



PROJECT MUSE®

Out of the Margins

Ge, Liangyan

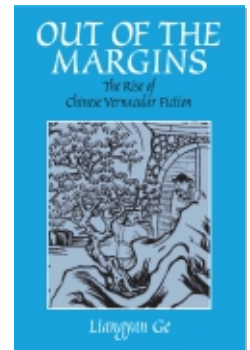
Published by University of Hawai'i Press

Ge, L..

Out of the Margins: The Rise of Chinese Vernacular Fiction.

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/8086>

Introduction

In both the West and the East, the relationship of writing to speech has a direct bearing on literature, especially narrative literature. Around the eighth century B.C., the Greeks adopted the writing shapes from the Phoenician syllabary and invented what is known to be the earliest alphabetic system. The advent of the Greek writing system marks the beginning of a new era of Western civilization, with written literature as one of the most immediate results. The Homeric epics, hitherto existing only orally, now became written, although there is no consensus how that was accomplished. The significance of this process has been most succinctly summarized by Eric Havelock in the title of one of his books, *The Muse Learns to Write*. Writing, as the newly arrived visitor, knocked at the door of the oral world and was hospitably received by the Muse, daughter of the goddess of Memory and mistress of oral literature. Only with the integration of the old and the new did it become possible for the Homeric verses to appear as *literature*, in the *literal* sense of the word.

In a literate age, there is another kind of relationship between writing and orality that has received less scholarly attention. The positions of the old and the new are now reversed. Writing, by nature resistant to changes, can become the agent for what is old and conservative. It necessarily lags behind the more dynamic and fluid development of orality and therefore only represents yesterday's language. Once the gap grows excessively wide, writing becomes senile and decrepit, to be rejuvenated only by a drastic dose of orality. On the other hand, the rapidly changing oral speech persistently seeks new surrogates in written script. Voice's never-ending quest for a chirographical body results in constant reinvigoration of writing. Such changes in writing have been a driving force behind the evolution of literary forms. Very often, when the linguistic medium in literature was realigned with the latest living speech, new genres and styles were born, keeping literature fresh and vigorous. Histori-

cally, therefore, what happened between writing and orality was by no means a one-way street. If the Muse had to learn to write in order to bring ancient Greece out of the preliterate “dark age,” the forces of literate culture afterwards also had to draw vitality from spoken words: The Muse-turned-writer had to return to the world of orality and learn—or *relearn*—to “babble.”

In the history of Western literature, a significant moment of the writer learning to babble was in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when men of letters in Europe who had written exclusively in Latin—which was predominantly a literary language seldom spoken out of the church—turned to orality and brought writing more in line with speech. The results were vernacular works such as Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which heralded the ascendance of European national literatures written in the vernaculars. In China, due to particular social and cultural conditions and especially to the unique nature of the Chinese script, vernacularization was a much longer and more arduous process. While the bulk of Chinese literature up to the end of the nineteenth century was written in classical Chinese, or *wenyan*, vernacular literature had existed stubbornly and persistently for many centuries. Yet the written vernacular, or *baihua*, did not become a full-fledged literary language until the emergence of voluminous novels in the Ming period (1368–1644), especially the works generally known as the “Four Masterworks” (*si da qishu*), namely *Shuibu zhuan* (*Water Margin/Outlaws of the Marsh*), *Sanguo yanyi* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), *Xiyou ji* (*Journey to the West*), and *Jin ping mei* (*Golden Lotus/The Plum in the Golden Vase*). To be sure, the dominance of *wenyan* was to continue in most of China’s cultural and literary sectors until the early twentieth century, when it was finally replaced by the vernacular as the nation’s standard written language—but in narrative literature that revolutionary change had started a few centuries earlier. After the “Four Masterworks,” many narrative pieces, especially short tales such as those by Pu Songling (1640–1715) and Ji Yun (1724–1805), continued to be written in the classical language, but the use of the vernacular became increasingly a genre convention in prose fiction, especially in the novel.¹

Among the “Four Masterworks,” it was *Shuibu zhuan* that played the most crucial role in establishing the written vernacular as the new literary language. Two separate pages from an early edition of *Shuibu zhuan*, with the title of *Jingben Zhongyi zhuan*, were found accidentally in the Shanghai Library in 1975. Most scholars agree that the fragments are from a Zhengde (1506–1521)-Jiajing (1522–1566) edition, if not earlier, possibly the earliest among all extant editions of *Shuibu zhuan*, full or incomplete. From a different Jiajing edition entitled *Zhongyi Shuibu zhuan*, five chapters are extant, previously in the possession of Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1958) and now housed in the Beijing Library.

