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Deciphering Dream Omens in Chinese Tradition:
Cases of *Cezi* in Late Imperial *Xiaoshuo* Literature

As a tradition that was originally linked to divination, Chinese oneirology includes many narratives that recount how a dream carries a hidden meaning that may reveal future events or explain ongoing ones. Dreams were indeed considered to be messages sent by the entities of the invisible world, so that the living may cope with their lives. The classical literature of leisure, notably the "small talks" (*xiaoshuo* 小說), was pervaded with stories of dream omens to be deciphered. Among the various techniques of dream interpretation was the "fathoming of characters" (*cezi* 測字), which bears many other names, and that consisted in manipulating the Chinese characters seen in a dream, or manipulating the characters that one could get out of a dream content. Dream enigmas appeared quite early in the literature of leisure, but we shall here focus on the Qing period (especially the 17th and 18th centuries) to show how persistently through Chinese history *cezi* appeared as a way to elucidate dreams. Examples of how people made sense of dreams through *cezi* are numerous in *xiaoshuo* literature, and this paper will provide a few examples drawn from collections such as Wang Jian's 王楲 (unknown dates) *Collected Talks of the Autumn Lamp* (*Qiudeng conghua* 秋燈叢話) (1780), Yuan Mei's 袁枚 (1716 – 1798) *What the Master Would Not Discuss* (*Zibuyu* 子不語) (1788), and also Cao Xueqin's 曹雪芹 (1715?–1763?) *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢).