Under Confucian Eyes

Writings on Gender in Chinese History

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The “Eating Crabs” Youth Book

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TRANSLATOR’S PREFACE

I chose to translate this text because I think it vividly and humorously illustrates the complexity of both gender and ethnic discourses in eighteenth-century Beijing. As a historian who questions the simplistic assumptions of “sinicization” and the notion that the Manchus and other non-Han peoples were inexorably absorbed by the Chinese, I am always searching for evidence that demonstrates the specific ways in which Manchus and Chinese interacted. In its choice of literary form, its visual presentation on the page (where two different writing systems appear interspersed in the same line), and in the story it tells of a mixed Manchu-Chinese marriage, this unusual text offers convincing proof that while acculturation occurred in the Qing, at the same time, ethnic differentiation remained.

What makes the text even more interesting to me, however, is the introduction of gender conflict into a particularly Qing context, giving familiar tropes of nuptial discord a novel ethnic twist. One is forcefully reminded of the sedimentation of social relations: sometimes it is gender categories that are operative, while other times it is ethnic or class categories, and sometimes (as with the case of the Auntie who comes to the rescue) all three.

The “Eating Crabs” youth book differs markedly from most of the other translations in this volume. Instead of a normative text participating consciously in the dominant moral discourse of the day, we have a performance text that is neither serious nor especially “Confucian.” The tale it tells—of a henpecked Manchu husband, his impatient Han wife, and their crustacean adversaries—is humorous, an eighteenth-century Annie Hall meant mainly to entertain. Rather than putting its message in a dry and didactic format, the story makes its point by exploiting absurd situations and stereotypes for
know, however, that texts were sung by one or two performers. If two, one sang and the other accompanied him on a three-stringed lute (sanxian); if one, then the performer played as he sang.¹²

In general, zidishu have been divided into two distinct types, an “East City style” and a “West City style.”¹³ The former was somewhat older, more emotionally moving, and more heroic. The latter, developing slightly later, was more melodious and better suited to love stories, its prolonged and low vowels lending themselves to extended melismas.¹⁴ “Eating Crabs” would appear to straddle this division. The couple’s valiant battle with the crabs is told in appropriately (mock-)heroic fashion, while the description of Auntie’s toilett dwells on the finer details of the preparations a proper lady made before leaving the house.

Zidishu appear by their number—close to four hundred are known today, but undoubtedly many more have been lost—to have been a very popular form of entertainment in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Beijing, particularly among the city’s large banner population.¹⁵ Members of the imperial clan were noted enthusiasts, but zidishu audiences were above all the ordinary residents of the Qing capital. These were men and women of the Manchu, Mongol, and Chinese banners who gathered at teahouses, temple festivals, and friends’ parties to hear both professionals and amateurs perform.¹⁶ The role of the banners in popularizing this literary form is recalled in the very name zidishu, which is taken from the phrase baqi zidi, “Eight-Banner youth,” a contemporary expression referring to young people in the banners, especially young men.¹⁷ One imagines it was these people, many of whom lacked employment and thus on whose hands time hung the heaviest, who provided the primary audience for youth-book performances.

That zidishu were meant for a banner audience is one reason for the common assertion that they are a specifically “Manchu” contribution to the Chinese literary tradition.¹⁸ Authorship is the other reason, even though of the four hundred or so extant zidishu texts’ exact authorship is unclear in all but a very few instances.¹⁹ It was believed in the late Qing that bannermen originated the genre,²⁰ and literary historians have tended to accept that youth books were texts originally written or adapted by Manchu or others in the banners. Performers, too, were drawn from the banner population, since Beijing’s Inner City was off-limits to Han Chinese after dark. One of the earliest detailed descriptions of the youth-book form suggests the following history:

It is said that these songs [zidishu] were produced by the Eight Banners. They never charged for them. Most of the performers were from the nobility and the imperial lineage; hence the name “zidi.” When they wanted to perform, they had to find someone to invite them using the requisite quantie [a large sheet of red paper specially folded for ceremonial use]. At the appointed time, everyone assembled to perform at a designated place and waited for the host family to greet
them. They were not to be bothered by the serving of tea. When the singing was done, everyone went home. Late in the day, when it was inconvenient to carry the lights back and forth, the hosts might prepare a dinner [for the performers].

This version of the origin of the youth book genre, with its emphasis on the role of the well-to-do, is challenged by more recent scholars, who insist that *zidishu* was from the beginning an art form of the common people in the Manchu banners.

