

Popular Narrative in Qing and Early Republican China

Margaret B. Wan

Popular Literature in Contemporary China: Production, Diffusion and Genres

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For most of Chinese history, fiction in general, and the novel in particular, always fell at the bottom of hierarchies of forms of writing. The term commonly translated as novel, *xiaoshuo* 小說, carries connotations of marginality or frivolity, something which “the gentleman does not do.”¹ Thus, not only was the novel in China traditionally placed outside the canon of serious literature, but also by implication of the term *xiaoshuo* it was something on which one should not waste time. Still, by the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) the novel was, along with textbooks, a staple of the publishing industry and thereby one of the most widely available forms of reading material. (Brokaw 2007b). The traditional novel flourished in China for about three and a half centuries, from the defining early examples in the sixteenth century until the late nineteenth century, when increasing contact with the West and urges to “modernize” spurred Chinese reformers to redefine the “new” novel in different terms. Thereafter the form of Chinese novels more closely resembled Western models, but reformers retained the indigenous term for novel,

¹ “The *xiaoshuo* school probably evolved from the office of petty officials. The works were street talk and alley gossip, made up by those who engaged in conversations along the roads and walkways. Confucius once said, ‘Although a petty path, there is surely something to be seen in it. But if pursued too far, one could get bogged down; hence the gentleman does not do so.’ Still, he did not discard them. Being something upon which those of lesser knowledge touched, they were collected and not forgotten, on the chance they might contain a useful phrase or two. They are really the discourses of rustics and eccentrics.” Ban Gu, “Yi wen zhi.” Translated by Laura Hua Wu in “From Xiaoshuo to Fiction: Hu Yinglin’s Genre Study of Xiaoshuo,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55, no. 2 (1995): 340. While the term is much older than the novel in China, when the novel took shape in sixteenth-century China, the term *xiaoshuo* was applied to it.

xiaoshuo, implicitly acknowledging a continuum between the modern Chinese novel and its traditional predecessor. (Zeitlin 2006)

My central concern today is to consider what “popular” means for Chinese narrative in the Qing and early Republic. In keeping with the theme of the conference, I will address production, diffusion, and genre along the way. I will start with a brief overview of scholarly approaches to the traditional Chinese novel as a jumping-off point for this discussion. I suggest three things: 1) that the availability of texts and stories is a stronger criterion than aesthetics in defining what was “popular;” 2) that we should look at the Chinese novel as a system of genres; and 3) that scholars should also look beyond the novel to other narrative genres (including ballads) to get a fuller picture of popular literature in the Qing.

The first serious history of Chinese fiction, the still-influential *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* 中國小說史略 (*A Short History of Chinese Fiction*) published by Lu Xun in the 1920s, divided the novel into thematic categories including novels about gods and demons, romance, satires, erudite novels, novels of depravity (courtesan novels), and court-case adventure novels. The discussion of such novels in Lu Xun’s literary history also established a dichotomy between “popular” and “elite” novels as well as the powerful idea that novels were essentially of the folk. Following his lead, Chinese literary critics from the 1920s to the 1960s considered the ‘plain stories’ (*pinghua* 平話) and early editions of novels to be essentially equivalent to real scripts for performance by storytellers. Western studies from the 1960s-1980s worked to show the literary nature of

the ‘storyteller’s manner’ in vernacular fiction, thereby refuting the idea that novels were storytelling prompt-books (Hanan 1973; Idema 1974).²

Andrew Plaks (1987) argued forcefully that “literati” interests reshaped the few great sixteenth-century Chinese novels, including *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (Three Kingdoms), *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (The Water Margin), *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (The Plum in a Golden Vase), and *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West). Other studies established the literary value and literati outlook of two great Qing novels, *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (The Dream of the Red Chamber) and *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 (The Unofficial History of the Scholars). These six novels, which C.T. Hsia effectively introduced to Western readers in his enduring study *The Classic Chinese Novel* (1968), continue to define the core of the field. Several other novels have received sustained scholarly attention, generally justified on intellectual or aesthetic grounds, including *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* 醒世姻緣傳 (Marriage as Retribution, Awakening the World) (Wu 1999), *Rou Putuan* 肉蒲團 (The Carnal Prayer Mat) by Li Yu (Hanan 1988; Hanan 1990), *Yesou puyan* 野叟曝言 (Humble Words of an Old Rustic) (Huang 2006), *Jinghua yuan* 鏡花緣 (Flowers in the Mirror) (Roddy 1998), and *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* 兒女英雄傳 (Heroes and Lovers) (Epstein 2001). With only a few exceptions, the rest of the nine hundred or so known traditional Chinese novels are rarely studied by scholars, and when they do receive attention, it tends to be in the aggregate in occasional surveys of themes or print history.