The earliest known reference to a printed edition of *Shuibu zhuan* occurs in the catalogue entitled *Baichuan shuzhi*, compiled by the Jiajing scholar Gao Ru, which lists a hundred-chapter *Zhongyi Shuibu zhuan*.² Whether it was of the same edition as the *Zhongyi Shuibu zhuan* fragments in the Beijing Library remains unknown. Since *Baichuan shuzhi* carries a preface dated 1540 (the nineteenth year of the Jiajing reign), we can safely mark 1540 as the latest possible year for the earliest edition of *Shuibu zhuan*.

The earliest reference to *Jin ping mei* was made by Yuan Hongdao (1568–1610) in his letter dated 1596 to the famous painter and calligrapher Dong Qichang (1555–1636). It is indicated in the letter that Yuan had obtained part of a manuscript copy of the novel from Dong.³ During the following two decades, manuscript copies of the work may have been circulating among literati readers, as Shen Defu (1578–1642) reports in *Wanli yebuo bian* that he had copied the entire manuscript from Yuan Zhongdao (1570–1623), Hongdao's younger brother, in 1609.⁴ The work's earliest known edition in print is *Jin ping mei cibua*, with one of the two prefaces dated 1617–1618 by a pseudonymous Dongwu nongzhu ke. The year 1617 is therefore the earliest possible date for the edition, which was antedated by the Jiajing editions of *Shuibu zhuan* by at least two-thirds of a century. When *Jin ping mei* was written, the writer may have looked to *Shuibu zhuan* for a model, as evidenced by the fact that the story in *Jin ping mei* itself sprouts from an episode in the earlier work.

Both *Xiyou ji* and *Sanguo yanyi* had a long process of textual evolution similar and, for the most part, temporally parallel to that of *Shuibu zhuan*. However, extant fragments from budding textual precursors notwithstanding, the earliest exemplar of *Xiyou ji* in its fully developed form—the Shidetang edition—is dated 1592, at least half century later than the Jiajing editions of *Shuibu zhuan*. The earliest known edition of *Sanguo yanyi*, entitled *Sanguo zhi tongsu yanyi*, carries two prefaces, one by Jiang Daqi and the other by Zhang Shangde, which are dated 1494 and 1522 respectively. In all likelihood, the edition was contemporaneous with or slightly predated its *Shuibu* counterpart.⁵ Yet while *Shuibu zhuan* appears in a language that is distinctly vernacular, *Sanguo yanyi* is called a vernacular novel only when the word *vernacular* is more generously defined, as it employs a linguistic medium that mingles *baibua* with simple *wenyan*.⁶

Shuibu zhuan is, therefore, China's earliest full-length fictional narrative in the true vernacular prose. If we take into account the fact that the earliest anthology containing vernacular short stories, *Liushi jia xiaoshuo* (Sixty Short Stories) was not published until around 1550,⁷ indeed we may call *Shuibu zhuan* the trailblazer for Chinese vernacular fiction at large. To say this, of course, is not to repudiate the efforts in vernacularization prior to *Shuibu zhuan*; on the

contrary, as we will see, *Shuibu zhuān* is to be considered in the present study as part of a larger vernacularizing process. It is in *Shuibu zhuān*, however, that vernacular prose extends to an unprecedented length and the degree of vernacularity ascends to an unprecedented level. Writing and speech, divorced in *wenyan*, are now brought much closer to each other in the full-fledged vernacular prose of this novel.