Whatever their class origins, it seems beyond dispute that youth books trace their beginnings to innovations on Chinese literary/musical forms first introduced by Manchu bannermen. Later, when restrictions on the Han presence in the city were relaxed, Chinese professionals took over—though the author of the preceding passage disparages such performances as “not authentic.” In the process, the main venues for youth-book performance migrated to the Outer City, south of walled Beijing, where Han Chinese legally resided during the Qing. Once this happened, the original dual-language texts were gradually replaced by texts solely in Chinese that were written in a more elegant style—a development that meshed with the decline of Manchu as a spoken language. For this reason, the vast majority of the *zidishu* texts that remain today are written only in Chinese. The polished pieces that have come down to us, which rely heavily on Tang and Song poetry for their vocabulary, are likely very different from the original texts listened to by Beijing audiences two hundred years ago.

The mixed-language text of “Eating Crabs” dates from around 1800 and is one of the few remaining examples of what *zidishu* were probably like in the 1700s. It is for this reason one of the best-known *zidishu* texts. Seven editions of the text are extant, including five manuscripts and two wood-block-printed texts. Reflecting its hybrid origins, “Eating Crabs” goes by three different titles: a Manchu title, “Katuri jetere juben i bithe” (lit., the book of the tale of eating crabs), a Chinese title, “Pangxie duan” (The eating-crabs story), and a Manchu-Chinese title, “Katuri jetere zidishu” (The eating crabs youth book), which is the title chosen here. An annotated Japanese translation also exists. As far as I know, the translation that follows is the first English translation of the complete text.

One of the most unusual features of these texts is the appearance of the printed page, where Manchu and Chinese are combined in every single line. Romanized, with Manchu words in italics, the first lines of the main text thus read as follows:

```plaintext
you yige age buzhi shi bala ai
ye buzhi colo jiaozuo ai niyalma
you buzhi Manju Monggo shi ujen cooha
geng buzhi neige nirui ya gisa.

(Once there was a young gentleman—don’t know his clan name,
Don’t even know what name he was called or what man was he,
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Don’t know if he was Manchu, Mongol, or “heavy troops,”
Much less what banner or what company.)

Reproducing this in a mixed English-French text perhaps provides something of the feel of the original:

Once there was a jeune homme—I don’t know comment était son nom de famille,
Don’t even know comment il s’appelait,
Or if he was Mandchou, Mongol, or un Chinois des barrières,
Much less de quelle barrière ou compagnie.

The text is written vertically, but is read from left to right across the page, following Manchu (and European) practice. (Chinese texts, of course, were traditionally printed vertically but read from right to left.) This is one of the best indications that the authors of *zidishu*, although strongly influenced by Chinese culture, were themselves Manchu. As is true for most *zidishu*, the author of “Eating Crabs” is unknown. But whoever the author was, it is obvious from the very nature of the text that he (or she?) was bilingual, and that the audience was, too. For listeners whose command of either language was weak, the frequent repetition of phrases with similar meanings in both Chinese and Manchu was no doubt a boon to fuller comprehension. This sort of redundancy is common enough in Chinese performance genres.

Bilingualism was not unusual in eighteenth-century Beijing, especially among the educated minority, who were very often able to read and write (as well as speak and understand) both Chinese and Manchu. After all, Beijing was an official town, and these were the two most important official languages of the Qing dynasty (when the “national language,” that is, *guoyu*, was Manchu, not Chinese). A linguistic paradigm was set by the emperors themselves, who were fluent in both languages until the mid-1800s and sometimes even switched back and forth between them in the same sentence when responding to palace memorials. This mixed style is reminiscent of that found in “Eating Crabs” and is to be distinguished from the formal use of parallel texts in joint Manchu-Chinese *beibi* memorials. Even among the less educated, however, Manchu and Chinese were combined in regular daily use, a fact reflected in numerous linguistic studies of the Altaic nature of the northern dialect (i.e., Mandarin) and especially in local Beijing speech.

The story told in “Eating Crabs” is a simple one and falls into four main episodes. As the story opens, we meet an *age* (pronounced “ah-geh”), or Manchu “gentleman,” and his wife, who live in a village in the Beijing suburbs. The wife is often referred to in the text, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as a *jiaren* (Chinese for “beauty”). Attractive and clever, she is a “southerner” (Chinese, *manzi* in the text), or Han Chinese, but learns to speak
fluently Manchu, becoming a “half-Manchu, half-Han wildwoman.” During one particularly lean year they move to the city to be near relatives. One day the husband, with nothing to do, goes shopping and buys some crabs, which he brings home for his wife to prepare for supper. She has no idea what they are or what to do with them and ends up getting badly pinched. The second episode begins as they manage, after much effort, to get the crabs into a pot of water and boil them, but then they have no idea how to eat them. The wife loses patience, first with the crabs (“Devil take them! These are so hard! / They’re all nothing but bone. Where’s the meat?”), and then with her husband (“You lout! / Buying such useless things, / Wasting all our precious money”).