² Recently, scholars have been working to complicate such either-or approaches to orality and literacy and explore how Chinese novels can be both great works of art and a product of oral inspiration and imitation (Ge 2001; Børdahl and Wan 2010).

Plaks argues that the term “novel” can be used for the Chinese case--or at least the few outstanding Chinese novels he calls the masterworks (*si da qishu* 四大奇書)--because it shares a number of significant features with the best examples of the European novel and lends itself to analysis regarding the same kinds of theoretical and historical concerns (Plaks 1978; Plaks 2006). He emphasizes the novel’s function as a critical re-appraisal of a culture.

[I]t is precisely in the relation between the novel and intellectual history that we find the most striking parallels between the two traditions and the greatest justification for applying the term "novel" to the Chinese works, notwithstanding the vastly different features of structuration, characterization, etc., which would otherwise disqualify the use of that term. (Plaks 1978, 166)

The focus on the “masterworks” or a handful of great Chinese novels is justified, in Plaks’ view, because “any discussion of literary genres must in the final analysis base itself on the best works of a tradition, those whose stature and influence contribute most the conception of genre and establishment of generic conventions” (Plaks 1978, 167). Thus this influential discussion of how the term “novel” could be meaningfully applied to the Chinese case puts forward a definition that also excludes most possible examples of the genre. By defining the novel as tied to literati culture and focusing on the great works, Plaks’ definition perpetuated the fate of many Chinese novels to be relegated to the “Great Unread.”

Production: Defining “Popular” by Availability

The term “popular” as applied to traditional Chinese fiction is fraught. Plaks’ very definition of the novel largely would exclude what he considers the “lesser works” that he argues are modeled on the great novels but do not share their complexity and artistic excellence. Wilt Idema rejects the term “popular fiction” on other grounds, noting that this term implies a nearly universal reading public, while the literacy rate in eighteenth and nineteenth century China, which he estimates at about five percent of the population, would not support such a characterization. (Idema 1974) Idema’s point is well taken; the use of the term “popular” here is not meant to imply a mass audience. Still, the advent of the novel in China came at a time when access to education was expanding and printing was booming. This suggests a growing audience for texts, but readership in Ming-Qing China is notoriously difficult to analyze. We simply do not have the kinds of records available for British or French novels -- such as copyright registration records, detailed business accounts and correspondence, or records of lending libraries and book clubs (St. Clair 2004). Several models for conceptualizing Chinese reading audiences in terms of literacy and social status have been put forward by Idema (1974), David Johnson (1985), Robert Hegel (1985), and Anne McLaren (2001).

In the end, due to the lack of documentation, we frequently must infer what we can from the imprints themselves. Novels in the Ming (sixteenth-mid seventeenth centuries) were printed in two radically different types of editions: expensive, “full,” lavishly illustrated luxury editions (*fanben*) printed in the cultural heartland, and cheap “concise” editions (*jianben*) with illustrations above and text below that were printed in Fujian (Hegel 1998). Scholars still debate the relationship between these editions (did

concise editions abridge the full ones?), but they clearly aimed at different price points. By the Qing, commercial printing standardized the format of novels and carried them into even the hinterlands and across all social and educational strata (Brokaw 2007b). Woodblock printing remained the dominant means of producing novels in China until the late nineteenth century, when lithographic printing was adopted as much cheaper, faster, and more attractive (Reed 2004). Lithographic printing and the periodical press that it engendered, along with strenuous efforts in expanding education, helped bring about a sea change in print culture which led to the formation of genuine mass audiences. The impact of this was so great that Idema has argued that the founding of the first Chinese newspaper should be considered the true beginning of modern Chinese literature (Idema 2013a). The change in technology, however, did not mean an immediate and total change in content. “Traditional” novels maintained their popularity in the late Qing and early Republic, remaining one of the staples of the publishing industry (Han Xiduo 2002; Reed 2004, 88; Brokaw 2010, 40), and a boom in lithographic editions of ballad texts began around 1905 (Li Yu 2006, 18-19, 25-28).

