

## The Popular Novel in Nineteenth-Century China

The Chinese equivalent of the term 'novel' is *xiaoshuo*, meaning 'small talk.' In accordance with the etymological and semantic nature of the term, *xiaoshuo* is used traditionally to incorporate all kinds of 'small talks,' i.e. prose stories. If we take the novel to mean a long piece of fiction, then *xiaoshuo* is by definition a popular novel because of its oral origin. Tales were told by story-tellers at night markets to entertain the illiterate and semi-literate people who, of course, formed the overwhelming majority of any society before the Modern Age. The stories were usually about historical events and involved a group of outstanding personalities, and hence could be called historical novels, sometimes more historical than fictional, at other times more extraordinary and marvellous than historical. The story-tellers took disciples or apprentices; the masters' repertoires were often handed down to their pupils in draft-books which were enlarged and enriched in the course of generations of story-tellers and were eventually printed as novels. We can trace this development back to approximately the eleventh century. In later centuries, it often happened that literary scholars who had been unsuccessful at state examinations rewrote these draft-book novels; occasionally, a masterpiece was the result. A famous example is the novel *Water Margin*.<sup>1</sup> Gradually, *xiaoshuo* became a widely accepted genre:

- 1 *Water Margin*, in Chinese *Shui-Hu-Chuan*, consists of a series of episodes centering on 36 major and 72 minor bandit-heroes; it is the Chinese equivalent of the Robin Hood legend, set in the last decade of the Northern Sung Dynasty (1116-26). The novel took about 500 years to achieve its final form and had its origin in popular legends which began to circulate immediately after the downfall of the Sung dynasty. These were collected by the professional story-tellers in their repertoire-books. By 1300, there were at least two printed versions in existence. To these, many new episodes and characters were added in the course of the Yuan Dynasty (1280-1368). Playwrights took hold of the topic; they romanticized the bandits and changed them into a mixture of Robin Hood and Götz von Berlichingen, i.e. they were heroes loyal to the emperor, but oppressed by the corrupt officials who surrounded him. The first original version of the novel, written by Shih Nan-an and Lo Kuan-chung, can be traced back to 1370, and the last and most popular version was published in 1644.

literary scholars wrote novels, using the existing format to produce works such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.<sup>2</sup> Before the European novel was introduced into China, the quality of Chinese novels varied from the very crude to the very refined; they reflected the oral tradition of night market story-tellers and the development to a literary genre.

The *xiaoshuo* is characterised by two elements: the episodic nature of the plot and the perfunctory delineation of the characters. To a degree, the *xiaoshuo* resembles the picaresque novel of Europe. The episodic nature of *xiaoshuo* was a result of the way the story was told: the teller told one episode or a series of episodes and stopped at a crucial moment in the story; if the people in the market place wanted to know what happened next, they would have to return the following night. Despite the limitations imposed by the oral tradition, China produced several outstanding novels of this kind, before the advent of the modern novel.<sup>3</sup> However, none of these masterpieces were written in the nineteenth century, which was a time of transition. The *xiaoshuo* genre had already produced its classical novels and arrived at a stage of stagnation, while the size of the novel-consuming public was steadily increasing. In this paper, I shall consider two kinds of novels, one written in the stylized language of the learned, the other written in the vernacular used by the populace. The novel *Jīngūā Yuán* ('The Karma of the Mirrored Flowers')