At this point, the servant girl becomes alarmed and runs next door to alert the husband’s aunt to the trouble between her master and mistress. The third episode, the longest, narrates in excruciating detail the preparations the aunt makes before going out. This description parodies female vanity and at the same time celebrates female beauty. When she finally leaves the house to go next door, her splendid appearance and coquetish demeanor create considerable commotion in the street as everyone stops to stare, including a couple of passing Mongols who liken her to a living bodhisattva. The story concludes with a short episode in which the urbane and sophisticated aunt laughs at her relatives’ ignorance and sharply upbraids the wife for having scolded her husband. (“You’ve been scolding your husband for no good reason. / It’s a good thing he’s such a nice fellow and lets you rant. / If it were my husband you were married to, he’d have beaten you to death!”) Then she proceeds to instruct them in the art of eating crabs. The enlightened couple devour the crabs with gusto, the wife sends her husband out to buy more (“It doesn’t matter how much they cost!”), and all are happy and satisfied.

Though space does not permit a lengthy discussion here, the reader will not doubt find “Eating Crabs” to be a rich source for information on urban domestic settings in late-imperial Beijing. In this connection, it is noteworthy that three of the story’s four characters are women, two of whom—the wife and the aunt—receive by far the greatest attention from the author. The wife has much in common with the classic “shrew” type found elsewhere in Chinese fiction—quick-tempered, sharp-tongued, domineering. It is the woman who is expected to figure out what to do with the crabs, and her antics drive the story. Her husband, in contrast, is meek, hardly speaks, and is slow to react when the trouble with the crabs begins. His only response once his wife has finished cursing him is to sit, “quiet as a mute, without making a sound.” The husband’s general dullness and lack of initiative may have been intended as a humorous send-up of the stereotypical age, whose status as a bannerman guaranteed him a livelihood even if he did little or no real work, resulting in an image of the age as a craven loafer lacking ambition and enterprise. Hence, for most of the story the wife seems to enjoy the advantage. Yet “proper” relations between husband and wife are finally restored in the conclusion, as she is enjoined to show him more respect, or at least deference. Here the intrusion of neo-Confucian norms into an otherwise purely comical narrative may be observed. Once administered, however, the lesson is quickly passed over as all present turn to the repast at hand. The language focuses again on the crabs, eaten with much relish. One wonders how effectively “Eating Crabs” really operated as a cautionary tale and whether the audience left satisfied that the imbalance in the marriage had been suitably addressed—or hungrily for a plate of crabs they could consume themselves while retelling the jokes they had just heard.

In some ways the real “star” of the show is “Number Two Auntie,” a stylish flirt who clearly knows the woman’s proper place in the household and acts as peacemaker between the couple. Yet her intervention stops short of being sanctimonious—in part because of the absurdity of the marital spat, which is, after all, over a pot of crabs (“Such strange little monsters, spitting out foam, / I don’t even know what the hell name to call them”), and in part because she herself has already been well caricatured before she arrives. Much more sophisticated than her country relatives, she puts on a grand display of the city woman’s vanity, as the minute description of her toilet makes plain:

She evenly powdered her face, as pretty as the hibiscus,

Dabbed crimson on her tiny mouth, as red as the fragrant cherry.

In the part of her hair, ever so narrow, she traced perfumed powder,

The hair on her temples, cut ever so neatly, she daubed with light ink.

Despite the urgency of the servant-girl’s appeal, we see that nothing can interfere with Auntie’s careful preparations for appearing in public, although, as it turns out, she is only walking a few houses down the block. Yet even a short stroll provides an opportunity to turn a few heads and win a few compliments.

Apart from its portrayal of male and female types, “Eating Crabs” also reminds readers of the complex ethnic picture in late-imperial China, particularly in and around Beijing. As already mentioned, the bilingual text itself reflects the city’s bicultural milieu. In addition, of course, there is the fact of “mixed marriage” that begins the story: he is a bannerman and she is a Han Chinese. Though the narrator of the story professes ignorance as to the husband’s name and place in the Eight-Banner system, this is likely a literary device to enable all in the audience—which would have included members of the banners and perhaps Han commoners as well—to identify with the hero. That the wife learns Manchu once she marries strongly suggests that she has married into a Manchu, not a Mongol or Chinese, household. The matter-of-fact mention of their marriage suggests, more-
over, that primary marriages between bannermen—including Manchus—and Han women were not uncommon in the mid-Qing period.\(^{31}\)

The parody of the feckless bannerman in the depiction of the husband—even his marriage seems to come about in a haphazard fashion—has been alluded to. This was probably an ethnic stereotype familiar to all in the audience and good for a few laughs. To what extent the aunt represents an ethnic stereotype is harder to say. She, too, is Manchu. This is apparent from a number of clues: her coiffure, including the carefully groomed side-locks; the three earrings in each ear, typical of Manchu women; the tobacco pouch; the milk tea she orders for her husband; and her free movement out of the house onto the street. Manchu women—along with other bannerwomen, one imagines—enjoyed considerably more physical freedom than did Han women, and it is hard to picture a respectable Chinese society woman attempting the same sort of one-woman parade that the aunt makes as she sashays down the street to her nephew’s house.\(^{32}\)

One obvious question that arises from a reading of the text is whether the aunt’s feet were bound. Since she is Manchu, one would certainly not expect this; bannerwomen were forbidden from binding their feet, and it does not appear that the custom ever spread widely, although there are reports of the occasional Chinese bannerwoman who has bound her feet. Nothing in the description of the aunt’s ablutions mentions her feet, but the description of her movement down the street is highly suggestive:

That body so fragile, those feet so small,
The twin dragons on her shoes like water at the seashore.
