get up! What are you kowtowing for? Hey! It's only for you, child, that we came over.

MS. LI:

I, your daughter-in-law, am entirely dependent on father-in-law and mother-in-law to look after her.

SUN ZIHUI:

Oh! Daughter-in-law, so how many months has mother been dead?

MS. LI:

Ever since I was young, I have had no father or mother. How could it be that father doesn't know about that?

SUN ZIHUI:

I am asking about your mother-in-law!!

MS. LI:

Oh! Mother-in-law is doing just fine over at Uncle's place. Why do you say she is dead?

SUN ZIHUI:

What are you saying? Mao Bao saw with his own eyes that someone had died in our house.

MS. LI:

It's none other than your son that has died, East of the Pass. There certainly weren't two people who died!

SUN ZIHUI:

You are just spewing a mouth full of manure! Father and son the two of us returned together. He just went over to his Uncle's place. So why do you say he's dead?

MS. LI:

Father-in-law, you must be kidding me!

SUN ZIHUI:

Why should I kid you? (Looks over his shoulder.<sup>62</sup>) Isn't that him coming right now?

SUN GUI (offstage):

Mother, follow me.

MS. QIAN:

I am coming. (They enter.)

SUN ZIHUI:

Is that not my son coming over here, does he seem dead to you, hmm?

MS. QIAN:

Oh! Daughter-in-law, no need to be startled, all along it was like this, like this . . . .<sup>63</sup> There never was such a thing.

MS. LI:

Ooh! Amida Buddha! This is too much.<sup>64</sup>

SUN ZIHUI:

Hey wife! Who said there was a death in the pawnshop?

MS. QIAN:

Originally, it was what Master Zhou read in the letter.

SUN ZIHUI:

What a useless guy that Mr. Zhou is. Hrumph! Hrumph! Just wait 'til I get my hands on that karmic encumbrance, the crusty old dirt ball . . .

MS. QIAN:

There's no need for you to go look for him at his house. We can invite him over to our house so that everybody will become clear about it all.

SUN ZIHUI:

Fine with me. You go get him.

MS. QIAN:

Okay. (Exits.) (Offstage) Mr. Zhou, come with me.

---

<sup>62</sup> This stage direction would require the shadow figure playing Sun Zihui to look over its two-dimensional shoulder, a delicate maneuver from behind the scrim.

<sup>63</sup> Here is another example of this formula.

<sup>64</sup> *Zhong guo tou* 中過頭 (“to keep on even after hitting the target”).

MASTER ZHOU:

What? I misread it? I was not wrong. (Enters.) Yow! Ah! So, everybody has come. Congratulations on your business success!

SUN GUI:

Oh! Mr. Zhou, how are you?

MASTER ZHOU:

Fine, fine. Get the letter and I'll read it again.

SUN ZIHUI:

You look all right. Your looking produced blood. Mr. Zhou-the-useless, there is no enmity or hatred<sup>65</sup> between us. Why do you hope for our early death?

MASTER ZHOU:

Dear brother Sun, you don't have to yell, it's only a letter. . .

MS. QIAN:

Please give it a look, old sir.

MASTER ZHOU:

I still have to put on my glasses. "These words sent home: Business East of the Pass is flourishing. Each year we're about to make a certain amount of profit from the interest. The messenger will naturally know someone young has died."

SUN GUI:

Mr. Zhou read it wrong!

MASTER ZHOU:

It's written wrong!

SUN GUI:

You read it wrong!

MASTER ZHOU:

It's written wrong!

SUN GUI:

Read it wrong!

MASTER ZHOU:

Written wrong!

---

<sup>65</sup> Taking *yan* 眼 as a mistake for *hen* 恨.



SUN ZIHUI:

Are you saying that both of us, father and son, wrote it wrong? Hm?

MASTER ZHOU:

In any case, it's written wrong. Youngster, you read it!

SUN GUI:

Give it to me to read. "The messenger of course knows about it."<sup>66</sup>

MASTER ZHOU:

Oh! You are saying that there's a break right after the word *xiao* there, so that it reads like a complete sentence, right? But the character read *xiao* that means "to know" is the *xiao* in the word *zhixiao*,<sup>67</sup> it's not the *xiao* meaning young in *xiaosheng*.<sup>68</sup>

SUN GUI:

This young man doesn't know. I desire to receive your instruction.