- 2 *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, in Chinese *Hung-Lou-Meng*, has two authors: Ts'ao Chan (about 1715-64) and Kao E (about 1750-1820). During Ts'ao's lifetime, several transcripts, different both in length and content, were in circulation, but his version or versions remained a fragment (of which 80 chapters from the year 1754 are extant) which Kao E undertook, in 1790, to complete. He concentrated on developing the main plot and left a few episodes untouched which now appear to have no connection with the main story at all. Despite these undeveloped episodes, the novel still has 120 chapters and over 400 carefully delineated characters with individual traits. The main plot is about a young man, his love for two super-heroines and his encounters with ten other major heroines when his powerful family is on the decline. The story shows the transitoriness of riches, power, and beauty; the hero finally leaves his wife and family, to seek solitude and nirvana as a Buddhist monk.
- 3 Some of the classical pre-nineteenth-century *xiaoshuo* include: Luo Guan-zhong, *Sānguózhì Yǎnyì*, 1494 (?) (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, translated by C.H. Brevitt-Taylor [Shanghai: Kelley & Walsh 1925]); Wang Shih-zhen, *Jīnpíng Méi*, end of the 16th century (*The Golden Lotus*, translated by Clement Egerton [London: George Routledge & Sons 1939]); Wu Chengen, *Xī Yóuji*, 1627 (*The Journey to the West*, translated by Anthony C. Yu [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1977]); Cao Xu-jin, *Hónglóu Mèng*, 1792 (*A Dream of Red Mansions*, translated by Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang [Peking: Foreign Language Press 1978ff]).

was written by Li Ruzhen in the first quarter of the nineteenth century; the author reportedly spent more than ten years composing it.<sup>4</sup> Li passed the regional examination in his youth and obtained the degree of *xiùcái*, which is approximately equivalent to the bachelor's degree of today. He was appointed to his first office — a district magistrate — only in his late thirties and only for one term. Besides the classical canons, he was also well versed in astrology, mythology, phonology, etc.. In other words, he was anything but an orthodox scholar and even tried his hand at *xiaoshuo*. In *xiaoshuo*, he expounded the unorthodox branches of knowledge. His novel was enjoyed by the educated strata of the population, including women; it is, as we shall see later, the first feminist novel in the Chinese language.

The novel opens with a description of the mountain Pénglái which stands in the traditional Fairyland. Three fairies are discussing an unusual phenomenon: the God of Literature has assumed the form of a goddess, an omen which presages official literary glories to the fair sex. After this discussion, the three fairies — the fairies of 'Hundred Flowers, Hundred Cereals, and Hundred Grasses' — depart for the banquet of the fairy queen of the Western Celestial Palace; during the banquet, the Moon Fairy suggests to the Fairy of the Hundred Flowers that she order all flowers to bloom; the latter refuses on the ground that it would be against the celestial rules. An altercation ensues, quite inappropriate for fairies, which seals their karma: the flower fairy swears that she would rather go through the sufferings of being re-incarnated in the world of red dust (the human world) than ever letting all flowers bloom at the same time, even if commanded to do so by the 'king of men.' (Traditionally, those who have the mandate of heaven, i.e. emperors, can issue orders to the fairies and gods.)

Years after the banquet, it happens that the flower fairy gets bored and visits her friends. It is mid-winter and snowing; she stays at a friend's house to play the age-old Chinese chess game known now in the West as 'go.' When this happens, China — called the Celestial Empire throughout the novel — is ruled by Empress Wu.<sup>5</sup> While the Fairy of Hundred

4 Li Ruzhen, *Jinghūa Yuán* ('The Karma of the Mirrored Flowers') (Shanghai 1828), so far only excerpts have been translated. Sample titles of learned *xiaoshuo* include: Cao Xu-jin, *Hónglóu Mèng* (1789), Wu Jing-zi, *Rúlín Waishi* (probably written in 1745, first published in 1803) and *Chronique indiscrete des mandarins*, traduit du chinois par Tchang Fou-jouei (Paris: Gallimard 1976).

5 The historical Empress Wu had been a concubine of the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty; after the death of the emperor, she had renounced the world to become a Buddhist nun. However, the emperor's successor saw her and was con-