The last statement may call for a little qualification here. Chinese characters, whether employed in *wenyan* or *baibua*, are not a phonetic system of writing like alphabetic scripts. The peculiar relationship of Chinese characters to speech has long been a focus of the scholarly debate. The terminology that has been applied to Chinese characters has almost become a nomenclatorial kaleidoscope. They are called variously “sinographs,” “pictographs/pictograms,” “ideographs/ideograms,” “logographs,” “lexigraphs,” “morphographs,” “phonograms,” “phonosemantics,” “phonoideograms,” “logo-syllabics/word-syllabics,” and many others.⁸ This messy situation reflects the formidable difficulty of defining the Chinese script in terms of its relationship to the semantic and phonetic aspects of the language. Contending that no writing system represents ideas without regard to sound, John DeFrancis argues that terms such as “ideographic” should be consigned to “the Museum of Mythological Memorabilia along with unicorn horns and phoenix feathers.” DeFrancis designates the Chinese script, which he believes to be basically phonetic, as “morphosyllabic,” but even he has to admit that “the Chinese syllabary is only partially reliable in representing the pronunciation of the Chinese characters.”⁹ More recently, William Hannas tries to reconcile the “aphonic” and the phonetic views of the Chinese writing system by proposing that a character is part of a morpheme, which he defines as the conventional interface between meaning and a phonological form.¹⁰ Hannas, too, is quite aware of the inefficiency and inaccuracy of the phonetic denotation by the characters. “Lacking a systematic relationship between symbol and sound, or even an efficient protocol for describing the structure of its units,” Chinese writing “places an enormous burden on the user in comparison to alphabetic systems,” as Hannas puts it.¹¹

The written vernacular, which inherits many—in fact most—of its characters from classical Chinese, may be no more phonetic than the latter. But what is relevant here is not each written symbol’s representation of an isolated sound, but the correspondence between a string of written symbols and a string of sounds in a speech utterance. A character in *wenyan*, of course, was and is pronounceable, and one of the most important pedagogical methods in traditional Chinese education was making students read aloud writings in *wenyan* until they could recite them from memory. Most of the characters, the so-called *xingshengzi* (semantic-phonetic composites), even have a component as a cue

for pronunciation.¹² But if one reads aloud a line of characters in typical *wenyan*, the string of sounds will usually represent a highly stylized utterance. On the other hand, the written vernacular can be much more accommodating to common speech, although it can be stylized in different ways as well. Characters in the written vernacular can therefore *correspond* to speech sounds, usually one character to one syllable, although each character is not phonetic in the same way as a letter or a syllabogram in an alphabetic script. It is in this sense that we can say that writing was finally realigned with the speaking voice in *Shuibu zhuàn*, bringing to fruition the repeated and tenacious attempts of vernacularization for several centuries.

This book is devoted to that historic moment when written vernacular prose—the product of a gradual acclimatization of writing to speech—became established in *Shuibu zhuàn* as the new literary language for Chinese narrative literature. The argument here is that *Shuibu zhuàn*, in its fullest and artistically most complex form, is the product of long-term interaction of oral and written traditions, reflective of the fascination with oral language used by generations of professional storytellers. Although the thorny issue of recensions will be addressed, this is not a study of the textual history of *Shuibu zhuàn* punctuated by the different *fanben* (full-version) and *jianben* (simple-version) editions in post-Jiajing times. Rather, it is more about the *poesis* of the text, or the pre-Jiajing life of the narrative, before the *fanben-jianben* scramble ever had a chance to start.

Chapter 1 is a review on the long and arduous process of vernacularization in literary prose during the few centuries prior to the *fanben* editions of *Shuibu zhuàn*. Vernacular texts associated with various oral and performative genres in different historical periods will be discussed. Such a survey is necessary, as it informs us of the general linguistic conditions for the evolution of *Shuibu zhuàn*, in both oral and textual forms. As the discussion will demonstrate, what happened to many other works in early vernacular literature may have been quite similar to the cumulative textualization of *Shuibu zhuàn*. This makes the evolution of the *Shuibu zhuàn* not an anomaly but representative of the general trend of vernacularization in literary prose.

In chapter 2, efforts will be made to reclaim at least part of the formative process of the narrative in *Shuibu zhuàn*. A number of oral and performative genres and their possible roles in the evolution of the narrative will be discussed. After that, the chapter will provide a discussion of the historical and contemporary critical views on the formation of the narrative, focusing on the divergent opinions on the relationship of the narrative discourse to the oral tradition. I will argue against the either-or binary logic that often lurks behind the divergent critical judgments on *Shuibu zhuàn*'s connection to popular orality.

And I will propose that *Shuibu zhuan*, as the earliest vernacular novel wrought by the long-term orality-writing interplay, should be considered *both* a work of oral provenance *and* a great literary innovation by men of letters.