Cynthia Brokaw’s very helpful model for audiences in the Qing examines the production and distribution of texts as material objects, considering factors such as print quality, geographic distribution, and how accessible the language of the imprints was. She differentiates between a ‘select’ strata of specialized texts aimed at the small segment of highly educated men throughout the empire; a ‘core’ of ‘bestselling’ reading material which extended socially across all literate levels and geographically across the Chinese empire; and texts largely of ‘local’ interest. (Brokaw 2007b) In this model, novels are national bestsellers.

By using the term “popular” here to refer to the traditional Chinese novel, I want to highlight two ideas. The first is the relative ubiquity and availability of many of these works in the print culture of their day. Thus I define popularity in terms of wide accessibility, measured by the number of times a novel was reprinted. Judging by known editions, the most popular works of fiction in sixteenth to nineteenth century included the short story collection *Jin’gu qiguan* 今古奇觀 (Strange Views Old and New, 55 editions), the romances *Yu Jiao Li* 玉嬌梨 (53 editions) and *Ping Shan Leng Yan* 平山冷燕 (46 editions), the historical novels *Dong Zhou lieguo zhuan* 東周列國傳 (Stories of the States of the Eastern Zhou, 45 editions) and *Yinglie zhuan* 英烈傳 (Stories of Heroes, 36 editions), and the collection of court-case stories *Longtu gong’an* 龍圖公案 (Cases of [Bao] Longtu, 32 editions), as well as military romances, stories of gods and monks, and martial arts novels. (Ōtsuka 1987; Hegel 1998) All of these were printed in numbers of editions comparable to or exceeding those of five of the six recognized “masterworks” of the novel.³ The many less familiar titles on this list demonstrate the importance of the “Great Unread.” The canon of “masterworks” and literati novels studied today does not always correspond with the works which were most widely known or influential in their own time.

The seemingly strange bedfellows on the list of the most printed works of fiction in Ming-Qing China lead to my second point: the permeability and fungibility of many of our conventional categories for traditional Chinese fiction. Once we define “popular” in

³ The term “masterworks” here is used as a convenient term for the six novels. I use it only to acknowledge their canonization.

terms of a novel's availability in print, as opposed to its authorship or internal aesthetics, it challenges the division between "high" and "low," or the linguistic division between vernacular and classical, by which scholars often classify these works. To give two examples, the "erudite" novel *Jinghua yuan* may have been written to show of the wide learning of its author (Hsia 1977; Roddy 1998), but it was also a bestseller with more than twenty-four known editions--perhaps, like *Gulliver's Travels*, because of its depiction of wondrous places (Hegel 1998). The compendium *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異 (Liaozhai's Records of the Strange) was written in classical Chinese, but it also was widely available all the way down to the village level (Brokaw 2007a, 19). By my definition, most of the masterworks of Chinese fiction would also count as popular novels. They tended to be reprinted dozens of times, with the exception of *Rulin waishi*. Indeed, *Honglou meng* was an unprecedented publishing phenomenon; it not only changed the conception of the romance plot in China, it spawned a whole genre of sequels and continuations in response (McMahon 2004; Widmer 2004).

The Chinese Novel as a System of Genres

Staying with a small group of novels makes it possible to talk about what "the novel" is or does in any tradition. Once beyond that canon, however, one is confronted with a bewildering number and variety of Chinese novels. The challenge is to find a way to analyze them in a meaningful way, rather than sidelining them. As Franco Moretti notes for the European novel,

For most literary historians, I mean, there is a categorical difference between ‘the novel’ and the various ‘novelistic (sub)genres’: the novel is, so to speak, the substance of the form, and deserves a full general theory: subgenres are more like accidents, and their study, however interesting, remains local in character, without real theoretical consequences.

...[H]owever, ...the novel does not develop as a single entity...but by periodically generating a whole set of genres, and then another, and another...both synchronically and diachronically, in other words, the novel is *the system of its genres*:And instead, all great theories of the novel have precisely reduced the novel to one basic form only (realism, the dialogic, romance, meta-novels...); and if the reduction has given them their elegance and power, it has also erased nine tenths of literary history.

Too much. (Moretti 2007, 30; italics original)

How, then, do we restore the neglected majority of Chinese novels? How do we connect the thematic subgenres of the novel?