Her gait so light and sauntering,
The traces of each step the imprint of a lotus.

And again, a few lines later:

Trembling softly like a willow in the wind as she moved,
Each step so easy and so fetching.

These passages emphasize the attractiveness of small feet and convey the impression of a woman not quite steady on her too-tiny feet, swaying sensuously and provocatively. But were her feet bound? It is hard to say. Once her admirers have dispersed, the author notes that she reached her destination “in the wink of an eye.” This might mean that she could move quickly if she so wished, or merely that she did not have far to go. The evidence is inconclusive, but I think it is more likely that the author wished to describe her movements as being extremely feminine. The language here is fairly conventional as a description of feminine beauty, and one could easily argue that at the time a “feminine” walk was by literary definition a bound-footed walk. Even if one lacked bound feet, one might wish to affect the walk in order to look attractive. Certainly it was for this reason that the odd-shaped platform “horse-heel shoes” sported by elite Manchu women came into fashion: such shoes guaranteed a tottering gait that males were supposed to have found so fetching.\(^{33}\)

A final point of interest in regard to the text’s ethnic texturing is the appearance on the street of Mongol admirers, whose praise of the aunt is given in Mongolian (using Manchu writing). This is a wonderful touch that strikingly emphasizes the plurality of Beijing society under the Qing.

Translating a popular text such as “Eating Crabs” poses a number of special challenges, not the least of which is getting the meaning right. Apart from the difficulties posed by the constant switching between Chinese and Manchu, many of the expressions used are Beijing colloquialisms. Other problems arise when the nuance of the Chinese gloss suggests something not found in the main Manchu text (here I have generally preferred the meaning in Manchu). A different sort of challenge is posed by the desirability of preserving the lively, informal tone of the text without sacrificing comprehensibility. Should \textit{eniygei monio}, referring to the crab that is pinching the wife’s fingers, be translated literally as “my mother’s monkey” or more loosely as “the little rascal”? My decision has been to translate colloquial expressions in Chinese and Manchu into colloquial expressions in English that approximate the sense and emotion of the original. This is not, then, a literal translation, and doubtless I have made some poor choices. Whatever the limitations that may burden the following translation, I hope it may nevertheless provoke a few smiles and allow the reader a glimpse into the little-known universe of hybrid Beijing.

\begin{itemize}
\item \texttt{ORIGINAL TEXT} \footnote{\footnotesize\textit{The “Eating Crabs” Youth Book}}
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\end{itemize}

To live to one hundred merits some praise,
But it doesn’t compare to taking advantage of the pleasures of springtime.
If you come upon some good village wine, drink a few bowls;
When you see flowers in the field, stick a few in your hair.
For where in the underworld are there fresh flowers to wear?
And after all, winehouses around the gates of Hades are few.
If you don’t believe me, brother, take a look in the mirror—
Your face is even more lined this year than last.
But let’s cut the fancy talk and dispense with the poetry,
And go on to the crab-eating for some good laughs.
Although it’s an ordinary story in plain language,
Take care you don’t laugh so much that your mouth hurts!
Once there was a young gentleman—don't know his clan name,
Don't even know what he was called or what man was he,
Don't know if he was Manchu, Mongol, or "heavy troops,"
Much less what banner or what company.
He'd lived on the manor for two years and a half
When he took a wife from a Southerner family on the estate.
He didn't ask the surname of the bride's side or her pedigree;
He just up and married her.
Now this beauty was clever and sharp, and she had a way with
words as well,
And before six months were up she learned to speak Manchu.
She was a lively woman, too, and fond of jokes;
Soon she became a half-Manchu, half-Han wildwoman.

Without any warning, one year a drought hit,
Making it tough just to eat and keep the clothes on your back.
The two had no choice, so they moved into the city,
A place not far from here, right off the main street.