The subsequent chapters will substantiate that proposition. Chapter 3 discusses the oral provenance of the narrative discourse in *Shuibu zhuan*. One conceivable way to determine the oral derivation of the narrative would be to track down in reverse chronological order all its textual precursors, but that approach is obviously unfeasible, as the only extant text of *Shuibu* narrative before the *fanben* editions of *Shuibu zhuan* itself is the sketchy account of the Liangshan rebellion contained in *Xuanhe yishi* (Unrecorded Events of the Xuanhe Period), a historical narrative probably published in the early Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). Everything else was lost, including the earliest stories featuring *Shuibu* figures that circulated during the Southern Song period (1127–1279). Consequently, it is “difficult to show any direct textual connections to these materials, even to the *Xuanhe yishi* segments that are sometimes taken as a kind of blueprint for the novel,” as Andrew Plaks rightly points out.¹³ But the difficulty goes even deeper. Even if we could collect all necessary textual clues that would enable us to trace all the way back to the very earliest textual prototype, we would still have to face the same question about the nature of that version: Was it written or derivative of the oral? In the present study, therefore, what are considered as features inherited from the novel’s oral antecedents will be demonstrated through other means. Chapter 3 examines the thematic patterns of the narrative that are frequently recurrent, with numerous stretches paralleled either within the novel itself or elsewhere in early vernacular literature. The recurrence of the thematic patterns will be discussed in terms of the dialectic between the uniform and the multiform in the economy of the oral mode of story making.

A major factor in the twentieth-century study of oral and oral-derived literature is the Parry-Lord theory on the making of oral epics. The universality of the theory has, however, met considerable resistance. One of the controversial issues is the very definition of *orality* itself. Parry-Lord studies seem to suggest a “pure” type of oral culture—what Walter Ong calls the “primary orality”—as opposed to an equally “pure” type of literate society. A singer of tales, as Albert Lord believed in his earlier works, can never be a literate or semiliterate man; if so, he would cease to be a singer. Therefore, a text is “either one or the other . . . either oral or written.”¹⁴ This categorical separation of orality from literacy, where the oral sensibility and the mode of composition-in-performance precludes literate mentality and the mode of writing, may be an accurate description of the Yugoslav oral world, where Lord did the field study, but the absolute polarization of orality to writing may not be univer-

sally applicable. For instance, Ruth Finnegan, with the support of her fieldwork in the South Pacific, forcefully challenges what she calls the “binary typology” of orality and literacy by showing the possibility of a “mixture” of oral and literate modes of transmission: “For how useful is this binary typology when it turns out that most known cultures don’t fit? In practice a *mixture* of media (oral and written) is far more typical than a reliance on just one, with writing being used for some purposes, oral forms for others. . . . This kind of mixture is and has been a common and ordinary feature of cultures throughout the centuries rather than the ‘abnormal’ case implied by the ideal types model.”¹⁵ Another example of such a “mixed” mode of transmission is the Icelandic saga. The *Njáls Saga*, for instance, went through a formative period in which the oral and written sources not only existed side-by-side but also alternated and were often convertible to each other.¹⁶

This brings us to a conception of the “Chinese-type” of popular orality behind the genesis of the vernacular narrative of *Shuibu zhuàn*. Chinese popular orality was by no means absolutely isolated from the literate culture. Rather it was in constant interaction with writing and with an extremely rich written literature in *wenyan*. Chapter 4 discusses the long and cumulative process of textualization of the narrative based on the writing-orality dynamic and reciprocity. In a philological analysis of the *fanben* text of *Shuibu zhuàn*, some stylistic and linguistic features will be examined against a context constituted by other works in early vernacular literature, especially vernacular stories. The examination shows in the *fanben* text a sedimentary accretion of stylistic and linguistic features typical of different historical periods, which attests to a prolonged and gradual process of amplification of written vernacular prose.

What I mean by “textualization” is different from “transcription.” To transcribe an oral narrative is to make a written record of the spoken words by using a preexisting writing script, and it is necessarily notational, as a modern American folklorist would do in collecting “personal narratives.” To “transcribe” the *Shuibu* narrative complex would suggest that developed and mature written vernacular prose was already available as an established literary language, which was not the case, as we will see in our survey of the pre-*Shuibu* vernacular works. Not writing *in* a mature vernacular prose but somehow writing *toward* it, the effort to turn the *Shuibu* complex into the novel *Shuibu zhuàn* had to be a long process punctuated with successive written versions, both notational and compositional, each representing a certain point on the axis of transition from voice to print.¹⁷ As the cumulative result of such a long process of textualization, the novel may not be directly derivative of any particular single oral presentation. Instead it makes better sense to say that what is registered in print is based on the words from the oral tradition of the *Shuibu* cycles.