With hundreds of novels and dozens of genres of the traditional Chinese novel to grapple with, providing an overview of the main “popular” genres and their development poses a real challenge. However, the relationship between history and fiction can provide a useful starting point. History in China served as a repertoire of moral models, positive and negative. As such it held a central position in Chinese culture. Chinese novels often justify their existence by claiming to be elaborations of the official historical record (*yanyi* 演藝), or supplementary unofficial histories (*yeshi* 野史). Martin Huang in his article “Dehistoricization and Intertextualization” posits a neat progression in four of the

great Chinese novels, in which each novel, in dealing with the anxiety of its antecedent, forms a step in a progression away from history and toward emphasis on the individual. Thus the historical novel *Sanguo yanyi* traces the fate of a dynasty, while the adventure novel *Shuihu zhuan* shows the rise and fall of a band of outlaws. The pioneering domestic novel, *Jin Ping Mei*, borrows characters from *Shuihu zhuan* to explore the fortunes and squabbles of one family, where the male protagonist is figured as a bad last emperor. Later, *Honglou meng* used that as a blueprint for its own story of a boy's search for identity against the backdrop of his family's decline. As the focus narrows to the individual, the settings and concerns also shift to the private. These novels each have clear intertextual relationships with their predecessor. (Huang 1990)

A similar trend away from emphasis on historical events and toward portraying the individual can be seen across most genres of the popular Chinese novel, although the chronology is not as neat. Some of this is apparent in the shrinking scale of the novel. The use of space and time, discussed by Bakhtin as chronotopes in the European novel (Bakhtin 1981), shifts in the traditional Chinese novel from the imperial court and battlefield to the road, and then focuses in, going within the household to the bedroom and the garden. Many of the earliest Chinese novels are historical fiction, which strive to faithfully present historical fact while incorporating legend and lore. These often focus on the founding of a dynasty or the restoration of a dynasty in a period of turmoil. Besides the archetypal *Sanguo yanyi*, examples include novels on the Tang dynasty such as *Sui Tang yanyi* 隋唐演義 (Elaboration on the Sui and Tang Dynasties). A closely related genre, the military romance, coexisted early on with the historical novel. Both the historical novel and the military romance draw on existing legends of heroes,

and both center on the values of loyalty, brotherhood, and filial piety. The military romances center on issues of national security and relate the undying loyalty of great generals, their achievements on the battlefield, and their conflict with treacherous officials. These looser accounts often follow several generations of one family, and make much play of characters who do not appear in the historical record. The tale of the Yang Family Generals, which forms the core interest in *Nan Bei Song zhizhuan* 南北宋志傳 (Account of the Northern and Southern Song), is one of the best known. Military romances were some of the most-published novels through much of the sixteenth century. Novels like *Shuo Tang houzhuan* 說唐後傳 (Later Tale of the Tang) which parody their stock characters and values (Hegel 2004) appeared in the eighteenth century, and both kinds of fiction remained perennial favorites through the nineteenth century.

A very different focus characterized the scholar-beauty romance, which emerged by the seventeenth century. These short novellas about the courtship between a talented boy and one or more equally gifted girls include some of the absolute bestsellers among traditional Chinese novels, such as *Yu Jiao Li* and *Haoqiu zhuan* 好逑傳 (The Fortunate Union). They tell of the courtship of a couple who are both equally brilliant and beautiful. The heroes are distinguished from the villains by their learning, intelligence, and virtue. Poetry plays a central role in the development of the romance plot; it is through reading each other's poetry that the protagonists recognize talent and pursue the match. Lin Chen (1988) outlines the typical tripartite structure of the scholar-beauty romance as: love at first sight, separation of the lovers by external forces, and a final reunion. These correspond to the three underlying values of the genre: free choice in marriage; loyalty and chastity in love; and a happy marriage for the lovers.

Court-case novels, which appeared in the nineteenth century, drew on a long-standing theme in Chinese literature, the wise and incorruptible judge. Legends of good judges, such as the archetypal Judge Bao, took many forms before the novel, including ballads, plays, and collections of short stories (Idema 2010). With a few exceptions, novels on this theme tend to be long, episodic works that combine the judge figure with a number of assistants skilled in martial arts (Ma 1979). Examples include *Shi Gong an* 施公案 (Cases of Judge Shi) and *San xia wu yi* 三俠五義 (Three Heroes and Five Gallants).