MASTER ZHOU:

The *xiao* in *zhixiao* has a sun radical placed next to the character Yao, which is the character for Yao of the sage emperors, Yao and Shun. That is the correct character for *xiao* in the word *zhixiao*.

MS. LI:

Old sir, please continue reading.

MASTER ZHOU:

Okay. "For the person who died, use ten taels of silver."

SUN GUI:

You've read it wrong again.

MASTER ZHOU:

It's not wrong.

SUN ZIHUI:

This "it's not wrong" means you wrote it wrong.

---

<sup>66</sup> Sun Gui apparently wrote the last character in the sentence he reads out here as *xiao* 小 (little) when he meant *xiao* 曉 (to know), as Master Zhou points out below.

<sup>67</sup> *Zhixiao* 知曉 ("to know").

<sup>68</sup> *Xiaosheng* 小生 ("young man").

SUN GUI:

What I wrote was “we were busy and therefore hired a man using fifteen taels of silver.”<sup>69</sup>

MASTER ZHOU:

Where’s the word “and”?

SUN GUI:

I must have left it out.

MASTER ZHOU:

It’s not just that you left it out, even if you only left it out, *mang*<sup>70</sup> has to be written with the standing heart radical, yes? In the letter isn’t it clearly written as the character *wang* as in the compound *siwang*?<sup>71</sup> I think we can say that you gentlemen who recognize only half a character have been moving pythons.<sup>72</sup> From now on, you should remember “knowing it is knowing it; not knowing it is not knowing it.”<sup>73</sup> Do not again respond recklessly when you do not know the answer.

SUN GUI:

I humbly recognize my faults and apologize.

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<sup>69</sup> The Chinese text for what he reads is *mang you gu gu yiren shi gen [yin] shiwu liang* 忙又故顧一人使良[銀]十五兩. *Gu* 故 here means “therefore” and not “deceased.” Besides that, here we have both *gu* appearing at once and not the wrong one substituting for the right one. The script as a whole is quite confusing with regard to how exactly Sun Gui wrote the letter and what errors Master Zhou made when he read it. Above, it appears that Master Zhou broke up the character *mang* into *xiao* (little/young) and *wang* (died), This time around, however, the appearance of *xiao* (young/little) in the letter is explained as Sun Gui’s writing it instead of the *xiao* meaning “understand.”

<sup>70</sup> “To be busy.”

<sup>71</sup> *Siwang* means to die. The radical of the character *mang* 忙, the so-called standing heart, is what’s left over when the *wang* 亡 part is removed.

<sup>72</sup> This is what the text literally says.

<sup>73</sup> The quote comes from *Analects* II.17. In the original, it is the answer to the question of what knowledge is. Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 91, translates the quoted text plus a tag that follows after it as: “When you know a thing, to recognize that you know it, and when you do not know a thing, to recognize that you do not know it. That is knowledge.” Master Zhou’s usage is simpler, as the translation reflects.

MASTER ZHOU:

Even someone like this useless person can have eyes for book learning. Everything has been made clear, so now “abandoning-armor-and-dragging-weapons I must run away.”<sup>74</sup>

SUN ZIHUI:

What kind of talk is this? Wife, kill a small chicken. I want to make vinegar-dripping chicken legs, and have a rollicking good time about it. Make a whole platter full and bring it.

MS. QIAN:

Okay. (Exits.)

MS. LI:

I’ll help and go get the firewood started. Now I have something to live for! (Exits.)

SUN ZIHUI:

Master Zhou, let’s first drink a pitcher of wine and then you can go!

MASTER ZHOU:

That would be to put you to great trouble for no good reason, but to refuse your hospitality would be impolite. Your honoring me makes me ashamed of my unworthiness.

SUN ZIHUI:

Since we’re neighbors, you needn’t be so polite. Please come with me!

MASTER ZHOU:

After you!

SUN GUI ([recites]):

Because of mistaken characters four people were thrown into doubt,

MASTER ZHOU ([recites]):

Today I am indebted to you for some chicken! (They exit.)

[THE END]

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<sup>74</sup> The last part, *qijia yibing er zou* 棄甲曳兵而走 comes from the third passage in *Mencius*, where it describes deserting soldiers. Master Zhou, having won the battle, cannot resist using this dramatic moment to show off his misplaced erudition.