One day, with nothing to do, the young gentleman went out and,
on a lark,
Bought a few pounds of crabs and brought them home.
Entering the house, he put them in a basin;
"Yikes!" said the wildwoman when she saw them. "What in the
world are those?"
The gentleman laughed, saying, "Don't ask me!
I'm astonished, too! I don't know what they are."
While the man and wife were busy guessing and making mischief,
The crabs clambered and crawled out of the basin.
The beauty shouted at them, "Where do you think you're going?"
She tuck up her sleeves and quickly went after one with her hands,
But before she could grab it, the crab seized her hand between its
two pincers.
"The little rascal's got my hand!" cried the wildwoman,
In such pain that she could only shake her delicate wrist frantically
While the crab hung on for dear life, its legs writhing in the air.
The young gentleman watched in alarm. "Oh, no!" he cried. Rushing
forward, he
Began pulling desperately at the claw.
But the more he pulled, the tighter the crab pinched, and the more it hurt;
Again and again she shook her hand, but the crab just wouldn't let go,
until finally
With a mighty flick she hurled the crab onto the floor with a loud crack!
It hurt so much all she could do was grit her teeth and yell, "Ouch!
Ouch!" at the top of her lungs.
The tears and snivel were still streaming down her face
When the remaining crabs surrounded her with much clattering,
Scaring her so that she trembled and changed her expression,
As from her mouth poured an uncontrollable stream of curses.
She spun wildly all about the room,
Her hands fluttering in the air, just as if she were dancing.
As long as she didn't catch them, she had to watch out for their biting;
Yet if she tried to pick one up, she was afraid of being pinched.
So the beauty was at wit's end with no idea what to do;
Whenever she saw an opening, she flung here and grabbed there.
Watching all this from the side, the gentleman's ire rose, and
Rolling up his sleeves, he went after them.
The two of them worked together, so that
All you could hear were the shouts that filled the air.
The beauty was throwing her hair pins at the crabs,
While the gentleman took his knife and stabbed at them as hard as
he could.
The lady finally took off her blouse and laid it over the floor
As the gentleman removed his summer hat and tried clumsily
to catch them.
The husband capped them, his wife flapped them;
The wife wrapped them, her husband trapped them.
So busy were they that the gentleman's head steamed,
And sweat dripped down the girl's face.
Half the day they spent till all the crabs were finally caught
They were panting in exhaustion from all their jumping about.
Then she called to him: "Sir! Why don't you come here and ladle up
some water?"
Together we can cook these stupid things and kill them."
They covered the basin with the pickle-jar lid and put a ceramic bowl
on top,
Then weighed all that down with a big rock they brought over.
They broke some stalks of millet to build a fire,
And did all they could to get the water to a fast boil.  
Once it had boiled for a good long while,  
The young beauty lifted up the lid to have a look:  
“This is really an amazing fish!  
No wonder people prize it so much.  
Alive, it's blue like indigo, but  
Once it's cooked it's as red as cinnabar.  
Let's give them a try to see how they taste!”  
Quickly they picked up their chopsticks,  
One on the left and the other on the right, but they just couldn’t get a grip.  
Aloud she cursed them: “Freaks of nature! How come you’re so slippery?”  
Putting down her chopsticks and holding her breath,  
She hiked up her sleeves and grabbed one.  
With the crab in her hands she gave it a bite.  
“Devil take them! These are so hard!  
They're all nothing but bone. Where's the meat?  
How am I supposed to chew something as hard as this?”  
The beauty's temper flared again as she  
Cursed the gentleman, “You lout!  
Buying such useless things,  
Wasting all our precious money.  
Steam it and steam it, but it doesn’t get cooked. Boil it and boil it, and it  
doesn't get soft.  
I can’t believe what an idiot you are!”  
Her scolding made the young gentleman pout his lips  
And stay as quiet as a mute, without making a sound.  

When the servant girl saw the couple so angry,  
She rushed off to get Number Two Auntie,  
Who, when she saw the girl, broke into a big smile and asked,  
“What have you come to see me about?”  
The girl explained, “They’re quarreling in the master’s house!  
Oh, Auntie, please go and make them stop. Hurry!”  
Now, this fine lady made a little bleating sound and ordered the girl,  
“Be quick! Go get my toilet case.”  
With a “Yes, ma'am,” the girl ran into the house  
And in a great flurry got her cosmetics.  
All kinds of things she brought out to  
Set in front of her master’s aunt, including  

A carved-dragon basin brimming with perfume, and  
An embroidered mandarin duck pillow with mallows.  
With skilled hands the aunt undid her jet-black hair,  
A tortoise-shell comb in her grasp.  
She combed and straightened, straightened and combed;  
When her hair was all combed, she put cassia oil in the tresses.  