Flowers is playing go, the empress is enjoying the 'snowscape' with her favourite lady-in-waiting, a gifted poet. Whenever the lady-in-waiting completes a poem, the empress empties her glass. The poems of that time were short; usually, they consisted of four lines. The lady-in-waiting in the novel is an accomplished poet, so that the empress is soon intoxicated. She suddenly becomes aware of a few plum trees which are in bloom and assumes that they bloom to please her. She thinks that other plants might be equally eager to please her, and she orders her carriage to bring her to the royal garden to enjoy the flowers. But she finds there only snow and empty branches. She becomes extremely angry at the flowers and commands them to bloom by noon of the following day; she writes the command with the royal gold brush and applies her royal seal. The flower fairies on duty receive this order and look for their mistress, the Fairy of Hundred Flowers, who cannot be found. As the deadline draws near, the fairies of ninety-nine different kinds of flowers give up waiting for their mistress and depart in groups to the royal garden to obey the royal command, i.e. to bloom. Only the peony fairy lingers, and, consequently, the peonies in the royal garden begin to blossom long after the deadline has passed. For disobeying the royal command, all the peony bushes are dug up and banished from the capital. While the empress is enjoying the blossoms with her court, the Fairy of Hundred Flowers is condemned for negligence in her office, and the ninety-nine flower fairies are convicted of sinning against the law of nature; all one hundred fairies receive the same punishment: re-incarnation.

The scene of the novel changes: we are now among the ordinary people on earth. A middle-aged scholar is ranked third in an examination under the reign of the Empress Wu. He receives no prize, however, because of his connections with the former dynasty. The scholar realizes that worldly honour is but transitory. It happens that his brother-in-law is just leaving for overseas in order to trade; the scholar decides to accompany him, leaving his wife and daughter behind. He travels into the world of Chinese mythology and becomes an immortal at the end of the first volume. His daughter is none other than the incarnate Fairy of Hun-

quered by her beauty; he made her his own concubine and eventually disposed of the legitimate empress to make room for his beloved concubine in the year 655 A.D. Soon afterwards she became the *de facto* ruler of the Empire. In 680 she removed the rightful heir and made her own son Crown Prince. In 683 she became regent for her son after the demise of her second husband. Later she disposed of the young emperor, her own son, and made her older son emperor; yet she dethroned him in 690. She became the first reigning empress of China and proclaimed a new dynasty, the Zhou Dynasty, which lasted from 690 to 701.

dred Flowers; she takes the boat to look for her father. The second volume records her journey and how she gathers her former subordinates. Together they pass the first state examination for women initiated by the Empress. They all obtain fame and honour and are given awards for their erudition. Towards the end of the novel they all recognize the ephemeral nature of 'the world of red dust' and return to the Fairyland. Meanwhile, a war has broken out. The forces of the Empress Wu are defeated, and the Empire is re-conquered by the rightful heir of the Tang Dynasty.

Despite the rather conventional plot, *The Karma of the Mirrored Flowers* offers some uncommon aspects. First, nowhere else do we encounter so many accomplished female scholars (who are, in addition, much superior to men in their learning), and secondly, this *xiaoshuo* presents a number of satires unique in Chinese fiction. The different mythological states offer the novelist ample opportunity to satirize some of the social conditions of his time. A summary of these criticisms can be found in Chapter 12, when the travellers of the Celestial Empire are in the Land of Gentlemen and are asked by a kind, modest old man to explain some of the customs of the Empire. One of these is not to bury deceased parents until an auspicious location which would bring luck to the heirs is found. In order that the descendants might prosper, the burial is sometimes delayed for several generations. The old man is against geomancy; he argues as follows: if the geomancers knew where to bury their parents, they would reap the benefits and be prosperous; they would not have to sell their skills. Another custom of the Celestial Empire which the modest old man (who is actually the prime minister of the country) criticizes is the binding-up of the feet of females. He says that he had thought at first that this was a punishment in lieu of the death penalty, because of the pain inflicted on the young girls and because of other diseases caused by the crippling of the feet. He could never understand that it was being done in the name of beauty. If the forehead is thought to be too high, one does not simply knock a part off; one does not cut a bigger nose to size. Furthermore, in former times, the feet of famous beauties had not been crippled.