出考西... 在西來... 在東... 在西... 在西... 在西...  
有朝一日回家轉... 見了老婆...  
樂子陝西同州府白水縣人氏姓孫名字子會  
他們把我這兩片字都叫白咧都叫我孫子輩  
自勿跟着我老子來在沈陽習字買費  
如今熬的自己的買賣衣有片兒子名叫孫貴  
上年來到沈阻如今買賣李的精熟昨日西

First page of the script, after *Qing Menggu Che wangfu cang quben* (unpaginated)

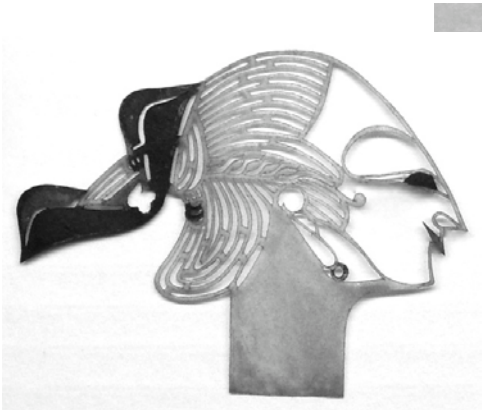
Possible Heads for Characters in the Play  
(Originals @ The East Asian Library and the Gest Collection, Princeton University)



Sun Zihui



Sun Gui



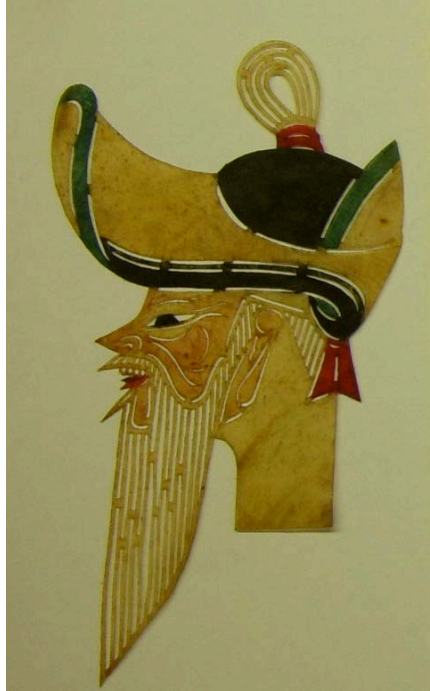
Ms. Qian



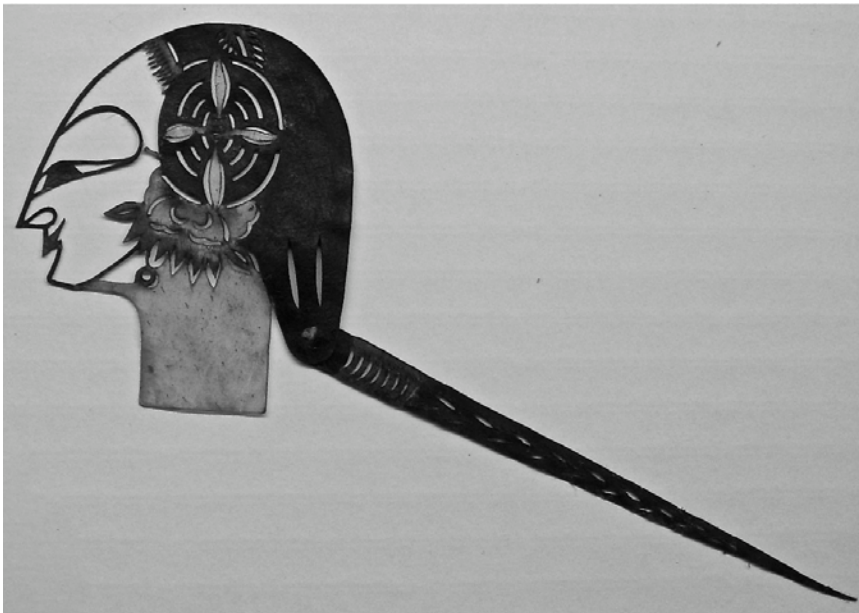
Master Zhou



Mao Bao



Uncle Qian



Ms. Li