Ribbons of shiny black artfully supported the now-dressed hair,  
Golden ear-picks of pure yellow pined it sideways.  
With crystal-clear warm water she washed her face,  
Then wiped it dry with a downy white silken kerchief.  
She cleaned and rinsed her delicate tongue, then  
Brushed her teeth as white and sparkling as sticky rice.  
She evenly powdered her face, as pretty as the hibiscus,  
Dabbed crimson on her tiny mouth, as red as the fragrant cherry.  
In the part of her hair, ever so narrow, she traced perfumed powder,  
The hair on her temples, cut ever so neatly, she daubed with light ink.  
Her fine and delicate eyebrows she lined with a silver hairpin,  
While glittering pearl earrings dangled down, three on a side;  
A modish, large flower she fastened in her hair,  
Along with many different hairpins all over her head.  
Taking the mirror and breathing on it,  
With her black tresses she wiped it meticulously; then,  
Holding the shiny clean mirror high, looked both in front and in back,  
Checking everything carefully, point by point, with fluttering eyes.  

When the servant girl saw her mistress had completed her toilet,  
She sprang over to the wardrobe to get her clothes.  
Slowly, gently, the lady arose and extended her delicate wrists to  
Put on a colorful satin-lined gown.  
The girl put some tobacco in a pipe and handed it to her, and  
Without thinking about what she was doing, also brought tea.  
Shyly, the lady called the girl over:  
“What do you think? How do I look?”  
The servant raised her head when she heard the question;  
Looking up and down for a long time, she clicked her mouth in approval.  
Her face wreathed in smiles, she respectfully pronounced, “Mistress!  
Your appearance is truly marvelous.  
I'll just say that while it is hard for people to compete with the beauty  
of flowers,
Who would have known how much like a flower is your visage!
No wonder the elder master cherishes and dotes on you so,
His warm affection added to his favor and love.
Who has ever seen a goddess?
Yet you are like a fairy descended from the moon!"
The lady's cheeks beamed with pleasure at such praise,
But she scolded the girl: "That's enough jawing, you misbegotten little monkey!
I have to go now to your mistress's house.
Since there's no one here, you stay behind and watch the house.
When the elder master returns, you be sure to look after him well and
Make his milk tea with a lot of cream."
These preparations complete, she set on her way,
Entering the main street right after leaving the house.

Before moving, she first affected a pose,
So that people on both sides of the street were all watching her.
What they saw was a vision of an immortal
Made up to look just like a blossom in her appearance.
Her body was sheathed in a sky-blue satin dress decorated with a
"prosperity-cloud" pattern,
Out of which came the long sleeves of her moon-white satin camisole.
Wrapped loosely around her neck, a scarf draped down over her bosom,
Making the little embroidery purse she carried look all the more precious.
One had only to look to see her curved brows, seductive almond eyes,
Crimson lips behind which showed silvery teeth,
Snow-white complexion, fresh like a mirror of jade, and
The fine line of her beautiful hair, black like a nest of crows.
How magnificent the kerchief that lazily adorned her hair,
How brilliant the gold and jewels that glittered on her head.
That body so fragile, those feet so small,
The twin dragons on her shoes like water at the seashore.
Her gait so light and sauntering,
The traces of each step the imprint of a lotus.
The sweet smell of incense struck people's faces,
Her slender, precious hands clutching a colorful fan.
Every manner of gentility and good taste so pleasing,
So much to commend in her charm and elegance.
Everyone who saw her was full of praise,

Clicking their tongues in amazement.
When the beauty saw so many people gathered and cheering,
She deliberately slowed her pace,
Fluttering the moon-white scarf about her neck,
With skilled hands she pulled the sidelong hem of her gown.
Both eyes flitting anxiously, watchfully, recklessly, she
Purposefully adjusted her hair ornaments and tamped down the locks on her cheeks.

Trembling softly like a willow in the wind as she moved,
Each step so easy and so fetching,
You could even hear the bell-like sound of her delicate cough and
Watch as she dabbed her mouth with her kerchief.
Every glance of those smiling eyes left its mark,
Enticing everyone to stare.

Passersby stopped in their tracks, such that
In a moment all of Taiping Street was full.
Several stopped their sedan chairs and pulled aside the curtains to look;
Several reined in their horses and whipped but lazily;
Several secretly stole a peek and forgot what they were doing;
Several just stood and stared stupidly for a long, long time.
Several Mongols on the street blinked their eyes and said, "Mercy!
Bless my soul! It's the Mother of Buddha in the flesh, a living bodhisattva."
A few businessmen were also busy looking,
Exchanging looks with each other with gaping yellow-toothed mouths.

After everyone had had their look and gone their way,
The lady arrived at her sister's house in the wink of an eye.