Tales of deities and unusual monks also captured the imagination. An early example and perennial favorite, *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演藝 (The Canonization of the Gods, 1620s), tells the story of early dynastic change as an epic magical battle in which the gods took sides. Later novels including *Zui Puti* 醉菩提 (Drunken Puti, 1721) focus on eccentric magical monks (Shahar 1998). These novels especially alert us to the difficulty of categorizing fiction into neat thematic genres: some stories of deities and immortals share significant material with the military romance (Hege1 2011), while many of the stories of eccentric monks have strong ties to martial arts narratives.

In most of these genres of the popular novel, along with the shrinking scale of chronotopes over the course of the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, we observe an ongoing process of “dehistoricization” and increasing emphasis on individual subjectivity. There may be some exception with the court-case adventure novel and martial arts novels, where the road still features prominently, but even there the focus of interest is on the characterization of individual heroes.

Genres tend to form systems. Their characteristics are often defined in opposition to one another, as genres energize each other by counterbalancing each other's values. Sometimes the opposed genres threaten each other by mutual criticism. (Dubrow 1982) Either way, the genres form a dialogue over values, language, and technique. In the case of the Chinese novel, we can see that thematic genres often stake out opposite positions on central issues or values. Thus, for example, while the hero in a scholar-beauty romance would put love (*qing* 情) above all else but preserve ritual propriety, the hero of the military romance generally treats love with suspicion or contempt and does not concern himself with propriety. Likewise, court-case fiction portrays the ability of the wise judge to bring justice within the established legal system, while the martial arts novel laments the corruption of the system and trumpets the individualistic heroes who must take justice into their own hands. Thus the genres of the Chinese novel frequently offer diametrically opposed perspectives. If many of the genres of the Chinese novel sketched above developed by carving out for themselves different spaces, around the turn of the nineteenth century, the martial arts novel emerged by parodying most of its fictional predecessors. Novels like *Lü mudan* 綠牡丹 (*Green Peony*) incorporated themes from many genres of popular fiction, placing their value systems in dialogue and thereby revealing their conventions. Thus the final step of the trend away from history in the Chinese novel comes when it exposes the value systems previously presented as models for life (Wan 2009).

Diffusion of Stories and the Other “Popular Literature”: *Su wenxue* 俗文學

The stories of popular novels also circulated in many other media in the Qing, including drama, ballads, and popular prints (*nianhua* 年畫), and were widely known to broad audiences (Idema 1974; Riftin 1970/1997; Riftin 2010; Børdahl 2013). The eminent scholar of Chinese folklore Boris Riftin noted that popular prints on the subjects of 28 novels circulated in China. The subjects of these prints included Three Kingdoms (over 500 pictures); the historical and military romances *Xue Rengui zheng Dong* 薛仁貴征東 (Xue Rengui campaigns against the East), *Xue Dingshan zheng Xi* 薛丁山征西 (Xue Dingshan campaigns against the West), *Sui Tang yanyi*, and *Yang jia jiang yanyi* 楊家將演藝 (The Yang family generals); the Water Margin (over 80 kinds) and the martial arts novel *Qi xia wu yi* 七俠五義 (Seven Heroes and Five Gallants); the “fantastic” novels *Xiyou ji* and *Fengshen yanyi*; the court-case tales *Bao Gong an* 包公案 (Cases of Judge Bao), *Shi Gong an* and *Peng Gong an* 彭公案 (Cases of Judge Peng); and *Lü mudan*, *Erdu mei* 二度梅 (Plum Blossoms Twice), and *Honglou meng*. Most of these subjects were also part of the repertoires of oral storytellers (Riftin 2010).

A survey of the Academia Sinica collection of performance-related texts from local genres across China shows the most widespread subjects are *Sanguo*, *Shuihu zhuan*, *Honglou meng*, and Judge Bao—in approximately that order. Texts about Judge Bao outnumber those about particular military romances, but some military romances still outnumber *Xiyou ji* (Academia Sinica). While this can only be a rough estimate of the prevalence of these subjects in performance literature, it tallies nicely with the tastes of

the rural audience in Sibao, Fujian (Brokaw 2007a). By the late Qing, stories like the court-case legend of Judge Shi and his martial helpers were nearly ubiquitous, as printed novels, drama, storytelling, ballad texts, and popular prints. Thus such stories were part of the fabric of the culture.