This special criticism is enlarged upon in a later episode. The travellers arrive in the Land of Females where the customs are similar to those in the Celestial Empire; only the social roles of men and women are reversed. The males are attired in dresses and skirts and have elaborate coiffures. They wear make-up, their beards are torn out, and their feet are bound in the form of 'tiny golden lotuses.' They perform all the household duties done by women in the Celestial Empire. The brother-in-law of the scholar goes out to sell some commodities and is admitted

to the king who is, of course, a woman in man's attire. The king likes the looks of the exotic merchant from afar and decides to keep him as a concubine. After dinner, the merchant is seized by the serving women, i.e. men, who bathe him, do up his hair fashionably, paint his face and jewel him. On the following day, the beautifying process continues: his ears are pierced, and then the beauticians arrive to reshape his feet. His tears and his begging for mercy are of no avail. At night, when nobody is watching, he takes off all the bandages from his feet. When discovered the next morning, this incident is reported to the king who orders his concubine to be disciplined; the merchant is spanked with a bamboo pole. The same evening, his feet are bandaged up again. He suffers unspeakable pain and is forced to walk on his crippled feet. However, before his feet are really deformed and reduced to one fourth – or less – of their normal size, the merchant is rescued by his companions.

In his criticism, the author is by no means consequent. In the Land of Gentlemen, all clear-minded men should convince others to put a stop to the so-called beautifying process of deforming the feet of women; in the Land of Females, one of the main characters is made to go through all the suffering to demonstrate, in a humourous way, the cruelty of the process. However, when the Crown prince escapes from the kingdom with the men from the Celestial Empire (because a favourite concubine is trying to have him killed so that her son would be made Crown prince), he has to be reconverted into a woman – and this includes having his feet bound. Everybody seems to think it is the most natural thing to do. (We must keep in mind here that the crown prince and the king are female, while the concubine is male.)

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a special kind of *xiaoshuo*, which had been popular in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, became popular again.<sup>6</sup> As it originated directly from the storytellers, it was written in the vernacular and usually tells of the Herculean deeds of a compassionate, just, and incorruptible imperial official who fights against corruption among high-ranking court ministers, gangs and local dictators who oppress the common people. These corrupt officials,

6 Examples of this late nineteenth-century popular mode of *xiaoshuo* include: Wen Kang, *Ernü Yingxióng Zhuàn* ('The Story of Loving Heroes and Heroines'), probably written 1849, exact date of first publication unknown. The *Sanxia Wuyi* – which could be translated approximately as 'three brave men and five upright men' – was later developed to *Qixia Wuyi* – 'qi' means seven – which was followed by *Xiaowuyi* ('Five Young Upright Men') and *Xuxiaowuyi* ('Five Young Upright Men, Continued'). Reliable publication dates of these novels are not known.

local dictators and bullies openly take possession of whatever pleases them: jewels, antiques, virgins, married women; they are unperturbed by having to kill a few persons in the process. They extort money from the citizenry and pocket the silver designated for the coffers of the state. The just official, on the other hand, upholds justice even if he has to behead the only son of the Prime Minister. He never thinks of his career or personal fortune and protects the people against all injustice. The people usually call him 'Lord Blue Sky,' because he sees through all darkness and rights all wrong. The vernacular literature had popularized two such fearless officials: 'Lord Bao' and 'Lord Hai.' The last impersonation of 'Lord Hai' triggered off the Cultural Revolution in 1965: in a *drame à clef*, Hai accuses the emperor of certain wrongdoings and loses his office; the emperor is, of course, Mao Zedong.<sup>7</sup> In traditional vernacular literature, Lord Bao dominates the scene. Even during his life in the twelfth century, it was widely believed that he administered justice in the human world during the day and in the other world at night. No wonder that in vernacular literature many supernatural phenomena are associated with Lord Bao.