The couple sat in morose, angry silence
When they heard the sound of someone's steps.
The young gentleman raised his head and opened his eyes;
His wife looked up to see who was there.
But the woman they saw walk in from outside was a
Colorfully made-up fairy princess.
"Who are you?" they asked, when upon closer inspection they saw
It was in fact their Number Two Auntie from next door.
"How are you?" she asked as she entered,
"And what are the two of you quarreling about?"
The wildwoman cried out, "Dear sister! You've come at the right time.
Can you take a look and see what these things are here?
Their bodies are roundish and flat,  
They have neither head nor tail.  
Such strange little monsters, spitting out foam,  
I don’t even know what the hell name to call them.”  
Number Two Auntie glanced in the pot and saw the crabs;  
Looking down, she broke out instantly into uproarious laughter.  
She called her niece over, still laughing and laughing:  
“You country girl, don’t you know what these are?  
Clearly, sister, you’re in the wrong here.  
You’ve been scolding your husband for no good reason.  
It’s a good thing he’s such a nice fellow and lets you rant.  
If it were my husband you were married to, he’d have beaten you to death!  
From now on, I’d suggest you do your best to yield to him  
And don’t you go fighting again!”  
When she was through talking, she called the servant girl to bring the crabs over,  
While the husband and wife watched in dumb amazement.  
Number Two Auntie spoke: “This thing is called a crab.  
There is an excellent way to eat it.”  
As she spoke, she took one, removed the carapace,  
Opened the shell, and removed the gills.  
She broke the crab in two halves and handed it to them,  
Saying, “Brother-in-law! Sister! Try it, try it!”  
Wife and husband took some in their hands and  
Put some of the yellow meat in their mouths, snacking as they chewed.  
The beauty ate, smiling and happy,  
The gentleman ate joyfully, laughing.  
His wife said, “Dear husband! Go buy some more,  
It doesn’t matter how much they cost!”  
With great relish they finished off every one,  
Laughing themselves into exhaustion before they separated.  

NOTES  
I would like to express my thanks to my teachers James Bosson and Okada Hidehiro,  
who first introduced this text to me; to Ding Yizhuang of the Chinese Academy of  
Social Sciences for translation help; and to my colleague Kathryn Lowry for her  
careful reading of the preface. Thank you also to Yu-Yin Cheng for many helpful  
suggestions on the translation itself.

1. Literally “sons and younger brothers,” zidi is best rendered, I think, simply as “youth.” See the entry in Morohashi Tetuz, Dai Kan-Wa jiten, 6930-647, 3:1067.  
Translated directly as juse deote, the phrase was in regular use in Manchu, with this same meaning.

2. Two other well-known mixed-language zidishe are “Chaguan” (The frontier sentinel) and “Xunfu qu” (Looking for a husband). The former is translated by Wadley in “The Mixed-Language Verses from the Manchu Dynasty in China.” See also the discussion of this work in Okada Hidehiro, “Mandarin, A Language of the Manchus: How Altaic? Both stories are translated by Tulli in “Due esempi di zidishe sino-mancesi.” Neither, however, duplicates the interspersed use of both languages found in “Eating Crabs.” “Chaguan” is mainly in Chinese with Manchu words occurring primarily in the speeches of one character; “Xunfu qu” is completely parallel, with all text in both Chinese and Manchu. The only other youth book whose language might mirror that of “Eating Crabs” is one titled “Shengguan tu” (A plan for promotion to office), described in a footnote in Guan Dedong, Quyi lunji, 88, n. 2.

3. On the other hand, as the existence of Manchu-Chinese “mixed verse” attests, it was not impossible to combine Chinese and Manchu together in regular metrical poetry. See Stary, “Fundamental Principles of Manchu Poetry”; and Tulli, “Analisi metrico-formale di una raccolta di poesie ibride sino-mancesi.”

4. Thus the final words of each couplet in the first twenty lines after the introductory section are nijalma”, “gisa”, “jia, jia, bahanaha”, “mama”, “mamga”, “gya”, “jia, jia”, “ta, pa, zhu, jia, la, la, sa, ya, ta, la. This rhyming pattern holds true for the entire text. (Asterisked words are Manchu.)

5. Hatano Tarō, “Shiteisho Man-Kan ken Pangxie duan’er kaidai,” 6. Cf. the remarks of someone who no doubt had heard youth books performed: “The songs of the zidishe are sad and lovely, and their words are refined” (Tun Li-ch’en, Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking, 97).


7. Guan Dedong, Quyi lunji, 92-93. I rely on the authoritative accounts by Hatano and Guan for many of the following characterizations of the youth book genre.

8. Zhen-jun, Tianzhi ouwen, 7:175; Tun Li-ch’en, Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking, 96, 113. It is not entirely clear from the passage in Tianzhi ouwen if Zhen-jun meant that the genre had disappeared entirely or if the best tradition of blind zidishe performers had been cut off.