Shifting from the text analyses in the foregoing chapters to a historical approach, chapter 5 speculates about the context of communication for the oral mode of existence of *Shuibu zhuan*'s precursors and expounds on some aspects of the work's narrative formation and value orientation in terms of the raconteur-audience relationship. This chapter will also discuss the role in the textualization of the narrative played by the men of letters who had been relegated to the circles of oral entertainment. In the light of the historical conditions, the textualization of *Shuibu zhuan* will be considered a social protest as well as a literary innovation. It was with a defiant spirit of rebellion—which was in perfect accord with the subject matter of the narrative itself—that the frustrated men of letters revolted against the craft literacy in the *wenyan* tradition and anchored the storytellers' voice in written words.

The significance of registering voice in print and its literary ramifications deserves a full recognition. The concluding chapter discusses how the ascendance of literary vernacular completely reoriented China's narrative literature. As the *Shuibu* stories became textualized with the storytellers' dramatization of all the speaking voices of the characters, what we have in print is an exuberance of dialects of various social, professional, and geographical groups. *Vis-à-vis wenyan*, vernacular prose enjoyed a much-enlarged referential capacity; but more importantly, this stratified linguistic structure became an image of society itself, which is necessarily congested with different types of linguistic-ideological consciousness. Vernacular prose, as the vehicle for realistic representation of the characters' linguistic experience, makes Chinese vernacular fiction quite compatible with the Western novel in that regard.

This book thus considers the evolution of *Shuibu zhuan* as the most important terrain for the vernacularization of literary prose, which laid the linguistic groundwork for the rise of Chinese vernacular fiction. It does not claim to offer conclusive answers for all those perplexing questions about the inception of Chinese vernacular fiction in general and the formation of *Shuibu zhuan* in particular. Instead, this is a book suggesting some possibilities that have hitherto been largely overlooked. The ascendance of vernacular fiction during the Ming period was of course an extremely complicated issue. Apart from the maturation of vernacular prose, many other social, cultural, and economic factors were involved—including, for instance, the printing industry, the literacy level, and the emergence of a middle-brow readership. Those, however, are beyond the scope of this book.

As we all know, the title of the novel, *Shuibu zhuan*, literally means "a story that happened on the water margin," as the lair of the rebels, Liangshan, is on the side of a lake. Hence one of the novel's English translations is entitled *Water Margin*.¹⁸ The word "*shuibu*" (water margin) originated in the *Shijing* (*Classic*

of *Poetry/Book of Songs*). In the poem “Mian,” Danfu, the forefather of the Zhou people, is said to have led a westward exodus along the riverside (*shuai xi shuibu*) to the foot of Mount Qi, where he settled down and established the base for the future kingdom of Zhou.¹⁹ In our novel, the “water margin” indeed seems to be where the rebels belong, for as outlaws they are marginalized from society—politically as well as geographically. As Jin Shengtan expounds in one of his prefaces to the novel, the word “*shuibu*” refers to a place beyond the waters on the fringe of the emperor’s land, a place from which a member of the mainstream society is supposed to keep away.²⁰ But it is from the “margin” that the bandits, like the self-exiled Danfu, grow into such a formidable force as to challenge the rule of the imperial court, the center of the geopolitical map. What we have said of the bandit heroes on the “margin” can be said of the *Shuibu* tradition itself as well. As a story complex it existed, for a long period, on the social margins before it crystallized into *Shuibu zhuan*, which was to be incorporated into the mainstream culture as a masterwork of fiction. What we call *Water Margin* is therefore a novel that has itself arisen from the margins. Indeed, as we will see in this book, the formative period of *Shuibu zhuan* was representative of the embryo stage of vernacular fiction at large. From the cultural margins, where the belles lettres interlocked with the popular and writing infiltrated into orality, tremendous energy was accumulated that eventually gave rise to Chinese vernacular fiction as a new and vigorous literary genre.