The new *xiaoshuo* about Lord Bao, the *Sānxiá Wūyì* (a title which involves concepts defying a meaningful translation), first published in 1879, was actually written by a story-teller who worked in Peking. Unfortunately, besides his name, Shi Yukun, and his trade, we know very little about him. He was apparently a master of his craft; he developed the so-called 'judgment *xiaoshuo*' into an art form and at the same time transcended it. The novel begins along the traditional line of Lord Bao literature, in a world which is more mythological than real: ghosts possess inanimate objects or animals and indicate that they are the souls of murdered people who ask for revenge. Lord Bao would invent ingenious ways to make the criminals confess (Chinese law did not allow conviction without confession). However, after about thirty of the one hundred and twenty chapters, the author departed from the tradition and began to expand the plot and to create new characters. Lord Bao fades into the background, and the author creates several unforgettable popular heroes who come much more to life than the paragon Lord Bao. These heroes are uncommon only in so far as they are accomplished martial artists. Making allowance for the different cultural and social background,

7 Wu Han, *Haijui Baguan*, first published in the periodical *Beijing Wenyi* ('Peking Literature and Art'), January 1961. An English translation was prepared by Clive Ansley and published as *The Heresy of Wu Han, His Play 'Hai Jui's Dismissal' and its Role in China's Cultural Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1971).

they can be compared to the three musketeers of Alexandre Dumas. They are all good fighters, loyal to their sovereign, and they inevitably help the weak and the underdogs. These newly created heroes, unlike the characters in most vernacular *xiaoshuo*, are not stereotypes; they are unique individuals, vivid characters who have their flaws and positive aspects, who lead their individual lives, serving the empire by helping Lord Bao. Some become guards of the emperor, others steadfastly refuse any office or reward; still others prefer to become Buddhist or Taoist monks, etc.. However, they are not blind loyalists; they are individuals with their own kind of pride. They do not hesitate to play an occasional prank on the emperor. This vividness in the characterization of individuals points towards the masterpiece of vernacular literature: *Water Margin*.

The plot of *Sānxiá Wūyì*, too, is superior to that of the average vernacular literature. The novel is still divided into episodes, but the plot is by no means episodic. Instead, we have a main plot with a number of sub-plots. But even the sub-plots are connected to the main plot — quite a large step forward in comparison to 'The Karma of the Mirrored Flowers.' There, a mythological country is introduced in a few words and dealt with in a few lines. The author of 'The Karma of the Mirrored Flowers' had many points to make which he could not incorporate into his story, while the professional story-teller, Shi, was telling a coherent tale within a general moral framework. As far as craftsmanship is concerned, the *Sānxiá Wūyì* is far superior to the other novels of the nineteenth century, be they of learned or vernacular nature. It set a trend and there were many imitations, like the *Judgements of Lord Shí* or the *Judgements of Lord Péng*, all of which, however, fall back into the episodic pattern of the old 'judgement *xiaoshuo*'.<sup>8</sup>

To conclude this survey, let us glance at contemporary criticisms aimed at these novels, criticisms published in the People's Republic of China.<sup>9</sup> Concerning the feminist novel, the opinion of Communist China is that while the author shows some democratic traits, his scholarly

8 *Shigong An* ('Judgements of Lord Shí') and *Peng Gong An* ('Judgements of Lord Peng') were published in the last decade of the nineteenth century under pseudonyms. Probably several authors were involved. Following these two, there were other *gongan xiaoshuo* such as *Ligong An*, *Liugong An*, *Zhanggong An*, etc. We know little about the authors and have only sketchy bibliographical data.

9 Department of Chinese at Beijing University, *Zhōngguó Xiāoshūo Shǐ* ('History of the Chinese Novel') (Peking: People's Literature Press 1978). Another publication on the same topic is: Zhenyi Guo, *Zhōngguó Xiāoshūo Shǐ* ('History of the Chinese Novel') (Taiwan: Taiwan Commercial Press 1971).

ladies are well versed only in poetry and some other branches of book knowledge. They are content to win recognition as learned women, with a diploma and silver pieces as rewards; it never occurs to them to ask for a fundamental change in the political position of women. Although the novel argues, to a certain extent, against piercing ears and binding feet, it still supports the basic feudal customs which oppress women. The author is unable to free himself from the ideology of feudalism. About the 'judgement *xiaoshuo*' (new style), present critics have the following to say: The heroes in the novel either belong to the landed gentry or they surrender readily to the ruling classes and become their lackeys in oppressing the peasants. In short, whatever they do, they serve the interests of the ruling classes; they are, in fact, the slave-drivers of the grand slave-owner, namely the emperor.

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