10. Xu Ke, Qinghai leibao, 10:4954. The language here is suspiciously close to that in Zhen-jun, Tianzhi ouwen, however.

11. Fu Xihu was the first scholar to examine the youth book genre. Hatano says Fu began his work in 1938 and for years searched in vain for anyone who could sing zidishe. He also cites a Beijing guidebook of 1919 to the effect that zidishe were no longer being performed in the Inner City. See Hatano Tarō, “Shiteisho Man-Kan ken ‘Pangxie duan’er kaidai,” 7.


13. This division is understandable when one recalls that what is now central Beijing’s primary east-west thoroughfare, Chang’an dajie, did not exist in the Qing. The placement of the imperial city (huangcheng) in the middle of the walled “inner” (or “Tartar”) city (neicheng) made crossing from east to west and vice-versa impossible except in the north of the city.

14. Zhen-jun, Tianzhi ouwen, 175, on the special sound of the West City style.
15. The "banner" (Chinese qī, Manchu qaṣa) was the basic unit of social, political, and military organization in Manchu society. Banners were distinguished by eight color patterns as well as by three ethnic subdivisions: Manchu, Mongol, and Chinese (called ujên coôha or "heavy troops" in Manchu). Banner people were required to live separately from Han Chinese. A wide range of legal and economic privileges accentuated their distinct ethno-social status. For more on the banner system and Manchu identity generally, readers are referred to Elliott, The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China.

16. Tun Li-ch’en says that zidishu were performed by "amateur singers who go in groups to the houses of friends, temple festivals, etc." (Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking, 115).

17. This is my sense after reviewing thirty-odd occurrences of the relevant Manchu expression, juse deote, in Manchu documents from the early eighteenth century. In only one instance did it seem that the phrase referred to bannermen generally; everywhere else it referred either to young people or to children.

18. Guan Dedong and Zhou Zhongming, Zidishu congchao, 11; Liu Liemao and Guo Jingrui, Qing Che wangfu chaocang quben, zidishu ji, 2; Nienhauser, The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature, 844. It should be noted, however, that phrasing it this way sidesteps the problem of how the hybrid banner culture that developed in Beijing is taken to stand for "Manchu" culture.


20. Zhen-jun, Tianshi owuen, 175.


22. Guan Dedong and Zhou Zhongming, Zidishu congchao, 3.

23. See the two important collections: Guan Dedong and Zhou Zhongming, Zidishu congchao; and Liu Liemao and Guo Jingrui, Qing Che wangfu.

24. Liu Liemao and Guo Jingrui, Qing Che wangfu, 4.


27. A full Japanese translation is found in Jin Jiuqing (Jin Majin), "Chi pangxie," (Man-Mō zasshi [September] 1935), reproduced in Hatano Tarō, Pangxie duan’er yanjiu. A partial English translation (based on the same manuscript text used here) is given in Okada Hidehiro, "Mandarin, a Language of the Manchus." The present translation is based on the version in Hatano Tarō, Pangxie duan’er yanjiu, that is, the so-called Liwuwaotang manuscript, ca. 1800. See note 34.

28. For more on the role of Manchu at this time, see Crossley and Rawski, "A Profile of the Manchu Language in Ch’ing History."


30. On the classic "shrew," see the work by McMahon: Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction; also Wu, The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme.

31. It was matches between bannerwomen, especially Manchu women, and Han men that were prohibited by the court. This double standard makes sense if one bears in mind that marriage was an important site of acculturation and that acculturation was something the court was quite concerned about. Han commoner women marrying into banner households would presumably ease into a Manchu lifestyle, whereas Manchu women marrying into commoner households would theoretically lose their "Manchu-ness" and become sinned. More on banner marriage patterns may be found in Ding Yizhuang, Manzu de fuji shenghuo yu hunyin zhidu yanjiu.

32. On the status of Manchu women in Qing society, see the work cited in the previous note; also Elliott, "Manchu Widows and Ethnicity in China"; and Zhang Juling, Qingdai Manzu ziji, 110–16.


34. Source: Hatano Tarō, Pangxie duan’er yanjiu. See note 27. Fortunately, modern editions of the youth book provide helpful annotations, but I have dispensed with annotating the translated text that follows. Readers who wish further information are encouraged to refer to the notes, particularly to the studies by Hatano and Guan. Some editions, such as that used here (ca. 1800), provide a Chinese gloss for the Manchu text. I have been guided by this gloss, but in some cases have opted for English phrasing that seemed to me to better reflect the original sense of the Manchu. I have also introduced breaks in the text between the four main scenes.