Given the limited literacy rates in China before the twentieth century, performance-related literature becomes even more important. Most people probably knew these stories first and foremost through performance. In addition, the format of ballads would probably make them more accessible to the marginally literate (Wan 2010). Still, very few studies of this kind of popular narrative have been undertaken. As Idema noted in his recent overview of scholarship on Ming-Qing literature, “Studies on the many genres of narrative ballads of the Ming and Qing are extremely rare.” (Idema 2013b, 339)

Studying this other kind of popular literature, *su wenxue*, would open up several new ways of thinking about the diffusion of culture. One new aspect is the regional dimension. Chinese culture was never monolithic; the multitude of dialects and regional performance forms readily attests to this. Still, literature scholars have paid little attention to the question of China’s multiple regional cultures. Which stories were known where, and through which genres? Ballad literature is a treasure trove of material waiting to be explored. Second, even the “same” story manifests differently in different versions. Vibeke Børdahl’s work on the story Wu Song Fights the Tiger demonstrates the independence of nearly all of the performance and performance-related genres from the novel; they are not “based on” the novel, but parallel traditions (Børdahl 2013). Wilt Idema’s many translations of multiple versions of particular stories show in each case

how differently each story is told over time, space, and genre. Alternate versions diverge in their plot lines, interpretations, and focal points, creating multiple perspectives (Idema 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2014; Kwa and Idema 2010).

Considering diffusion another way, popular Chinese novels and their stories have been influential not only in China but across Asia, and were among the first representatives of Chinese literature and culture to Europe. Since the seventeenth century, Chinese vernacular fiction has been translated into Manchu, Mongolian, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese. The earliest Chinese novel available in a Western language was the scholar-beauty romance *Haoqiu zhuan*, translated into English in 1761 as *The Pleasing History* and into French in 1766 as *Hau kiou choaan histoire chinoise*. The same novel was also translated into Korean in the eighteenth century and adapted in Japanese in the early nineteenth century; as might be expected, the translations vary significantly, each interpreting Chinese culture through a different framework (Sieber 2013; Son 2013; Lam 2013). Beginning in the nineteenth century, traditional Chinese novels were also translated into Thai, Cambodian, Javanese and Malay. (Salmon 1987). Translations give us another index of the popularity of particular stories. Nearly all of these Asian cultures eventually produced translations of *Sanguo yanyi*, military romances, and court-case fiction. Conversely, the most representative “literati” novels, including *Jin Ping Mei* and *Honglou meng*, were only rarely translated. The cultures which did translate these more literary works, including Manchu, Mongol, Korean, and Japanese, were those with particularly strong connections to China.

Looking Ahead

Popular novels, and their stories, deserve more attention as cultural phenomena. They challenge many of the binaries implicit in scholarly approaches to Chinese literature: high versus low, vernacular versus classical, and traditional versus modern.

The advent of cultural studies and more interdisciplinary scholarship, as well as the availability of wide variety of novels through photo-reprint series like *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* in the early 1990s, has spurred numerous innovative studies of popular Chinese novels. Keith McMahon (1995) and Zuyan Zhou (2003) examine scholar-beauty romances through the lens of gender. Print culture (Miao Huaiming 2005) and sound (Keulemans 2014) provide new angles for understanding martial arts novels and court-case adventure novels. Fiction has also been a fruitful avenue for exploring legal culture, as pioneering chapters by Carlitz (2007), St. Andre (2007), and Youd (2007) demonstrate. Scholars at the intersection of literature and religion have found new ways of understanding the novels on deities and monks. Meir Shahar's work on the eccentric Buddhist monk Crazy Ji shows the crucial role of novels, oral traditions, and drama in spreading this cult (Shahar 1998), while Mark Meulenbeld connects *Fengshen yanyi* *Gods* with Daoist ritual practice, thereby demonstrating the intertwining of "literature," "religion," and "community" (Meulenbeld 2015). Many of these studies demonstrate the relevance of popular Chinese novels by placing them in new cultural contexts.

Still, at present our view of the popular Chinese novel is fragmented since each thematic genre is largely treated as an independent world. And if genres of the novel are different worlds, then the works of ballad literature and other "popular literature" (*su*

wenxue) are a strange parallel dimension, one that is rarely visited by most scholars of literature. In order to fully understand the novel, we need to broaden our view. We can continue to look deeper into the ways these stories were used and transmitted in everyday life through texts, images, ritual, and performance. We should also look at the Chinese popular novel as a system of genres. It may be that new digital approaches to scholarship will help us in this endeavor, as my current research aims to demonstrate.

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